

Chapter Fourteen- cookery lesson – 36 years old



I am not quite sure if I like cooking or I just like to eat good food, maybe it is a little of both. Trying to replicate the meals I eat in restaurants isn't easy for me, even though I know it requires practice, time and knowhow. The practice part is simple enough, all I have to do is buy the right ingredients and give it a go. It sometimes seems a waste though if it goes slightly wrong, however I will not get any better without practice. Time mainly concerns the shopping and the preparation. I have a set rule for drinking...I never queue to buy a drink longer than it takes to drink it. With food however the same cannot be said, not when cooking it myself anyway. The preparation can be a drawn out process, often with an uncertain end.

Knowhow may be obtained through watching television programmes, reading cook books or taking advice. I have thought of taking a holiday in Italy and attending a week long cookery course. I think if I was doing it day after day it would eventually sink in. I have watched countless chefs on television and they all make it look so easy. My particular favourite shows feature Keith Floyd, Ken Hom and the hairy bikers (Dave Myers and Simon King). Unfortunately as soon as the programme ends I seem unable to repeat what I have seen.

It would be simpler to eat something ready-made but it is not quite the same. Freshly prepared food using the best ingredients tastes a lot better. It is particularly frustrating for me if the ingredients are in the cupboard and just need assembling.

Bearing all this in mind I decided to seek some expert help. There are numerous cookery schools and classes advertised on the internet. The first question I had to ask myself was which sort of food I would like to try. This is difficult for me because I do like a wide range of foods. I also prefer to eat a variety rather than a large quantity at any one sitting.

I like an Indian Thali (Hindi for platter) which is either vegetarian or non-vegetarian. The individual dishes have already been selected by the restaurant. I have ordered this before and asked to change the dishes but it was aggravation. I bought seven sets of these Thali dishes to use at home. I only use them for takeaways but need at least four people all eating the same curries to make it work.



I have tried Spanish tapas a few times and I like the wide variety of tastes. Bars and restaurants have different approaches but the theme is the same. Some are made to order, some are on the bar to purchase and some come free with a drink. Most are simple to prepare so only a little imagination is required. To make a meal would require some assembly but this is good for parties or out at a wine bar.



Italian food is another favourite and I could easily settle for a selection of starters rather than a main course. I like the whole Italian eating experience from the simple white table cloths, to the wine, olives and bread. I could also happily spend all evening just taking my time and sampling small dishes. The choice of red or white wine depends on the dish and my mood.



Chinese stir fries remain a bit of a mystery to me. They never taste the same as a takeaway which puts me off cooking them. I must be missing some of the ingredients out. I usually have a Chinese beer on the side instead of wine, I don't know why maybe it is just a habit. Thai food is a favourite of mine as well which is spicier, served in smaller portions and tends to cost more. I don't have a favourite dish but again I like the variety.



One day my research took me to something that looked interesting. An Italian countess (Enrica Rocca) was offering to take small groups for a whole days' cooking experience in London. This included a guided tour of Borough Market to select and purchase the food. Afterwards there was a cookery lesson at Enricas' home in West London. I made the booking for a Saturday and waited for the day to arrive.



We met up in an Italian cafe in Borough high street at 09:00 and had a coffee. Enrica asked for her espresso to be served the Italian way (at 67°C). When everyone had arrived introductions were made and we set off to explore the market. I had been to Borough Market a number of times for food and whilst it can be expensive it is normally good quality.



There are a wide range of stalls selling meat, fish, vegetables as well as international food. There are also cafes, restaurants and pubs to enjoy. The market also has the added benefit of being the location of the Market Porter. The pub has a great reputation for serving quality real ales and there are twenty five to choose from in any given week. The beer is always good because it is fresh and well looked after by the Landlord.



The pub is quite large but there is a quiet corner where I have spent a few Saturday afternoons. Alec Tomasso (one of my engineers at the time) helped me sample the different ales. I know by the colour if I am going to like it or not. Unfortunately the lesson did not allow time even for a short visit, today I would just have to settle for coffee and wine.



As we entered the market we encountered a butchers' stall, where Enrica greeted the head butcher. Enrica then headed off to get him a cappuccino (his reward / payment?) and we had a lesson in meat selection. We were shown the different cuts and where they were located on the animal. We were also advised on the taste difference aging the meat made. Overall this was interesting and a good start.

Enrica rejoined us with her trolley and we weaved our way through the market which was now starting to fill. In passing she picked up a corn fed chicken and told us they were always very tender. I couldn't help myself, I asked her if they were tender because she poked and prodded them every week!

Our first purchase was some red bream from the fishmonger. We made sure the eyes were clear indicating that they were still fresh.



We also bought some veal, a large aubergine and some other vegetables. Everything was selected with more care than I would have done on my own.

We also made sure we tasted the free samples as we walked around and took in the whole of the market atmosphere. The market tour was completed at 13:00 and was very tiring.

Next we had to stop off to buy some wine as this was not included in the price. Vinopolis was handily nearby and provided us with a wide variety of alcohol to choose from. I had been here before so I knew a little about the place. As well as selling wine, spirits and beer there are wine tasting tours, restaurants and corporate rooms available. It also has the widest choice of whiskeys in London. We quickly chose a bottle of wine each and headed for the underground station.



When we reached Enricas house we unpacked the food and put the wine to one side. The kitchen was perfectly designed, it had a large wooden table in the centre and everything was built around it. There was a lot of counter space for preparation as well. Cooking utensils hung down from the ceiling. It was in fact a typical Mediterranean kitchen which I have only previously seen on television.

I was tasked with preparing one of the vegetable dishes. The only time I can recall eating an aubergine was in a Thai curry. This was a lot larger and I diced it up and popped it into a frying pan with some chopped garlic and onion. I gave it a stir and just had to make sure it didn't burn, not too much of a challenge this one. The result tasted ok but I don't think I would bother replicating it.



One of the girls was asked to prepare the veal by flattening it out with a rolling pin. Once it was of the required thickness herbs were added and it was rolled up. Parma ham strips were added to the outside and some small skewers kept it all together. Once it was assembled it went straight into the oven. This was probably my favourite dish of the day, small in size, but big in flavour.



The fish was prepared by a third person in a baking dish with tomatoes, olives, garlic and herbs. Everything seemed so simple and tasted delicious. I stayed with one of the women passed the allotted 17:00 finish time and we were joined by Enrica's teenage daughters. We had to go out and get some more wine at one stage. We were told this was a little unusual as when the class finishes people are normally encouraged to leave. This was not the case today though as Enrica was enjoying our company, I left just after 19:00 full of wine.

Overall an enjoyable day and I would say it wetted my appetite for experimenting with food. The first thing I need to do is create a signature dish which I can consistently reproduce. The biggest trouble I have encountered so far is waste. If I choose a recipe and buy the ingredients there are inevitably some things left over. Half a can of this, a hand full of that and these tend to go in the bin. The problem is I don't cook often enough to use them up, but that is slowly changing. I now know that preparation is the key to a good self-cooked meal. Fresh ingredients make a big difference and today I try to experiment when I can. I have an assortment of herbs on the shelf but I still need to think of ways to use them. Time and imagination are the only other missing ingredients.