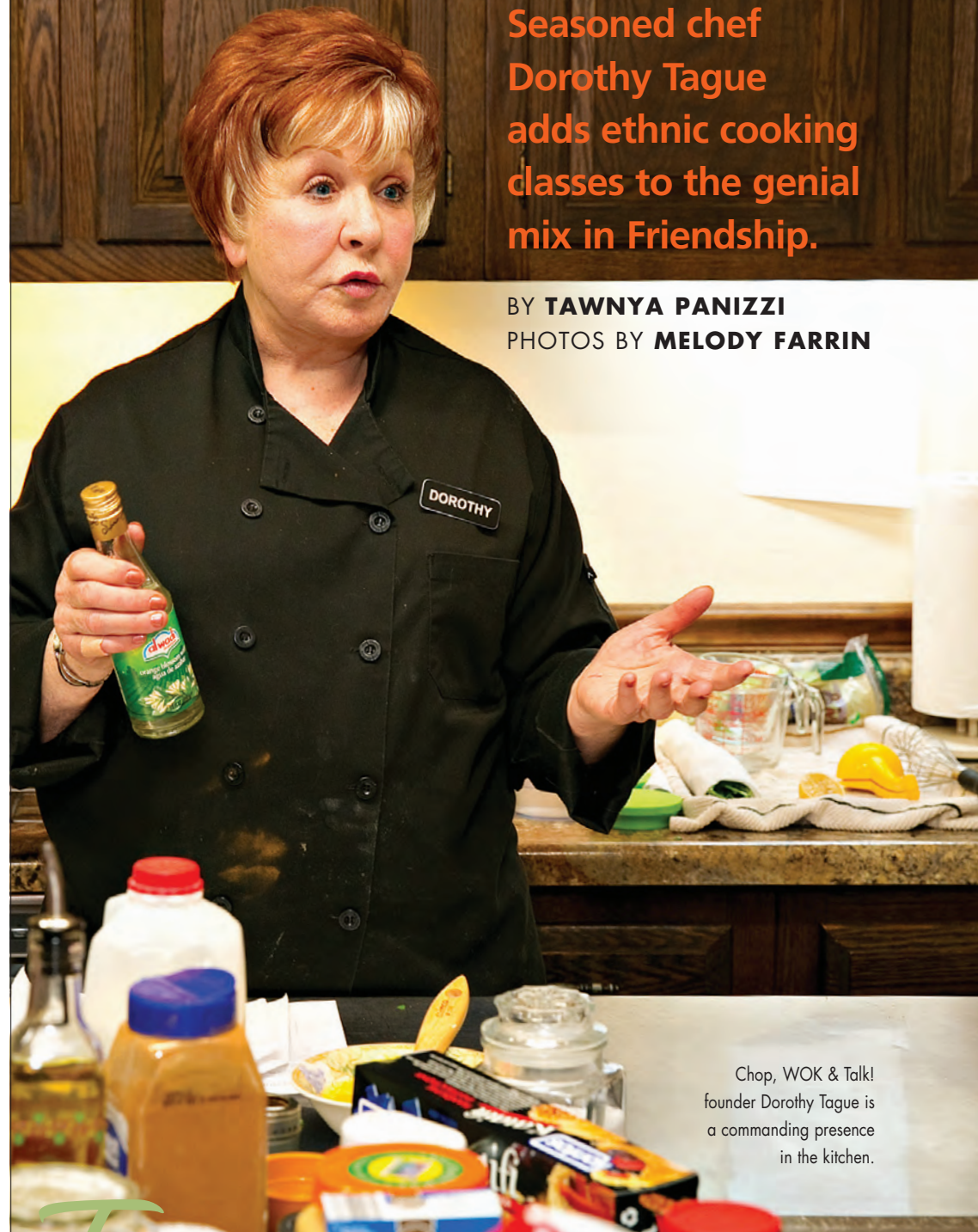


Recipe for Success

Seasoned chef
Dorothy Tague
adds ethnic cooking
classes to the genial
mix in Friendship.

BY TAWNYA PANIZZI
PHOTOS BY MELODY FARRIN



Chop, WOK & Talk! founder Dorothy Tague is a commanding presence in the kitchen.

Tucked away in a nondescript brick building at 5404 Penn Avenue in Friendship, Dorothy Tague's kitchen is bursting with flavorful menus that bring together foodies and cooking newbies to learn the art of ethnic cuisine.

When her business, Chop, WOK & Talk!, opened 17 years ago, it fulfilled Tague's life-long passion for food, art, and exploration.

"Everyone is gathered around the tables and somebody's peeling and somebody's chopping,"

Tague says, touting her operation as the only hands-on ethnic cooking school in the area.

"And we eat continuously," she adds. "I think that's why people like it."

The Highland Park resident and former music teacher in the Shaler Area School District leads small classes of six to 10 students in the homestyle kitchen and dining room of a converted apartment across from Penn Aiken Dairy. Her calendar typically includes five days of courses a week on tapas,



Tague takes a group step by step through the preparation of a Moroccan dinner.

Tuscan, and Thai food, along with a host of other fare.

"If I had to teach the same thing every day, forget it," she says.



Learning proper cooking techniques is as much a part of the classes as learning new recipes.

Tague's classes are not for the wary. She admits to being commanding, shouting fast-paced orders, and prodding students to dig in.

Huddled in the small kitchen around stainless steel islands, everyone gets their hands dirty—no exceptions. "We don't split into groups," Tague says. "Everybody is rolling the dough by hand and everybody is seasoning the chicken."

When each dish is complete, the group dines together. People enjoy the intimacy of the converted apartment, Tague says, rather than a sterile classroom. Walls are painted with a border of bright hot peppers, and shelves are filled with plates and platters specific to certain cuisines.

Courses from French to Moroccan to Greek cooking are three to four hours long and usually cost \$80 per student. At an Italian class, students might learn to prepare tomato basil bruschetta, panzanella salad, fettuccine with butter basil sauce, chicken piccata, and lemon Caprese torte for dessert.

But class is more than unfamiliar menus. Tague teaches sanitation practices, knife skills, kitchen tricks, and shortcuts, as well as cooking techniques.

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Tague says her mother was a consummate home entertainer who sparked her daughter's early love of cooking. "I always had to do the grunt work," she recalls. Tague's childhood passion was later stoked as an adult during lessons taught by the late Anna Kao, who once operated an eponymous O'Hara Township Chinese restaurant that was hugely popular. "I had 65 lessons from her and learned more than 300 Chinese recipes," Tague reports.

After that experience, Tague was confident in her kitchen prowess and started offering her own lessons to friends and family. "Sometimes I get wild ideas," she laughs. "My husband wondered who would be next, after our friends had all come."

For the first two years, she offered only menus that mirrored what she'd learned from Kao, but people started asking for Thai, Vietnamese, and Italian recipes. So Tague branched out, and it wasn't long before her success mushroomed. There are now 20 cuisines on the current list of classes, along with specialty offerings like Desserts Around the World and Pizza and Limoncello.

Private parties and date-night dining are popular, too, as are the team-building courses that Tague describes as "camaraderie through cuisine." More than 70 regional companies such as PNC, Highmark, and PPG enroll employees in an effort to encourage risk-taking and problem-solving. Tague incorporates timed challenges and a Foodie Feud game to up the ante. "I might give them a generic cannoli recipe and a table full of ingredients and set each team off to make their own fillings," she says.

Larger groups are accommodated at two off-site classrooms.

Having studied in Thailand, France's Loire Valley, and other exotic locales, Tague is eager to expose her students to similar culinary experiences, and she hosts an educational trip each year that has grown wildly popular. The upcoming April trek to Tuscany sold out months ago.

"Last year, we went to the Amalfi Coast and we cooked every day," she says. "We went to mushroom mines and olive groves. We study with chefs, and I'm learning, just like the rest of the group."

As her classes have grown, Tague has taken on six part-time assistants and a sec-



Students enjoy the fruits of their labors in a home-style dining area decorated with souvenirs of Tague's culinary adventures.

ond instructor who leads special-request classes on vegetarian, vegan, lactose-intolerant, paleo, and gluten-free cooking.

Amy Hauch, one of the newest assistants, stumbled upon the school through an online listing. She looks forward to weekly classes where she sets tables, chops peppers, and learns from Tague's vast experience.

"It really is hands-on," Hauch says. "I like that the class sizes are small and people don't feel lost."

Despite having a full plate, Tague says she has no plans to expand her cooking school outside the East End. "It's all I can handle," she says. "I can't even remember the last time I had people over to my own home."

For more, visit chopwoktalk.com.

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