

Men bid to cook up love

By EDAN CORKILL

Staff writer

Takashi smiled as he held up his mobile phone and photographed the slightly shriveled piece of *tonkatsu* (deep-fried pork cutlet). "At today's lesson I made another awful-looking dish," he tapped out in an e-mail to send with the photo to a friend.

The recent boom in popularity of cooking schools among young Japanese men can be put down to the industry satisfying two very different types of clientele. One is interested in learning to cook. The other is interested in learning to cook *and* in meeting women. Takashi, 38, (who preferred to use a pseudonym) is an example of the latter.



Recipe for success: Men mix it with their female counterparts at the +m Marunouchi Studio cooking school in Tokyo. EDAN CORKILL

Blinking under the bright lights of ABC Cooking's chic +m Marunouchi Studio, he said that attending cooking school was a good way to impress girls. "You say you're going to cooking school and it's like, 'Wow!' "

Not that Takashi's tonkatsu was anything to say "wow" about. After 12 lessons he hadn't picked up the habit of cooking at home, but he was having fun nonetheless.

Standing opposite Takashi throughout their 90-minute cooking lesson was a large man of about the same age, who I will call Taro. Looking at Taro's plump, juicy tonkatsu, it was hard to believe he and

Takashi had used the same recipe.

Taro is a representative of the *other* type of cooking-school man. "He cooks dinners at home and he makes lunchboxes in the morning — for each of us," reported his proud wife, with whom he was attending the class.

Having taken classes for about a year, Taro said he was comfortable making just about anything at home.

About half of the 18 attendees at the +m studio on a recent Sunday were men. Six were interested in meeting women. The rest were there either with their wives or wives-to-be, learning skills that would allow them to help out around the home.

Junko Yoshihara, the studio manager, said it was a representative group. Until two years ago, ABC Cooking's classes had been off-limits to men, she explained. Although some competitor schools did offer classes for men only, they were aimed mostly at retirees. ABC Cooking struck out on a different path, wooing the young and image-conscious with chic studios that looked like they were ripped from the pages of Elle Deco.

In the last 12 months the classes have taken off. In quick succession, ABC Cooking opened men's classes in Tokyo's Marunouchi and Ginza districts, and in Nagoya — and saw their male student numbers jump from 100 to about 600.

Yoshihara said the cooking trend among young men has been simmering for a few years. She explained: "It probably started with Bistro SMAP" — a segment of the popular SMAP×SMAP TV program in which the members of the famous all-male pop band whip up delicacies for celebrity guests.

"When famous people do it on television, it's like, 'They're handsome *and* they can cook!' " Yoshihara said. "Now being able to cook is considered a plus when it comes to finding a wife."

In addition, the recession and a spate of food

contamination and mislabeling scandals have nudged both the cautious and frugal-minded members of the male sex into the kitchen, too.

Still, while the popularity of cooking schools among young Japanese men can be traced back to a wide variety of motivations, there is one point that seems to unite most participants. When asked if their fathers cooked, both Taro and Takashi responded with the same answer: They had never even seen their father set foot in the kitchen.

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