



Ellie Jarvis, Greg Hawkins, Carolyn Denny and Katie Jarvis at work

It's MasterChef with Greg!

Katie Jarvis takes daughter Ellie and her boyfriend along to a cookery class...
just in case she overdoes the wine-testing again

So let's talk about food; about cooking. And about me, Ellie and Greg going to cookery school. Yes, yes, you do know Greg, Ellie's boyfriend - I've mentioned him before. He's the one with no understanding that kitchen cupboards are specifically designed to be filled with out-of-date haricot bean tins and potatoes that have passed, zen-like, to a state of liquefaction. (Even though he claims to be a chemist.) He doesn't get that it doesn't matter what meals actually look like, as long as they taste nice. (One person's 'dollop' is another

person's 'served with casual grace-while-in-quite-a-hurry'.) Or that recipes are especially devised so you can do surprising substitutions when, halfway through, you realise you've run out of sugar but do have an old jar of honey (which, thank the lord, doesn't date). And then there was that incident earlier this year when, shortly before hosting a dinner party, I considerably test-ran several of the wines to make sure they were up to standard for guests. As a result, I felt a little tired all of a sudden, which is the only reason why Greg ended

up having to cook the entire meal while I was quietly thinking things through on the sofa. So, in an attempt to win him back over to my charms, I ask him if he'd like to accompany Ellie and me to cookery school. To the wonderful Winston House School of Cookery, to be specific. Run by the equally lovely Carolyn Denny, to be personal. "Umm. Is this so I can learn to cook more meals for you?" Greg asks, slightly snarkily, it has to be said. Cynic.



ABOVE: Carolyn Denny

This is how lovely Carolyn Denny is.

She knows that Ellie has recently been diagnosed coeliac – meaning she can't eat gluten in any form. And so, when we arrive at her gorgeous and historic home (part of the curtilage of Standish Court; you still drive through the ruined arches of the 14th century gatehouse), we see bags of gluten-free flour lined up ready. Not only that, but she has especially sterilised all the tins and implements to make them super-safe. Above and beyond.

You can take any one of a number of courses Carolyn runs, such as: Tomorrow's dinner cooked today; Kids Leaving Home Nosh (for soon-to-be-students); and (my personal favourite) OMG – What's for supper tonight?

"But I'm also very happy to do bespoke sessions based around areas of cooking that people would like to explore," Carolyn says. "I've recently had a lady in her 50s, who simply wanted to learn how to make bread, and a pie! She said her husband fancied chicken pie for supper, but she'd never made pastry in her life."

Bespoke is exactly what we've plumped for today. We want to make a fruit cake (not easy using gluten-free flour), and we're keen to have a go at some Thai cookery, at

which Carolyn is expert. "Whenever I go to Thailand, I disappear for a couple of days on cookery courses," she says. "Apart from anything else, it's a lovely way to get to know the culture of a country. In Koh Samui, they have a college called SITCA (Samui Institute of Thai Culinary Arts), where international chefs go to learn. I went for three days and it was extraordinary – such fun."

She tell us about wandering round the vegetable markets, breathing in exotic fragrances, helped by an interpreter from the college; about discovering vegetables such as the little green papaya, which you have to search for high and low back in England.

"The Thais never weigh anything; it's all done on taste," Carolyn says.

"Just like you," Greg tells me pointedly, though I take it as a compliment.

We start by packing fruit – currants, raisins, sultanas, glace cherries – into our cake mixture, which goes into the range cooker for a long, slow bake while we turn to the next dish: mushroom and Marsala pate. For this, we sauté a pack of button mushrooms before adding the alcohol, which is burnt off with a couple of minutes' stove heat. ►





Tasting the salad

"I always keep a bottle of Madeira by the cooker. When I'm lacking ideas, it inspires me," Carolyn says. "A dash added to a bit of pork tenderloin transforms it"

(I also keep a bottle of Madeira handy, but more for the odd running-out-of-sherry crisis.)

The joy of Carolyn's cookery is that it's simple, tasty and completely replicable. The pate – we add some cream cheese and nutmeg to the mushrooms - takes moments to make but, once blitzed in a processor with a bit of nutmeg, turns out to be one of the best starter/light lunch recipes ever. And, in the blink of an eye, we make the easiest fried flatbreads to go with it. Carolyn also makes it all huge fun – we break for a health-giving juice (made before our eyes with carrots, celery, pear, apple and a piece of fresh ginger; divine) – as she takes us through her cookery history, which began back in childhood, in Swindon.

"When I was young, I lived with my grandmother before my father married again – and she was an amazing, old-fashioned cook. We'd have a full breakfast every morning, before we went to school. Best of all were her Sunday roasts: the ritual was that I'd sit on a stool by her side and make the stuffing. By the time I was 10, I could make a really decent chicken pie."

She pauses while she gets us to start on the green papaya salad (som tom in Thai) with cherry tomatoes, dressed with shrimp paste, fish sauce, garlic, chillies, lime juice and palm sugar, with roasted peanuts to garnish. "If you can't get green papaya, then you could use grated courgettes," she explains. "Now. Which of you would like to start chopping?"

I explain that Greg would.

The cookery school is a relatively new venture; but food has long been a passion. "In another world, I'd love to have been a top chef. Instead, I went into marketing – PR and advertising – and I loved every

minute of it. But, along the way, I managed to get involved in food in various ways."

While working in a graphic design company in Cirencester, Carolyn waltzed into the then-supermarket Somerfields, asking if she could help with food photography and brochures. The gambit paid off, "And for the next few years, we did all their recipe cards."

Three years ago, she married Charles Denny, a baronet, whom she met at a dinner party. (That, technically, makes her Lady Denny; but don't feel daunted. This is a couple neither uppity, nor pretentious.) Eighteen months ago, they moved to Standish, after a long search for the perfect home together. "I had been living in a Georgian townhouse in Tetbury, and I just wasn't sure I wanted to live in Stonehouse," she confesses. "But, actually, as a town, it's got everything you need. And when I came to see this house, I drove through the old archway, looked out over the view and thought: my goodness; stunning."

I've timed that biographical chat perfectly: for Greg has just finished the salad, which is piquant and utterly delicious. Now he's preparing a green paste for our chicken curry, as Carolyn offers more tips: use chicken thighs, which are cheaper and tastier than more expensive cuts; and don't precook the chicken pieces: simply add the raw meat to the sauce and let it gently poach.

And so, after a hugely entertaining morning, we leave with a fantastic fruit cake, salad, curry, a pack of recipes and even a framed certificate of achievement to hang on the loo wall.

Brilliant. And such a relief for Greg. "You know – it must feel great to have a few more ideas for my next dinner party," I explain.

Honestly. He loves me really. ■

For more information on Carolyn's cookery school, visit www.winstonhouseschoolofcookery.com



Mushroom and Marsala pate

Ingredients

- Small pack of white button mushrooms
- 1 shallot, chopped, and one clove of garlic
- 1 shot of Marsala (or brandy, port, etc)
- Pack of Philadelphia cream cheese
- Little grated nutmeg
- 25 g butter
- Salt and pepper

Method

Melt the butter in a saucepan, add shallot, and gently cook until transparent. Add mushrooms and sauté until sticky. Pour in Marsala and cook for a couple of minutes. Season to taste. Remove from heat and cool, before blitzing in a processor. Turn out into a bowl and add cream cheese and a little grated nutmeg. Cool for an hour at least.



Instant gratification flatbread

Ingredients

- 150g plain flour (gluten-free, if preferred)
- Tsp cumin seeds, pinch of turmeric, or other herbs, spices, etc
- 3 pinches of salt
- 50ml water
- 1tbs olive oil
- Olive oil for frying

Method

Mix all the ingredients together in a bowl, then knead into a soft ball. Flatten with your hand until thin, between greaseproof paper. Brush a frying pan with oil and, when hot, cook each side for a minute or two until mottled brown. Serve while warm. (Can be made in advance and kept in fridge.)