

Becoming a Hipcook

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Hipcooks owner and LA transplant **Monika Reti** isn't joking when she says she never gets stressed in the kitchen. At her Hot Soup Focus Group class (around \$55) at her [new North Williams Avenue cooking school](#) a few nights ago, I mutilated an onion during the knife skills portion and she didn't bat an eyelash. My group added far too much tarragon to the corn chowder, but with a smile and some lemon and salt, she managed to salvage it. And when I grated a lemon down to the juicy part when all she needed was a bit the yellow rind, she cracked a joke and then used my sorry lemon as an example of what not to do. It seems that Monika thrives on incompetence in the kitchen, which was a godsend for a klutzy novice like myself.

The class was most definitely an eye-opening experience. About a dozen women attended, but there was only one man brave enough to set foot in the Hipcooks kitchen. He out chopped his wife and proved to be the slicer-and-dicer extraordinaire, wielding his [Wusthof knife](#) with the greatest of ease. I observed his technique carefully, trying to emulate his movements on my own cutting board. Prior to that, a discussion about the virtues of a balanced, full-tang knife would have normally made my eyes glaze over, but Monika led the group into a thoroughly engaging conversation. I had never tasted watercress before and was shocked at how much I enjoyed the watercress soup. And who knew that peeling ginger with a spoon was more effective than using a knife or a peeler? True to her assertion that "I ban recipes and ban measuring implements from every class," there was nary a measuring cup in sight and spoons constantly being thrust into hands for tastings to determine how much more of something was needed. She made everything look gloriously simple and was continuously putting ingredients from [Trader Joe's](#) on the table. Chopping [mirepoix](#) may not be my specialty, but I do know my way around a Trader Joe's so that aspect was extremely comforting.

When we finally made it to the table, the delicious aromas that had been teasing my palate for so long convinced me to eat more than I normally would have, but everything we made was healthy so there were minimal guilt pangs. After a ladle-full of each of the seven soups, a small glass of wine, and an engaging conversation with the women on either side of me at the dinner table, the Hot Soup Focus Group was over. Part of me wanted to ask for a job—after all, the assistants got to taste everything. But the more reasonable side of my brain won over. I settled for making a grocery list and a resolution to try each of these recipes on my own.