

Annette Lang and Expat Kitchen: Bringing quality to the table and to life

By Kevin F. Cox, Culinary Explorer



It started when she was a child, peering over the edge of the kitchen counter, watching her mother cook. And years of sitting at the family table, eating great food at home, sealed her addiction. Annette Lang is a foodie, through and through.

Having developed a taste for excellent food at such a young age, Lang found herself increasingly taking on food-related careers in her native Australia. Whether buying for department stores, designing, tasting or cooking food, she knew that one of her favorite places was in the kitchen. So, when she left her homeland on expat assignments, first in India, then in Singapore, she brought more than just her family; she brought her passion for great food, too.

There was only one problem: how to ensure that the family helper could prepare the food her family was accustomed to? "Basically, it got down to two options," said the fiery, dark-haired Aussie in her white apron and optic running shoes, sitting momentarily in her sparkling, white, commercial kitchen. "You can either hang out with your helper in the kitchen teaching her how to cook or you can send her to cooking school."

For Lang, that was not a hard decision and she spent a lot of her time guiding her helper in the purchasing, preparing and serving of food familiar to her family. After countless hours of patient teaching, impressive results started to show. Her helper prepared old favorites and new, diet-conscious dishes to the happy commentary of family and friends. "I knew I had done well when one night during an unplanned dinner party my friend asked how, with my busy schedule, I managed to cook such a wonderful meal. You should have seen her expression when I pointed to my helper and said that I had nothing to do with it. She asked me if I could teach her helper, too."

Like so many great ideas,

Lang's was borne out of necessity. A school teaching a Western approach to food for expats is missing in many developing nations. "It was an opportunity for the taking. The need was there but no one was filling it." So, in 2002 she decided to put her money where her mouth was and Expat Kitchen was the result. The objective: low fat, healthy Western cooking; the target students: domestic helpers. The demand was overwhelming and three years later Expat Kitchen is a name associated with good food.

"I knew I had done well when one night, during an unplanned dinner party, my friend asked how, with my busy schedule, I managed to cook such a wonderful meal."

Any new business undertaking is not for the faint of heart, and Expat Kitchen was no exception. After briefly joining forces with an in-home cooking instructor Lang set out on her own. She started by inviting some of her friends' helpers to her home for casual cooking classes. "I was nervous and the materials were inadequate. I quickly realized I had to build a structured program that could teach the basics and then take it to the next level. It involved a lot of work; it still does."

The classes took off, quickly overflowing her home and forcing her to a critical decision point. "The options were to stop the classes altogether and get my house back, or to step it up and build a real business," Lang shrugged.

She opted for setting up an official business, but it didn't come easy. The devil was in the details, including creating a viable business plan; getting approvals from three different authorities; finding appropriate space for

a real teaching kitchen; being scammed out of investment funds by builders; managing the relentless tax and regulatory requirements; and hiring staff.

"I never expected the stresses of establishing and operating a formal business," Lang explained calmly as she simultaneously watched the cleanup of the kitchen, directed the management of food for a catering affair that evening, kept an eye on something baking in the oven, and gave instructions for the grand opening celebration of her new kitchen later in the week.

And did I mention that she is the mother of two children whom she picks up from school daily and with whom she is very involved? "Sometimes I wish I could cut myself in half and do more," she said, exhaling. Half indeed; she already does the work of at least four.

But Lang's hard work has paid off. Today, Expat Kitchens has a staff of eight. The school is housed in a gleaming, new, commercial teaching kitchen in one of Singapore's best-loved foodie neighborhoods - Little India. Within the 1,600-square-foot space is a modern, professional kitchen, spotlessly white, with a large center cooking island, heavy-grated professional burners and ovens and a highly versatile open area where cooking workstations and banquet tables can be moved around to accommodate lessons and dining needs.

Housed within an historic building, complete with high ceilings, antique windows and excellent natural light, "This place was in rough shape when we found it," Lang commented as she looked around the room for a moment. Then, in a quieter voice, said "But I loved it as soon as I saw it."

With such success to date, anyone else might relax for a moment, but that's not in Lang's makeup. She is constantly tweaking the lesson plans, adding dishes or cooking styles to the curriculum and thinking of ways to expand or market the business.

"There are so many things we are trying to do at Expat Kitchen," she said with excitement. "We are branching into classes for expats themselves, including hosting cooking parties; cooking for men; and survival cooking lessons for students heading off to university and away from helpers and hawker centers. Those kids need to know how to cook; without that skill they're in trouble."

Indeed the only limitation on Expat Kitchen's continuing growth is Lang's own imagination



and, of course, time. The school's goal is to teach domestic helpers to plan, prepare and serve high quality, low-fat Western food. But as I felt Lang's contagious enthusiasm and saw the pride in her students as they served up delicious dishes which they prepared, I realized that there is much more going on here.

Whether advancing helpers' abilities in the kitchen, enhancing healthier, tastier eating among families, or giving people important life skills, what is really being taught at Expat Kitchen is quality of life: quality meals made with quality food and quality time as families come back to the table to enjoy it together. And what better business plan is there than that?



Clockwise from top left: Annette Lang teaching a group of highly enthusiastic helpers the art of Western cooking; Fresh-baked pastries; The pride of a helper's creation speaks for itself; Presentation and serving are an important part of the curriculum; The cooking classes are 'hands-on' at Expat Kitchen.

