HYDE PARK, New York -- Chef David Kamen poked his finger into the bright orange goop that was slowly creeping across the plate.

"You used four eggs, right? Well, you must have used the wrong amount of cream. This is too liquid. It hasn't set," said the cooking instructor in a matter-of-fact tone.

Taking part in a weeklong cooking boot camp at the prestigious Culinary Institute of America in upstate New York was a humbling experience.

I'd tried to follow Kamen's directions for making carrot flans, souffle-like concoctions that are oven-poached in little aluminum moulds. They should have turned out as tiny turrets tucked artistically beside the sole fillets. Instead, they slid out like slush.

Kamen didn't scream and he didn't yell but I still felt like a kid who had disappointed her favourite teacher.

Despite the dent in my ego, it was a memorable adventure. For five intense days I teamed with 14 other food enthusiasts to have basic kitchen techniques drilled into us. Most of us were Food Network addicts and had taken vacation time to be there.

For someone who loves to cook and wants to learn more - regardless of their skills level - it doesn't get any better than the C.I.A, founded in 1946 and billed as the world's premier culinary college.

(Unlike the other C.I.A, the Central Intelligence Agency, the only misdemeanours that upset this organization are of the kitchen kind - such as microwaves in restaurants.)

Housed in a magnificent 104-year-old former Jesuit seminary overlooking the Hudson River, two hours north of New York, the institute is a mecca for foodies.

It has 41 kitchens and bakeshops.

There's a smaller, second C.I.A campus at Greystone in California's Napa Valley.

In addition to offering degree and continuing education courses to more than 8,000 professional chefs a year, the institute also delivers programs for 2,700 hobby cooks annually.

The boot camps are especially popular.

They combine lectures with hands-on cooking in commercially equipped kitchens. There are wine tastings plus dinners in the four upscale campus restaurants where food is prepared and served by full-time culinary students.

My boot camp group came from all points of the American map - California, Minnesota, Florida, Washington D.C., Virginia and New York.

They included a doctor, marketing consultants, a stay-at-home mom, a prison worker and a computer whiz, who'd each ponied up $1,850 US for the week, not including air fares and accommodation. I was the only Canuck.
Our instructor for the week was the talented, unflappable and humorous Kamen, himself a graduate of the C.I.A. He calmly directed as we squawked over still-pink roast chickens, lumpy sauces and flaming kitchen towels.

"Drop it on the floor. Now stamp on it. STAMP ON IT."

Each morning, dressed in full chef's uniforms and starting at 7 a.m. sharp, we had classroom instruction on specific cooking techniques.

Then it was into the kitchen to slice, dice and stir at a pace and with a passion that would have impressed even potty-mouthed TV chef Gord Ramsay.

We discovered the secrets - in theory at least - to making successful soups, stocks, and sauces. We also learned the correct ways to roast, poach, grill, broil and stew vegetables, fish and meat.

We used weird and wonderful ingredients. Knobbly celeriac isn't as scary a vegetable as it looks once you know what to do with it. Ditto for a whole flounder that lands on the countertop complete with skin, tail, bones and eyes.

In teams of three we prepared set menus.

My partners were Keith Forneck, 40, a food scientist from Chicago, who juggled urgent cellphone calls from his office while breading pork chops, and Nancy Jones, 45, a marketing expert from Minneapolis who kept her head while I panicked over cutting cucumber into matchstick-thin strips.

One day we cooked up fillet of sole with white wine sauce, potatoes with saffron and parsley, carrot flan and sauteed snow peas with sesame seeds. Across the kitchen other teams tackled braised lamb shanks, chicken breast with tarragon sauce, risotto with porcini mushrooms and more.

We then ate these gargantuan amounts of grub so that by the end of the week we were groaning from overeating and were each five pounds heavier.

For those of us who had ever harboured a fleeting dream of opening their own eatery, this was a reality check.

I'd always thought I was a half decent cook, but apparently I've been roasting chickens the wrong way for 30 years because I haven't been shoving their legs up into their armpits, trussing them with string and ramming a meat thermometer into their thigh.

Besides, preparing large quantities of food with the clock ticking is nothing like making a Sunday roast for your family. It's hard, sweaty work.

Need to pee? You can't, the onions will burn. Feet ache? Of course they do. What's your point?

Remarkably, everyone in our group completed the week with honed kitchen skills and with fingers and humour intact.

And on the final day, as I removed my chef's hat and lamented my flattened hair for the last time, someone asked if I would come back and do it all over again.

My answer was - yes, in a heartbeat.

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ON GARLIC: 'Garlic should be like the oboe. You wouldn't go to the symphony just to hear it but if it wasn't there you'd know something was missing.'

ON CUTTING INGREDIENTS INTO EVEN-SIZED PIECES: 'If it looks the same, it cooks the same.'

ON HEATING THE PAN: 'Get the saute pan wicked-ass hot for sauteeing mushrooms.'

ON GARNISHES: 'The best-looking food is the food that's been properly cooked.'
ON FLAVOURS: ‘The secret to a lot of things is a little bit of acid - a splash of vinegar, of lemon juice, of brandy or wine.’

ON FAST FOOD: ‘We eat like we pump gas. What's cheap? What's fast? Sometimes we eat at the same time as we pump gas.’

ON ROASTING CHICKEN: ‘Make sure you get under its armpits, between its legs and all the places a chicken like to be seasoned.’

ON TOMATO SAUCE: ‘There are hundreds of different tomato sauces out there. It depends which part of Italy you're from or which part of the Bronx you're from.’

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IF YOU'RE PLANNING TO GO

WHERE: The Culinary Institute of America is located in Hyde Park about a two-hour drive north of New York or 1 1/2 hours south of Albany. There's a second, smaller campus at Greystone in the Napa Valley, California.

COURSES: It offers a range of one- to five-day programs for food enthusiasts. The boot camps, held several times a year, include Culinary Basic Training (which I took); Italian Cuisine; Baking; Pastry and Small Dishes, Big Flavours.

COST: The Culinary Basic Training boot camp costs $1,850 US. You'll be supplied with two full chef's uniforms, the C.I.A.'s The Professional Chef textbook, all meals and wine tastings.

MEALS: The boot camps include breakfast in the students' hall, lunch (which you cook in class) and dinner in the four student-staffed restaurants. They are St. Andrews Cafe (contemporary fare); the Escoffier (classic French food); Ristorante Caterina de' Medici (Italian menu in a Tuscan villa setting) and the American Bounty (regional cuisine).

ACCOMMODATION: A limited number of rooms are available on campus for food enthusiasts but reasonably-priced hotels are close by. I stayed at the Hyde Park Super 8 Motel which was basic but clean and quiet. It was about $50 US a night. Ph: 1-845-229-0088.

PHONE CALLS: Look out for the Crazy, Crazy, New York Calling card available at gas stations. It can be cheaper than calling collect when you want to phone home. For $5 I enjoyed several long conversations with my family in Edmonton and a staggering 40 minutes with my mom in the U.K.

YOU’LL NEED: Comfy shoes, a quality chef's knife, assorted other small kitchen tools and a big appetite.

GETTING THERE: I flew to Toronto where I boarded a commuter plane to Albany. I rented a car to drive the remainder of the journey. If you're staying off campus you'll need a car as the C.I.A is in a rural area. Alternatively, fly into New York City and make your way from there.