

Les Marmitons[®]

CRANFORD

The Cranford Chapter of Les Marmitons meets the second Tuesday of the month from September through May. Our venue is the Elks Lodge in Cranford, New Jersey. We develop a yearly plan where individual members find a Guest Chef, develop an exciting menu capitalizing on the Chef expertise –i.e. French, Italian, German, etc. When the menu has been finalized between the Host and the Cranford Executive, Our Sommelier then becomes involved and he selects wines for each course that will complement and frame each course. He also selects a Quaffer wine that starts out the evening when the members are arriving, selecting the team they wish to work on, and the guest chef is describing the evenings' activities. This includes the pitfalls, special activities required and other general tips to get the preparation started. For each dinner event, sometimes the guest chef will provide the unique groceries, other times the team is responsible for assembling all the ingredients required for a dinner for 25-35 people.

We have a large meeting room that easily accommodates our membership with 6 or 7 members at each round table. Of course, we have linen and crystal service, as yet there are no flowers and candles but just wait. The kitchen is functional and is equipped with professional appliances that include two gas burning ranges with ovens, two stacked free standing convection ovens, a fryer station, refrigerator, central islands, and a professional dishwasher and deep sinks. As the kitchen is too small for all of the dinner menu course teams to occupy at the same time, we set up tables in the "Dining Room" for each course or course element. There, we are able to prep our menu item(s) so that it can, at the guest chef's direction, proceed into the kitchen – in sequence of cooking time, so that the ovens and stovetop burners are used efficiently. This assures that each menu item is completed on time and plated in sequence. This also means that we may be cooking various elements of the dinner, dessert, the soup, or a sauce base while the "main course element" which is cooked or finished off just before serving is still waiting on the preparation table or in the refrigerator. In a way it looks like a jig-saw puzzle where various parts of the picture are complete but the entire picture is still obscure.

Each team, randomly selected based on interest in the element to be cooked, is responsible for the preparation, cooking, plating and serving of the dish. They are also responsible to break-down their preparation area and do all of the necessary clean up. After the dish/course is served, a spokesman for that team describes the preparation and cooking process, including any "tricks of the trade" to the members. The Guest Chef then critiques the cooking and presentation (usually we are able to get passing grades).

When the dinner is complete, everyone is responsible to clean up the dining room and kitchen – the entire venue. As a fund raiser we routinely raffle off a bottle of fine wine. The raffle is almost the last activity of the evenings and, as such, it keeps the membership involved in the clean-up process. This means that we distribute the pain of clean-up throughout the participants and are able to vacate the Elks Lodge by 11:00 PM. As a special side, we plate an extra portion of each dish and present it to the Elks Lodge steward – that keeps him on our side.

Over the years of New Jersey Les Marmitons we have had a variety of cooking locations. Each seems to have had its' own special attributes or problems. Sometimes they were too small, not enough hot water, too far for the regular members to travel, etc. Each location brought its own cadre of members who sometimes did not travel to the next location. We have cooked in a gourmet catering kitchen, to individual restaurant kitchens on their dark night, in corporate kitchens in the evening, and in quasi-professional kitchens located in a social hall/organization. Our biggest limitation is that no one wants to accept the liability for us serving alcohol. Although we have wine for each course, we do manage the pours to keep the total volume down. We have found that if a dinner contains butter, garlic, and cream and we use them in great quantity how can we not succeed. Nothing succeeds like excess.