



Hot in the **KITCHEN**

Looking to improve your culinary skills? Why not take a course to really impress your family and friends. *CAROLINE PHILLIPS* tries her hand at bread-making in Shepherd's Bush, antipasti in Mayfair and dinner party fare in Oxfordshire



The Raymond Blanc Cookery School at Le Manoir Aux Quat'Saisons, Oxfordshire

SUMMER DINNER PARTY

This is the Rolls Royce of cookery courses. Called 'The Summer Dinner Party', we use seasonal produce to create a three-course meal. It's a 9am start and we stay overnight (in a perfect Emily Todorhunter-decorated room, after dinner in the two Michelin-starred restaurant) and then have the best breakfast I've ever had in a hotel.

The cookery school is just a few steps from the 15th-century manor house. It's a homely Smallbone affair, just off the restaurant kitchen. There are ten of us, including four chaps – most here on birthday presents. We wear white chef's jackets and grey aprons.

Chef Joel Moroney – an engaging and humorous tutor – takes the class with his assistant. We work in couples (I'm partnered with Carol the radiographer). We learn eight dishes, including tomato essence risotto, pan fried sea bream and poached peaches with orange sabayno. Each has a difficulty rating. And each is selected to demonstrate techniques

from glazing to blanching and sponge making. It's aimed at every level.

There's lots of scientific info (olive oil breaks down at 191°C and becomes carcinogenic). Tips on equipment (which digital thermometer to use for testing custard). Tips on cooking (put a slot in the peppers to let the steam escape when you're cooking and blanch the basil for pistou to keep it green). And techniques (push the strawberry stalk in and turn it to get it out/roll the stuffed peppers away from you like sushi).

There's some hands-on, some demo: perfect amounts of each. And lots of tasting, each time with a new plastic spoon. ('One man, er, cooked with his until it melted.') It's very civilised – with teas, coffees and dainty biscuits at 10.30am, 'kitchen angels' to wash up, and a four-course lunch, eating what we've made.

It's all five-star. Before leaving, we're taken round the three catering kitchens, past blast chillers and chefs making desserts as art. We're sent home with a comprehensive recipe file, chef's whites, framed certificate, our Fraisier cake. And a pan – Raymond Blanc by Anolon – so good I've since bought the set. I've also cooked a top pistou soup and roast red pepper with couscous at home. But don't weigh yourself before and after the course.

Costs £310 (including lunch), 9am to 4pm.

Accommodation starts at £400 per room per night. 01844 278881; manoir.com



Cooking courses

COOKING FOR TEENS:

An excellent three-hour course which takes place in the Marylebone cookery school kitchen of **LA CUCINA CALDESI**. Chef Stefano Borella introduces the (initially sleepy) adolescents to good ingredients, simple culinary skills, butchery and easy recipes. Very hands-on and plenty of opportunities for cooking, tasting, sniffing and then lunching on what they've made – from Melanzane alla parmigiana to Torta Caprese. Stefano soon has the 14 teenagers eating (bruschetta) out of his hand. £60 per child, including lunch. 020 7487 0750; caldesi.com

Leiths School of Food & Wine, Shepherd's Bush, London

SPECIALIST PASTRY WORKSHOP AND BREAD WORKSHOP

This is food university. We meet in a former office block – now housing four kitchens and culinary library – in the outer-reaches of Shepherd's Bush. I'm here for two separate one-day courses: one covering the essential skills necessary to make perfect pastry; the other encompassing the basics of bread making.

First stop is the demonstration kitchen – with its big, raised TV screens zooming in on the saucepans. On day one, the Fat Cook in hair net and checked chef's trousers demonstrates choux pastry to rich shortcrust. And an enthusiastic bread aficionado leads the next: from soda bread to walnut bread.

Forty-eight amateur cooks sit attentively watching the Leiths ladies sift, heat and knead. *Blue Peter* for adults. They offer top tips (how to avoid streaks of egg in pastry to what to do with recalcitrant dough). And use white boards to outline tech terms like 'knocking back' and 'proving'. Students take copious notes.

Both courses attract kitchen geeks like myself. 'How do you rescue chocolate after it has seized?' and 'Should it just be a six-second drop in consistency?' are sample students' questions. The staff are walking culinary Wikipedias.

At 11am we're divided into three classes and taken upstairs to the teaching-kitchen with catering hobs and ovens. It's time to recreate the demo at our wood workstations. Lots of teachers (mostly Leiths graduates) in chef's hats and whites wander around helping. 'Be light-handed, the more you work it, the tougher it gets.' It's lovely. The emphasis is on traditional, handmade techniques and Sloane values.



We cook in copper pans and by midday we haven't tasted a thing. But a trainee solicitor does our washing-up. Afterwards there's a salad bar for lunch in the student canteen – scrummy Ottolenghi-style food.

Leiths is primarily about its career diplomas. It's a place where they don't just create cookery books, but cookery bibles. It's serious and disciplined. We take home our attendance certificates and apple and frangipane tarts, profiteroles and fougasse. I can now plait bread and make a mean rich shortcrust pastry. But the less said about my walnut bread the better.

£145 per day, including lunch. 9.30am to 4pm. 020 8749 6400; leiths.com



Cooking courses

CAKE DECORATION:

After taking this course, your respect for all the professional cake decorators and patissiers will know no bounds. The skill and intricacy involved is mindblowing, but the **CAKES 4 FUN MINI ICED CAKE COURSE** is the perfect taster. The six-hour day takes in the brave new world of cake decorating – from which type of icing to use on which part of the cake (sounds simple but apparently we all get it wrong) and how to level off your cake to solving the age-old wonky cake syndrome and making bows, blossoms and lilies. Afterwards, you can take advantage of the 10 per cent discount in the shop upstairs and wow your friends with your five miniature works of edible art when you get home. £119 for the day, 020 8785 9039; cakes4fun.co.uk





Theo Randall at the InterContinental, Mayfair, London

ANTIPASTI

Theo Randall – dubbed the most famous chef you’ve never heard of – gives great Italian cookery demonstrations in the kitchen of his eponymous restaurant. It’s Antipasti today. Before starting, we assemble at his restaurant’s bar at the InterContinental, Mayfair. Eight women and four men, Italian foodie fans – from doctors to head teachers – drinking capuccinos.

Theo is the foodies’ ultimate chef. Reviewers wax super-lyrical about his cooking; unsurprising since he was the head chef at the River Cafe when they received their Michelin star.

We watch him make six simple dishes, including Mozzarella di bufala con fighi, crab salad with dandelion leaves and grated Bottarga, and pan fried squid with borlotti beans. Unfussy, unpretentious food and all of which we taste, including sublime squid and crab for breakfast. His style is chatty and charming. ‘I’ve been hooked on Italy since I was a child,’ reveals Theo. ‘I was the only kid with gorgonzola sandwiches in my lunch box.’

He also displays a passion for seasonal ingredients and artisanal delicacies (supermarket unhung ‘red’ meat and ‘polystyrene’ pasteurised crab meat are out). He brings in some dead Daisy – the entire beef fillet to make carpaccio. ‘It’s so lovely, why would you want to cook it?’ Quite.

Additionally he’s a source of helpful tips, directed at novices and intermediate cooks.



He demonstrates pulling off the wings and membrane of the squid, and counsels to score it inside ‘to stop it going rubbery’. Then he brings in a large crab and shows how to kill it humanely – by hammering its central nervous system.

Afterwards we lunch in the private dining room: a fun, social affair where we’re served bresaola, then sea bass and an excellent lemon flan. Our going-home present is a voucher for a complimentary champagne cocktail, dessert and guided tour of the kitchen on our next visit. Impossible to refuse. And I’m now a buonissimo antipasto chef. But not yet ready to murder crabs.

Costs £150, 9.30am to 3pm first Saturday of the month, including lunch and wine. 020 7318 8747; reservations@theorandall.com

Cooking courses

GAME COOKING:

NEWLYNS IN HAMPSHIRE is not just one of the south’s best farm shops, but also doubles as a cookery school. Seasonally apt is its intensive five-hour Game Cookery course, running the gamut of wild fare from pheasant to rabbit, via venison and partridge. Students can tick off the tricks of pheasant terrine, boning a quail and cooking the perfect venison fillet all before lunch. In the afternoon comes rabbit and dumpling stew and pot-roast partridge. You leave with the afternoon dishes, the recipes and – ultimately – the ability to cook game confidently at home. £125, including lunch. 01256 704128; newlyns-farmshop.co.uk

READER OFFER ON SHOWING THIS PAGE, THEO WOULD BE DELIGHTED TO OFFER EVERY C&TH READER A COMPLIMENTARY GLASS OF PROSECCO AND A SELECTION OF DESSERTS TO SHARE WHEN DINING A LA CARTE.