Confessions of a reluctant cook

Is it possible to convert a cookery-Phobe into an enthusiast in just one day? Richard James* said he'd never, repeat NEVER, get into cooking and reckoned he needed a map to find the kitchen. Not altogether serious, maybe, but we couldn't resist a challenge like that. Time for a one-day intensive course at Le Cordon Bleu cookery school...

There was only one condition: he had to do it under cover

BEFORE THE CHALLENGE

So what qualifies me as a candidate for this culinary dare of (my mind)? Olympic proportions? I'd say, as a committed non-foodie for whom cooking holds no intrigue whatsoever, I have the perfect credentials. I see the kitchen as one of the most important rooms in the house, but not as a place to create culinary masterpieces—rather, as a way to add value to your home. And besides, where else are you going to unpack your Indian takeaway?

I admit it—I can't cook. I won't cook. I blame my mother who, throughout my formative years, systematically cremated every meal she prepared and, along with it, any interest in food or cooking I might otherwise have developed. Mealtimes in the James household were solemn occasions to be endured rather than enjoyed. In comparison, school dinners tasted like ambrosia. So it was with a degree of trepidation that I agreed to be a guinea pig and attend a one-day course at London's Le Cordon Bleu cookery school, whose corridors echo with the whispers of famous chefs. I'm not sure whose judgement (or lack of) surprises me most: that of the delicious team for asking me to take on the challenge, or the brave

THE PRE-COURSE HOMEWORK

Keen for me to keep all my fingers, delicious suggested it might be wise for me to do one bit of prep before my course: go online, learn how to hold a knife and chop an onion, then report back. I had no idea Google would present me with so many videos on the topic; I stopped counting at 25. Although they vary in length between 54 seconds and 4 minutes, I found it reassuring that they all stuck to the same basic technique. But I guess this is onion-chopping, not how to make a soufflé. There's not a lot of room for variation. Where the videos did differ is in the level of detail and number of tips, such as placing some wet kitchen paper under your chopping board to stop it slipping (thank you, Jamie's mate Pete). There are also written tutorials available if you prefer to learn things the old-school way, but I thought the videos (all easy to find via Google) were easier to follow—it's helpful watching somebody else do it before attempting it yourself. Here are my top three video guides:

Gordon Ramsay

Once you get over the jury-rigged movements of the camera—and Gordon—this had lots of useful tips for beginners.

Sorted

Pretty basic and to the point, but extremely easy to follow.

Jamie Oliver's mate Pete

Step-by-step guide that makes it look so easy it's hard to imagine getting it wrong.

folk at Le Cordon Bleu (LCB) for allowing me within 50 metres of their swish premises rather than issuing a restraining order.

APPOINTMENT WITH DESTINY

As the big day loomed, it didn't help that the only homework I'd done was to watch a video on how to chop an onion (see previous page) — and that ended in tears.

I needn't have worried. Well, not as much. I was put at ease right at the start by the chefs at LCB, and it was clear the day was going to be fun as well as educational. That was a revelation for me as I'd always thought of cooking as an arduous process with no guarantee of the outcome—well, not unless it was my mum who was cooking.

So the first and most valuable lesson I learned was that cooking can be enjoyable; that it's not just about boiling carrots to flabby oblivion or mashing potatoes (while keeping the lumps, in my mother's case) to a slop. Yes, there's a whole creative side I'd never considered.

Which brings me to the second lesson: that cooking is a skill and, like most skills, it helps if you have natural flair. One of the first things we were taught was how to bone a chicken. We watched the chef, who had the dexterity of a Harley Street surgeon, show how it's done, then returned to our workstations to replicate what we'd seen. Sure enough, I dismembered my chicken into eight parts as instructed, but it wasn't a pretty sight. My poor chicken looked as if it had been savaged by a wild beast—you couldn't tell a leg from a breast.

Lesson number three: it helps if you have a little finesse and appreciation of the art form. After two hours, it was clear I did not! Perhaps I should mention, though, that I might be the only LCB student who's managed to set a pan on fire after cooking fish. Don't ask...

But, as we learned how to make a vinaigrette, poach fruit in sugar syrup and make a chocolate sauce (anything that involves chocolate is good in my book), I could feel a faint stir of interest.

THE 24-HOUR CONVERT

After years of stubborn avoidance of the kitchen, I no longer have an excuse not to cook. A few weeks have passed since the course and I just might be getting into this cooking lark. Yes, I really am. How many kitchen shaped I cooked and mastered? Five: chilli, bouef bourguignon, Thai chicken curry, spaghetti bolognese and risotto. Now I need to branch out, as my family has gone from the surprised-and-delighted phase to the not-this-again phase. And I need the practice. It's frustrating that it takes me twice as long as most people to prepare a meal. Six weeks on, peeling and chopping still take me ages. I'm still at the stage where I follow a new recipe to the letter—sifting onions for eight minutes means exactly that, not a minute more or less. And I haven't yet developed an instinct with ingredients that gives me the freedom to deviate from the gospel of the recipe.

Cooking is like skiing—once you've covered the basics, your confidence grows quickly and you want to tackle something more challenging and exciting. It's then that you discover your limitations. The first time I cooked risotto, for example (a recipe from delicious. magazine), it was perfectly edible. The second time it was really rather good. The third time, I was so confident I'd mastered risotto that I barely made reference to the recipe. The result? It was awful: the rice was undercooked and I'd forgotten to add the parmesan. My experience, limited as it has taught me the importance of mastering the art of walking before attempting to run. I've also learned another important lesson in completing the course: respect the recipe—it's there for a reason.

One final confession: wandering through the kitchen department in John Lewis used to be a necessary chore to get to men's clothing. Now, I find myself admiring all sorts of marvellous contraptions—especially those KitchenAid things. I've no idea what they do or how to use them, but they're gadgets of beauty and I want one—sleek, shiny and red. Now there's a sentence I never thought would come out of my mouth...

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*Richard James, delicious's food editor.