



Photo: Trisha Hall (left) and Gigi Ragland (right) pose with Executive Chef Elise Wiggins at Panzano cooking class

By Gigi Ragland

She must have made up that word! "You... what...eee?" Puzzlement was my first reaction to executive chef, Elise Wiggins, when she gave a cheeky grin to the cooking class and asked us if we had ever heard of Umami. Those of us that didn't know gave her a quizzical look and those "in-the-know" brandished smug smiles. Was this some sort of special initiation into a culinary cooking club, I wondered. Maybe I didn't hear her correctly. What kind of strange jargon is this award-winning chef passing on to her naïve neophytes - namely me and my associate Trisha Hall?

# Umami Momma

First of all, Dictionary.com offers this method of pronunciation: **ü-mä-mE** for the unusual word. It is an actual real word originating in Japan in both word and concept. Umami, as Chef Elise Wiggins defines it, "is the taste sensation you get when satiated, and release endorphins like chocolate." Ah hah, that was my "light bulb" moment. Trisha and I looked at each other, raised our eyebrows and whispered in acknowledgement "hmmm, like chocolate." Now that's gotta be good I thought. And by the looks of Trisha's glassy eyes and sugar-high smile she must've been thinking the same way. Chocolate does have a way of eliciting an emotional charge and if that's what Umami can do for the old taste buds I was more than willing to introduce it into my vocabulary. A more formal definition describes it as the fifth taste to the other four. Supposedly the human tongue can detect only four basic tastes: sweet, sour, bitter and salty. Umami is associated with an essence, or words such as savory. And more recently has evolved into a feeling of a perfect quality in a taste or of some sort of special emotional circumstance in which the taste is experienced. I know I can get pretty darn emotional when tasting Chef Elise Wiggins' masterful dishes.

That particular day Trisha and I had the pleasure of participating in one of Wiggins' monthly cooking classes that she offers to the public. These have become sell-out events for Denver locals and hotel guests who

patronize Panzano Restaurant where one can enjoy her Northern Italian cuisine. My mouth was watering as Chef Wiggins went through the step-by-step process of cooking one of the restaurant's most sought-after dishes, the "Vittello Valle Dosta." A delicious veal dish made with prized components of Prosciutto di San Danielle, luscious Fontina cheese, shavings of black truffles and a drizzle of white truffle oil.

All twenty-something of us took scrupulous notes, while Elise gave tips on how to trim tenderloin and demonstrated how to bread the veal loin scaloppini. Trisha was taking A+ notes as her husband was expecting a reprisal of the dish at home in the near future. We learned that some of our classmates were loyal attendees to each monthly class. We discovered some participants were given the class as a birthday or holiday gift. And yet others were excited to find an outlet that gave them an opportunity to learn about Northern Italian cuisine in a comfortable and friendly environment.

Taking a class with Elise Wiggins is like being taught by a good friend. She jokes with you, answers every question, patiently demonstrates a technique and engages you in discussion. In short, she makes you feel good. The Umami Momma of Northern Italian cuisine -- "typical Italian is to let very good ingredients compliment themselves." One classmate responded back, "I don't think it is just the ingredients - it's you Elise." ✈

## Chef Elise Wiggins' Cooking Tips: Panzano Restaurant, Hotel Monaco, Denver, CO

Each cooking class is peppered with advice and tips from Elise for the gourmet enthusiast to try at home. Below are some of the tips offered in the Val D'Aosta (Foods from the Region of Val D'Aosta Italy) class Trisha Hall and I had the privilege of taking.

- Use kosher salt instead of table salt. It doesn't have anti-caking products or iodine in it and is more pure.
- Parsley helps clean the palate.
- When making sauce, simmer instead of boiling to keep flavors from evaporating.
- Use a smooth wooden board when pounding veal loins to make scaloppini. Or if using a plastic board place plastic wrap over it first. Otherwise veal might tear.
- Roast bones of veal or chicken before making stock. Roasted bones will intensify the flavor.