by the time a guest asks if there’s anything he can do to help—which is really nice, don’t get us wrong—it’s usually too late. You’ve spent the day in the kitchen, and everything is pretty much under control. But what if you did let the guests help? What if you really let them into the kitchen and put knives in their hands? What if you made an evening of it?

We call our exercise in group culinary adventure Team Cooking. Think of it as group entertainment, like a day of river rafting, except without the wet clothes or the possibility of capsizing. We call our exercise in group culinary adventure Team Cooking. Think of it as group entertainment, like a day of river rafting, except without the wet clothes or the possibility of capsizing. The ingredients are laid out, the equipment is handy. Everyone has a copy of the recipes and the timeline.

Now count off, gym-class style, and separate into three teams. Remember that this is supposed to be fun. Team Cooking is meant to be a way for some friends to get together and have a good time and wind up with a decent meal at the end of it all.

Ready? Then let’s start Team Cooking.

THE TIMELINE

The timeline is loosely based on a 2 1/2 hour schedule from start to finish, from clean counter to having the cake cooled and frosted. We’ve color coordinated the grid so you can more easily see what dishes are being worked on at a glance. Our timeline assumes guests will arrive around 5:30 and sit down to eat at 8:00. The timeline also assumes you’ve gone to the store and procured all the ingredients already. Use the timeline as a rough countdown to when you want to plate up and eat. Don’t forget the holding patterns (see sidebar), or to have fun.

Actions here are abbreviated. See the recipes for full instructions.

THE MENU

Baby Arugula Salad with Persimmons and Toasted Hazelnuts
Fettuccini with Pancetta Cream
Herbed Beets with Fennel

Chicken Breasts with Shallots, Chèvre Cheese, Figs, and a Port Reduction Sauce
Chocolate Cassis Cake with Whipped Cream and Raspberries

BABY ARUGULA SALAD WITH PERSIMMONS AND TOASTED HAZELNUTS

You can substitute mixed baby greens for the arugula and frisée.

20 mins
ACTIVE TIME: 10 mins
SERVES: 6

SALAD
½ cup shelled and unsalted hazelnuts
1 head frisée
3 fuyu persimmons
6 ounces baby arugula

VINAIGRETTE
2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
⅛ teaspoon sherry vinegar
kosher salt
Freshly ground black pepper
3 tablespoons olive oil

Preheat your oven to 400°.

Spread the hazelnuts on a baking sheet, or in a small pie tin, and place in the oven to toast. After about 1 minute, give the pan a good shake to prevent the nuts from burning on one side. After another 3 minutes, give the nuts another shake. Remove from oven after another 2 minutes and pour the nuts into a bowl to cool.

With a knife, remove the stems and dark ends from the frisée. Cut what remains into bite-size pieces.

Rinse and peel the persimmons, and cut them into slices. Wrap the cooled hazelnuts in a dish towel and rub them vigorously to remove the majority of the skins. Chop the nuts coarsely.

Combine both vinegars, add salt and pepper to taste, and slowly whisk in the olive oil.

PERSIMMONS

There are two main types of persimmons—Fuyu and Hachiya. Hachiya are more commercially available, and are astringent until they’re soft and ripe. Fuyu are non-astringent, and can be eaten while still firm. Both are tasty, but if you can get Fuyu, get them, they are better with the salad.
**FETTUCCINI WITH PORCINI AND PANCETTA CREAM**

**TOTAL TIME:** 1 hr 15 mins  
**ACTIVE TIME:** 35 mins  
**SERVES:** 6

- 3 Fresh Porcini Mushrooms, (or 3 tablespoons olive oil  
- 1 tablespoon dry vermouth  
- Kosher salt  
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter  
- 2 tablespoons olive oil  
- 6 chicken breasts (about 3 pounds)  
- 6 ounces chèvre cheese  
- 2 cups chicken stock  
- 2 cups port (tawny or reserve)  
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter  
- 1 bunch tarragon  
- 6 ounces parmesan cheese  
- 4 tablespoons chopped Italian parsley  
- 1 pound fettuccini

**HOLDING PATTERN**

This is a fine place either to drop the heat down to low or to kill the heat entirely.

Cut the green tops off the fennel and slice the bulbs in half lengthwise. Remove the cores, slice the bulbs lengthwise in ¼-inch strips, and reserve. Chop the chives and reserve (about 3 tablespoons).

Put the olive oil and butter in a medium stock pot and set over medium heat. Add the fettuccini, salt, and pepper, and cook for 5 minutes.

Add the sliced beets to the stock pot and cook for another 5 minutes.

Add the sliced chives to the stock pot and cook for another 5 minutes.

Pour the sauce over the top, add the pasta is cooking. Drain the pasta when it's ready, then return it to the stock pot.

Grate half the parmesan cheese and reserve.

**THE TIMELINE**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>TEAM ONE</th>
<th>TEAM TWO</th>
<th>TEAM THREE</th>
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<td>-5.35</td>
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<td>CAKE STEP 04</td>
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<td>CHICKEN STEP 03</td>
<td>CHICKEN STEP 02</td>
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**HERBED BEETS WITH FENNEL**

**TOTAL TIME:** 40 mins  
**ACTIVE TIME:** 20 mins  
**SERVES:** 6

This recipe also works well with potatoes in place of the beets.

- 1 medium red cheddar beets  
- 2 large fennel bulbs  
- 1 bunch chives  
- 1 bunch tarragon  
- 2 tablespoons olive oil  
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter  
- Kosher salt  
- Freshly ground black pepper  
- ¼ cup white wine  
- 2 tablespoons whole-grain dijon mustard  
- 1 medium lemon, juiced

In a pot, cover the beets with cold water and bring to a boil. Cook for 15 to 20 minutes, until a knife easily goes into them. Drain, then peel under cold running water. Set the beets aside to cool.

**HOLDING PATTERN**

This is a fine place either to drop the heat down to low or to kill the heat entirely.

Chop the juicy core (with the skin) into ¼-inch strips, then dice the stems. Combine the sliced caps and diced stems in a bowl and add 1 tablespoon of the olive oil and the dry vermouth. Toss and set aside for at least 30 minutes.

For dried mushrooms, put them in a bowl with 1 tablespoon of the olive oil and the dry vermouth. Add enough warm water to cover the mushrooms, and mix with your fingers. Let sit 30 minutes to reconstitute the mushrooms.

Chop the mushrooms into ¼-inch cubes. Mince the garlic. Chop the onion into medium dice.

In a large sauté pan over a medium-high flame, add 1 tablespoon olive oil. When the pan is hot, add the porcini and cook until golden brown, about 5 minutes. Stir frequently so the porcini doesn't burn to the pan.

Add the mushrooms (liquid and all), the garlic and onion to the pancetta.. Let this cook for another 5 minutes. Stir the porcini and pancetta together.

Warm the sauce over low heat while the pasta is cooking. Drain the pasta when it's ready, then return it to the stock pot. Pour the sauce over the top, add the grated cheese and mix it well.

Serve the pasta in bowls and top with shreds of parmesan cheese and the chopped parsley.

**PASTA STEP 02**

Wash dishes in sink  

Check drinks and music

CAKE STEP 04

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-7:30  
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-7:50  
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-8:00  

CAKE STEP 05  
CAKE STEP 06  
CAKE STEP 07  
CAKE STEP 08  
CAKE STEP 09  
CAKE STEP 10  
CAKE STEP 11  
BEETS STEP 02  
BEETS STEP 03  
BEETS STEP 04  
BEETS STEP 05  
BEETS STEP 06  
BEETS STEP 07

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**CHICKEN BREASTS WITH SHALLOTS, CHÈVRE CHEESE, FIGS, AND A PORT REDUCTION SAUCE**

**TOTAL TIME:** 2 hr  
**ACTIVE TIME:** 30 mins  
**SERVES:** 6

- 10 fresh figs  
- 4 shallots  
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter  
- ¼ bunch fresh thyme  
- 2 cups port (lammy or reserve)  
- 2 cups chicken stock  
- 6 ounces chèvre cheese  
- 8 chicken breasts (about 3 pounds)  
- Salt  
- Freshly ground black pepper  
- 2 tablespoons olive oil  
- 2 tablespoons sherry  

**HOLDING PATTERN**

You can finish this ahead of time, let it cool, and simply warm it up when you're ready to eat.

Preheat oven to 400°F. Rinse the figs and, with a knife, remove the stems and slice in half. Reserve.

Toothpicks (if wooden, soak them in water for 30 minutes)

Preheat oven to 400°F. Rinse the figs and, with a knife, remove the stems and slice in half. Reserve.

Toothpicks (if wooden, soak them in water for 30 minutes)
Peel and thinly slice the shallots in a medium sauté pan on medium heat, melt 1 tablespoon butter. When the butter is foaming, add the shallots and cook them until golden brown and softened. Remove from heat and reserve.

With fingers and thumb, slide up from the bottom of each thyme to up break off the leaves. Give the leaves a good dice, and reserve.

In a medium sauce pot, bring the pot to a boil. Lower the heat to medium and reduce by half, 20 to 30 minutes. Add the chicken stock and reduce by half again. Turn off the heat. Add a pinch of salt, pepper, and place the chicken in the center with a good pinch of thyme and close the openings. If the breast has tendons attached, you can use them to cover and close the pocket’s opening.

Add the olive oil and 2 tablespoons of butter to a medium sauté pan and turn the flame to medium high. Once the pan is hot, place two breasts in the pan, side top down, and cook for approximately 2 to 3 minutes to sear. When the breasts achieve a golden brown color, remove them from the pan and place on a sheet tray or caserole. Repeat for the remaining breasts.

When all the breasts are browned and on the sheet pan, use toothpicks to close the open ends and place the sheet pan in the oven and broil them fully 20 minutes.

**HOLDING PATTERN**
Once you’ve seared the chicken breasts, you can set them aside for up to 15 minutes before putting them in the oven.

Five minutes before the chicken comes out of the oven, reheat the port reduction over a low flame and add the remaining thyme. Remove the pan from the heat and whisk in 2 tablespoons of butter to the reduction until incorporated. Taste for seasoning and set aside.

In a medium sauté pan over medium heat, melt 1 tablespoon butter. When hot, place the figs face down in the pan and sauté until well browned. Be careful, since they can burn quickly. Sprinkle with salt and pepper and add to the port sauce.

Test the chicken breasts after 20 minutes with a thin, sharp knife or a finger. If the knife goes in and out of the breast smoothly, and the juices run clear, the breasts are done. If they don’t seem done, cook for another 5 minutes before removing the pan from the oven.

**HOLDING PATTERN**
Not ready to eat! Cover the pan with a piece of tin foil and hold off on plating up for at least 30 minutes. Or lower the oven temperature to 275°F and return the pan to the oven to keep the chicken warm for 20 minutes.

To serve, place a chicken breast on a plate, top with 3 or 4 fig halves, and spoon sauce over it.

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**MUSIC**
Music is an integral part of cooking and eating. It sets the mood, it adds to the experience, it provides a rhythm. Encourage the people coming over for the Team Cooking to bring a couple of their favorite CDs (or even to make a special mix CD for the event). Here are a few suggestions for prepping and dining music that will complement this menu.

**GOOD PREPPING MUSIC**
Beck: Guero (Geffen)
Bebel Gilberto: Tanto Tempo: Remixed (Zingiboom)
Louis Prima: Capitol Collector’s Series (Capitol)
Tom Jones: Released Greatest Hits (Beeja)
Tribal Called Quest: The Anthology (Jive)
Back 5: This Right Here Is Back 5 (V2)

**GOOD DRINKING MUSIC**
Pink Martinis: Sympathetic (Heinz)
Artie Shaw and his Orchestra: Begin the Beguine (Bluebird).
Various Artists: It’s On Canvas: Exhibition, Vol. 1 (Arma)

**HOLDING PATTERN**
One of the most difficult things about cooking in general is getting everything done at the right time. And the closer it is to serving time, the more stressful the situation becomes. So if things seem like they’re veering way off course, enter a “holding pattern.” This is a place where you can slow the meal down without losing it, or stop the meal entirely without ruining it, the last place before you need to cowboy up and wrangle everything together to serve. As you become more comfortable cooking and socializing at the same time, you’ll learn to sense where these occur. In the meantime, we’ve marked a number of places where you can stop the action and wait for a team to catch up.