

Like the Food? Make Your Own

Do-it-yourself gourmet food store offers wine and food tasting in Lorton.

By **Derek B. Johnson**

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The hardest part of her job, said Laura Escamilla, is explaining the concept behind Corner Cuisine to her customers. What can initially seem complicated is actually designed to make one's cooking life more convenient.

At a wine and food tasting on Saturday, Sept. 13, Escamilla and her husband David Christian, owner of Corner Cuisine in Lorton, said they used the event as a jumping off point to educate customers about the mechanics of their service.

"We're still selling the concept," said Escamilla. "You're asking people to change their habits. It's hard."

The habits in question are the dinner choices most working families are faced with: TV dinners, fast-food eat-outs or spending time perpetually shopping for ingredients to cook at home.

Located at 9000 Lorton Station Blvd., Corner Cuisine serves Lorton, Fairfax Station, Burke, Springfield, Alexandria and Fort Belvoir. It operates both as a take-out for pre-prepared meals at home and a do-it-yourself feature. Customers can customize and create meals from up to a dozen different stations throughout the small shop. There, with a full kitchen of tools, ingredients and spices already set up, customers follow what Escamilla called "foolproof" recipes and make dinners right in the store that can be heated up at home.

The wine and food tasting was a partnership between Corner Cuisine and Occoquan-based gourmet food market Tastefully Yours, owned by JoAnn, Patrick and Sam Barney. Corner Cuisine provided samples of its September menu, featuring main courses like Argentine Flank Steak and Chicken Marbella. Tastefully Yours offered samples of their gourmet wines.

"Good food goes with good wine," said Patrick Barney, who handed out samples of chardonnay and pinot noir at the event, which went from 2-4 p.m.

Escamilla, president of her own company, L2K Marketing, handles public relations for her husband's store. She said the plan was to begin offering food tastings and similar events once a month. Patrick Barney said he was interested in working with the store again in the near future.

The food is all natural, or as Escamilla puts it: "Nothing pre-processed, nothing weird." The menu, which undergoes a complete overhaul every month, was developed by a series of chefs hired by the couple as a result of their extensive travel.

"We're foodies by nature," she said.

Christian said they pick and choose their recipes from all walks of life. Some they pluck from cooking magazines, others from neighbors and relatives, like the recipe for Bavarian pork roast given to them by friends from Germany. He said they would even try recipes submitted by customers if they looked promising.

"If customers give us something, we'll try it and if it works we'll incorporate that recipe as well," said Christian.

VICKY POST, a regular customer who attended the Sept. 13 tasting, said the service has made her life easier.

"I can go home, throw [the food] in the freezer and have good, healthy meals for the month," she said. "Since you're putting the meal together you can tailor it to your taste."

Christian said his background in human resources and operations management made the concept



Photo by Derek B. Johnson/The Connection

Corner Cuisine in Lorton partnered up with Occoquan-based Tastefully Yours for a wine and tasting Saturday, Sept. 13. Owner David Christian said he and his wife Laura Escamilla planned on holding them monthly, as a way to greet customers and educate them about their service.

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a good fit for him. Originally, he had looked to open up a franchise with an existing company, Let's Eat!, but found the restrictions placed upon him to be overly controlling.

"You're extremely limited in your flexibility to do things," said Christian. "The more we looked at it, the more we realized we were basically working for them and not us. Everything was basically a cookie cutter approach."

Christian, who quit his previous job to pursue the idea, wanted the ability to put his touch on his store. "I'm investing my life savings in this. So guess what? I want to have control over it.

By coming in and making a week or a month's worth of family meals, customers are not only eating healthy but each individual meal, according to Christian and Escamilla, comes out to between \$3 to \$5, making it cheaper than most fast food outings. For Escamilla, a native of Spain, the transition in diets was difficult. Providing a healthier alternative that's also convenient was one of the main motivators she and Christian had when deciding to open the store.

"You have all these health issues [today] and it's basically because people aren't eating well," she said.

"When I was growing up, my family would sit down for dinner, even though we were running and gunning everywhere," said Christian. "It's becoming harder and harder to do that. Nobody works an eight-hour day anymore."



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