

Organic recipes go with the grain

By Sally Brown

WE'RE just 10 minutes into our cooking class at Brisbane's Mondo Organics when head chef Dominique Rizzo asks: "Does everyone know what quinoa is?" Most of the participants, including the lone male, nod enthusiastically. Feigning familiarity with this quinoa thing, I busy myself with my apron.

Perhaps I should have known the people doing tonight's class would have known about this obscure object (pronounced, by the way, "keen-wah"), which is a high-protein grain native to the South American Andes (although, actually, it's technically not a grain but the seed of a leafy plant distantly related to spinach). That's because we're attending a class for "dairy and wheat alternatives", and it is chock full of aficionados of the wheat-free, gluten-free and dairy-free variety. Perhaps they already know that the quinoa will add a delicate, granular texture to the burghul-free tabouli we'll soon be making.

Since 2000, West End's Mondo Organics has built a solid reputation for fresh, flavoursome organic restaurant food, and in 2003 went a step further by introducing organic and "alternative" cooking classes. Class themes include Spanish tapas, spicy African cuisine and Italian slow food, and classes are held on Tuesday evenings (6.30pm-8.30pm) in the restaurant's production kitchen.

Tonight, we're working within strict dietary parameters. Apart from the minimal use of dairy products, it seems meat will also be missing (not Mondo's usual menu, though, which features, among other things, braised duck and wood-smoked bacon). And, while a wine list has been left for our contemplation, there are no takers this evening.

Still, there are five savoury dishes and a dessert that we'll be whipping up in our 90 allotted minutes of cooking time. So we won't be going hungry, especially with dishes that sound as tempting as cheesy spring onion polenta souffle, Italian spinach rotolo with ricotta herb filling and polenta, pistachio and apricot syrup cake.

As the class gets under way, each of the 15-odd attendees is assigned a dish to help prepare (mine is the spinach rotolo) and Rizzo keeps an eye on us all as we do our chopping and mixing. Meanwhile, Brenda Fawdon, Mondo's owner and chef, lends her assistance and offers tips on where we can source the organics we're cooking with. There's a positive dynamic in the room and while Rizzo and Fawdon espouse the use of organics, they don't preach.

With the experts' help, and a lot of whisking and folding of eggs on my part, the base of my baked rotolo has the composition of a spongy omelette. Coloured green by the spinach, it could almost pass as retro. We allow the base to cool before smearing it generously but gently with a filling of ricotta, lemon zest, roast garlic, pecorino, eggs and fresh herbs. Then it's rolled up much like a jam roll. My part of the class done, I wait for the other dishes to be finished before we all make our way to a table reserved for us in the restaurant's dining room, tonight half empty. Fawdon and Rizzo emerge from the kitchen one dish at a time. The rotolo, first out and accompanied by a slightly warm roast vegetable relish, is light and springy, its filling deliciously fresh. For me, it's the stand-out, but maybe that's because I helped make it.

My fellow recreational chefs also respond enthusiastically to our next dish of leek, spinach and mushroom tart with potato pastry. By the time the souffle makes its debut -- served straight to our plates in rustic, creamy dollops -- most of us are close to full. The dish doesn't quite receive the applause it might deserve. Most of us agree with Fawdon's comment that it would be "fabulous as an 'under', as we call it in the kitchen, for a wet dish". Another forkful confirms that it would do rather nicely with a rich, saucy meat dish.

The savoury food gone, I find I'm unable to find that spot ordinarily reserved for dessert. I ask for my cake to go, but can't resist a little nibble on the way home. By the time I pass through the front door, it's all but gone. It has been a satisfying night, in more ways than one.

Mondo Organics, 166 Hardgrave Rd, West End, Brisbane.

Classes cost \$65-\$75, depending on menus.

www.mondo-organics.com.au