

# Food is the meat of this book club

By LIZ JOHNSON Correspondent | Posted: Wednesday, January 21, 2015 12:15 am

On a brutally cold Tuesday night in January when most people choose to hibernate, a group of women bustle into the Newtown Bookshop, dressed warmly, with a covered dish in hand.

Inside, toward the back of the store, is a table where they each place their dish, take off their coats and start to chatter.

“Those cookies were the biggest hit,” one of the women confides to another.

They’ve gathered to talk about cookbooks. This month, it’s chef Marcus Samuelsson’s “Off Duty: The Recipes I Love to Cook at Home.”

Every second Tuesday of the month, they meet at 7 p.m., agreeing ahead of time which cookbook to spotlight. Throughout the month, they plan their meals through email exchanges to be sure no one duplicates anyone else’s choice.

Anyone is welcome to join the club. First-timers working up the nerve to cook a dish are welcome to bring a bottle of wine, says Newtown Bookshop owner Kathy Morrison.

“I love to cook. I was looking for an outlet to get together with other cooks in the area,” says Alex Gallagher, who first proposed the idea of a cookbook club to Marianne Alt, a Newtown Bookshop employee.

That was three years ago.

“We started it and haven’t stopped,” says Alt.

On this particular night, the table is filled with colorful, appetizing entrees such as Red Shrimp and Spicy Grits; Quinoa, Broccoli, Cauliflower and Toasted Coconut; and Potato Spinach Pie and K-town Noodles, all from Samuelsson’s book.

Once everyone has settled, Morrison encourages them to “try a savory.” A line forms around the table, as members coo over presentation and aroma that wafts from the dishes, while individual cooks instruct or caution if, say, the dish is too hot.



Brenda Cseremsak of Titusville, New Jersey, and Gerry Hixsom of Lower Makefield discuss the latest recipes they made during the monthly meeting of the Cookbook Club at the Newtown Bookshop.

“Mine is a noodle dish,” warns Alt, who offers a side dish of cucumbers and scallions as flavoring along with kimchi, which she has picked up at the neighboring Korean restaurant. “But beware — it’s spicy.”

Newtown Township’s Debbie McLaughlin says her recipe of Marinade Charred Squid called for too many herbs.

“He overdid it with the herbs,” she laments to the group.

Cari Gundman of Upper Makefield arrives a few minutes late with a Pumpkin and Garam Masala Pie that everyone raves about.

The chatter quickly turns to silence as they sample the dishes. Then Morrison encourages them to go around the room to talk about what they’d brought, why they chose it and the challenges they found in preparing it.

Anne Gordon of Newtown Township has made the quinoa dish, which she says she chose because she’s always looking for a vegetarian dish to make for friends. She says she found it a bit time-consuming as there were many vegetables to chop.

Still, the group gives her high marks.

“It’s very good,” says one member, “and very pretty.”

Each cook shares her triumphs and challenges, such as spices she might have had a hard time finding or even had to replace because she couldn’t locate them (a squeeze of lime to make up for curry leaves, for example) or deciding whether to stick with the spice measurements, despite concerns the dish may be too hot or salty.

Sometimes, the conversation leads to an idea for a field trip, perhaps to a spice farm or the Italian Market in Philadelphia, to find ingredients.

At other times, the talk turns to stories shared by the author of the cookbook, like a recipe one of the cooks tried that Samuelsson recounted he’d made for President Barack Obama.

And sometimes, a cook shares her tale of disaster, like the Black-Bottom Peanut Pie that caught fire in the oven.

“I think the black bottom is supposed to be chocolate ganache — not burnt,” says Anne Palacek of Newtown Township.

After a hearty laugh, everyone assures her anything that includes chocolate and peanut butter couldn’t be bad.

“We do eat well here,” says Gallagher.

Want to know more?

To learn more about the cookbook club or other book clubs hosted by the Newtown Bookshop, call 215-968-2400 or go to [www.newtownbookshop.com](http://www.newtownbookshop.com). The bookshop is in the Village of Newtown Shopping Center at 2835 S. Eagle Road in Newtown.