

the
happy
COOKER

Hollister's Dorothy McNett
has turned her love of cooking
into a cottage industry

By KATHRYN MCKENZIE NICHOLS

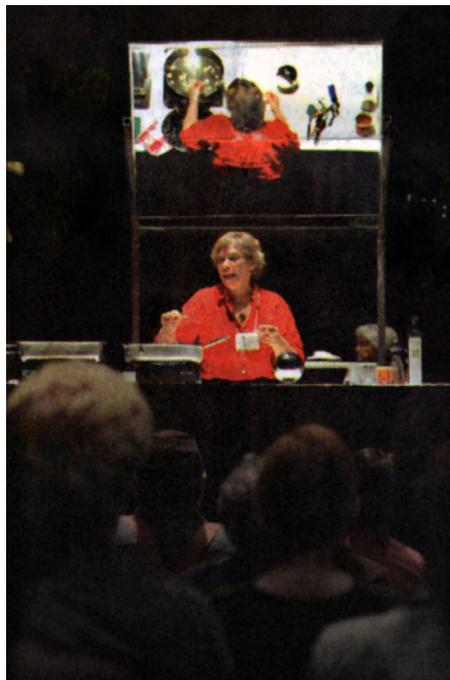
Dorothy McNett never really meant to have a Web site, or a 16,000 square foot gourmet cooking store, or a TV cooking show.

All she really wanted to do was share her love of cooking---and everything else developed as a result.

"Teaching is so enjoyable for me. It's the reason why I'm doing this," said McNett, a Hollister resident who is rapidly becoming the queen of cooking on the Central Coast.

Now, people are driving from Monterey County and the Bay Area to take her classes or check out her store, Dorothy McNett's Place, a former car dealership that's been transformed into a foodies' paradise. From around the world, fans are logging onto her Web site, www.happycookers.com.

"It is a curiosity," said McNett, who acknowledges that Hollister is probably the last place you'd think to find a store of this kind, and that intrigues shoppers. "That's OK, I'll take that. It's a gimmick, but it



ORVILLE MYSEERS/The Herald

Dorothy McNett attracts students from all over the Central Coast.

works."

McNett, who has parlayed her passion into a thriving business, may not have envisioned quite the scope of what would be when she opened her first tiny store in Hollister 10 years ago. But her success has not been accidental, either.

Chalk it up to hard work and

McNett's personal touch, which she delivers every week as she teaches cooking classes at her store's demonstration kitchen.

Some of those classes are now being seen by a wide audience. Last year, "Cooking with Dorothy McNett" was launched on KION, Fridays at noon. AT&T Cable also carries the show, with the schedule depending on the viewer's location.

Her students come from all over the Central Coast. A number of regulars hail from the Monterey Peninsula and the Salinas Valley, some of whom drive to Hollister every week for her classes.

One such student is Frank McInnis, who lives near Corral de Tierra. Every week, he and several friends drive 30 miles to Hollister to take McNett's Wednesday class.

"I couldn't even boil water in a microwave when I started," said McInnis, who is retired.

Now he's exchanging recipes with the other students.

McInnis said he enjoys McNett's sense of humor and her no-nonsense attitude. And having gone to the

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Wednesday class for so long, "It's sort of like family," he said.

And, as you might expect, the store is open during those classes so that cooks can pick up the equipment and ingredients they need to make those splendid recipes.

McNett started her career at the University of Northern Iowa, where she earned a degree in home economics. She married an engineer who was stationed in places around the world, and McNett had the opportunity to live in countries as far-flung as Germany and Ethiopia.

But wherever she went, she found that food was a universal language.

After absorbing all that, she and her family returned to California, settling in Los Altos. McNett decided to get a part-time job---just for something to do---and began working for Magic Chef in 1976.

In those early days of microwave ovens, it was common for the stores that sold them to offer cooking classes, so that consumers could learn to use the new-fangled devices. McNett discovered that she loved teaching people to cook.

McNett ended up owning several microwave stores, then sold to a competitor. Not long after, she moved to Hollister, and opened a little store. And the rest is history.

She spent two years in her first place, and seven in the second, and wasn't really interested in moving again. But then her son, Paul, talked her into what he felt was the wave of the future: retailing through the Internet.

"He was the one who drove me

into the Web business," said McNett, and the HappyCookers.com site was launched in 1997.

And that step necessitated having more space for inventory and packaging. So about a year ago, McNett packed up and moved to the former Tiffany Motors building, which was renovated for her needs. Most of the items that are in the store may also be purchased through the Web site.

Need an Antica bean pot? A canning funnel? A bottle of Sicilian olive oil or a tortilla press? A cookbook or an apron? Peggy Karr glass or a Krups panini grill? That's all here and more on the main floor.

But the store has an impact on the eye and the nose that a Web site can't duplicate.

For instance, if cooks come in looking for a whisk, they won't find a handful to choose from. There is a rack full, from oversized to mini, from stainless steel to silicone coated.

Clever gadgets abound as well: if you've ever needed pickle tongs, an asparagus peeler, or a tart tamper, this is your kind of store.

An old-fashioned candy counter where you pay by weight, and a temperature-controlled wine room, are also part of the retail space. (McNett emphasizes local products in her store---most of the sweets are made by the Marich Candy Co., based in Hollister, and many of the wines are local.)

Off in another wing is McNett's spacious, sunny demonstration kitchen, where up to 60 students can watch and learn, and video cameras catch all the action.

In a typically serendipitous move, McNett had had a mini-television studio installed so that all classes could be videotaped, intending to sell VS tapes of the sessions. Then the deal with KION came along, and McNett had everything she needed to provide the show to the station.

Her hope is to take it even further: to a national audience.

Said McNett, "If we get the sponsors, then we can go,"

Information about recently aired shows can be found on the Web site, as well as stations and times. The site also has details about upcoming cooking classes and a wealth of recipes that may be downloaded at no charge.

McNett is always dreaming up something new to do in the kitchen. With 100 to 150 students a week on site, and thousands more watching from home, she keeps her lineup fresh by introducing a variety of foods from other countries and cultures.

This week, however, it's classic Americana---baked ham with mustard sauce just in time for Easter. Next week, the springtime treat is homemade biscotti.

As long as people have a passion for food, McNett will be teaching them a different way to make a delicious dish.

"I never knew you could have so much fun in the kitchen," said her student, Frank McInnis.

For more information, visit:
www.happycookers.com
