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Culinary carvers transform fruits, vegetables

Artists display perishable works

By [WENDI WINTERS](#), For The Capital

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Dawn Berlin and Yung Cohn grew up on separate continents, but as children they both loved to play with their food.

They'd bend, shape, dice and slice the vegetables on their dinner plates into flowers, animals and other magnificent fantasies.

Mrs. Berlin, 40, a Severna Park resident, personal chef and owner of Your Thyme, a successful catering company, decided to add carved fruit and vegetable displays, centerpieces and garnishes to her personal repertoire last year.

Mrs. Cohn, 57, of Gaithersburg, spent her childhood in Vietnam. In the United States most of her professional career has been as a systems tester for Watson Wyatt & Company, a human-capital consulting firm.

"Playing with food was my entertainment. I did not have toys or even a doll until I was 9," Mrs. Cohn said. "We Vietnamese were influenced by French culture and aesthetics. When I came to America, I was shocked by this country's food presentation - just piles of food. We were all about presentation and image. Our focus was on how we could turn something ordinary into something special. Carving food was something to do so



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Culinary carving artist Yung Cohn of Gaithersburg shows personal chef Dawn Berlin of Severna Park how to finesse a detail while carving a papaya.

I wouldn't be bored.

"I started with radishes and cucumbers - traditional vegetables used as garnishes."

Said Mrs. Berlin: "I carved carrots as a kid, because they were cheap."

Now she can turn a leek into an elegant gift bow that looks like spun sugar. Her radishes, accented with leaves made of cucumber, resemble delicate pink-tipped roses. It's a shame that Mrs. Cohn's watermelon rose bouquets, with their rainbow of hues and delicate shadings, can't be bronzed for perpetuity.

When Mrs. Cohn reached her teens, she put aside her carving tools to study her English lessons and, later, in the United States she dedicated herself to raising her children and bringing home a paycheck.

One day she idly came across The Food Network on TV. "I was surprised to see a fruit and vegetable carving challenge on the screen," she said. "I realized that Americans were interested in veggie carving, too. I went out to a grocery store, bought back some stuff and carved it up."

She tracked down one of the master carvers on the show, Korean-American James Parker of Chantilly, Va., founder of Veggie Art. Hand the man an orange and he'll give you back an orange chrysanthemum or maybe a crab.

Mr. Parker asked to see photos of her work, which she sent. He immediately enrolled her in his vegetable- and fruit-art carving classes. She is now one of his guest instructors and part of the Veggie Art carving team when Mr. Parker is tasked with building huge, towering projects, such as the recent 27th annual Celebration of Life Cancer Gala held Aug. 7 at the Rod 'n Reel Restaurant in Calvert County.

Working with Mrs. Cohn and three others, Mr. Parker designed a jaw-dropping display using hundreds of carved flowers made from a cornucopia of vegetables and fruit.

The display reached toward the ceiling and included two intricately carved watermelons that dangled on hidden wires.

Some of the larger melon sculptures routinely take four or five hours to carve, yet will last, with some care, for 7 to 10 days.

Mrs. Cohn said vegetable and fruit carving is popular on the West Coast, especially on fancy hotel buffets. Food carving has been part of the culture of Thailand and China for more than a millennium.

Mrs. Berlin met the two carvers when she went looking for "a little something extra" to provide to catering clients and customers who tapped her to provide personal chef services.

"Right after my carving course with James and Yung, I donated a carved honeydew melon to a classroom at Aleph Bet Day School," Mrs. Berlin said. "Two days later, a parent called and asked me to do a carved watermelon for a birthday party. This skill comes in handy for making pretty garnishes on a plate, to make it special."

"It's a plate people will remember," Mrs. Cohn said.

Mrs. Berlin and her husband, Larry, have one child, Samantha, nearly 8, who is a student at Key School. Larry, a licensed chiropractor, owns Chesapeake Cartridge Company, which re-manufactures toner cartridges and ink. Mrs. Berlin also has a daughter, Jessica, 20.

Using her newfound skills, Mrs. Berlin can carve fruit into attractive "cookie-cutter" shapes that are intended to be eaten, and arranges them on skewers in a carved melon bowl.

"It's like building a castle in the sand, but before that big wave hits, it's a beautiful thing," Mrs. Cohn said.

Her own watermelon art is the subject of a monthlong exhibit that closes Sunday at Metropolitan Center of the Visual Arts in Rockville. Because her art is perishable, Mrs. Cohn replaces her elaborately carved artworks every five days in the exhibit.

"Now people will not look at a watermelon as just something to eat," she said. "People can do carvings like this on a small scale for their own family."

Coincidentally, James will present a free demonstration of his skills from 1 to 3 p.m. Sept. 27 and Sept. 28, at Homestead Gardens, 743 West Central Ave., Davidsonville.

"Food carving is a beautiful thing," Mrs. Cohn said. "It's short-lived but glorious while it lasts."

Mrs. Berlin's Web site is www.YourThyme.com. Mrs. Cohn, who also carves soap sculptures, can be contacted at www.VeggyGifts.com and at www.SoapCarvingArt.com.

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