

Tried & Tasted

COOKERY COURSES RESTAURANTS DELIS BOOKS HOTELS



Le Cordon Bleu London

If you really want to learn how to cook, you come to Le Cordon Bleu,' says chef Dave Morris as we tuck into pain aux raisins on arrival. Such words could be dismissed as spiel, but when we're shepherded through to the giant teaching kitchen, it's clear why so many keen cooks revere the 'Taste of Cordon Bleu' course. Gleaming pans are laid out at individual work stations, induction ovens wait in readiness and the enticing aroma of cinnamon and cloves fills the room. A peek at the pan on my hob reveals a glossy, deep red syrup – base for the Burgundy poached pear we are to make.

After some pointers on what to put where (red chopping boards for meat, green for veg), we begin jointing chicken for a fricassée with mushrooms. Wary of making my own bird look more like a Soutine painting than the neat joints we'd been shown, I take my time. Fortunately, the class allows for different working speeds, so when faster cooks start chopping their 'holy trinity' of celery, carrots and onions for the white stock, there's no rush to keep up.

Preparations for the main dish complete, we turn our attention to a gravlax salmon starter. Dave makes light work of boning, skinning and dressing a chunky salmon (beetroot on one half, dill on the

other), and vacuum-packing the fillets (to speed up the curing time) as we furiously scribble notes. The rest of the dish is left in our hands, with sous chefs helping us here and there so we end up with perfectly pan-fried fish, vibrant green asparagus tips, uniform poached eggs (the trick is to use barely simmering water) and a suitably tangy mustard and truffle dressing. A few tips on restaurant-worthy presentation and we parade through to the dining room with our morning's efforts – one valuable feature of the course is tasting your dishes while talking food with students and chefs alike.

In the afternoon we bring together our main; we roast chicken, make little courgette spheres using a melon baller and chop shallots for the white wine sauce. 'The best chefs don't have to use lightning speed,' says Dave. He grabs a shallot and seconds later there's a fan of guillotine-thin slices on his board. He grins, 'but it's good to know how.' Our pommes parisiennes – fried in staggering amounts of clarified butter – are the best I've ever tasted; the poached pears soft and delicious. In just one day I managed to grasp dozens of essential cooking techniques and was off home with plenty of leftovers – £210 well spent. *JB. cordonbleu.edu*

Deli of the month...

THE HOP SHOP Kent



With over 80 acres of lavender fields, Castle Farm in Shoreham spends half the year in a purple haze. Come winter, owners William and Caroline Alexander find endless uses for the dried flowers in the Hop Shop – a converted barn that serves as a farmshop. They make two different lavender culinary essences, one for baking, one for cold dishes, as well as lavender essential oils and toiletries. At Christmas, lavender shortbread is snatched off the shelves by customers, who can also order large joints of beef, herb-rolled sirloins, apple-cured gammon and bronze turkeys in advance.

The shop's chestnut stuffing and jars of brandy butter help create that home-made Christmas feel (and shave a little cooking time off the big day), and the delicious mince pies are infinitely better than supermarket varieties. Pumpkin fans can pick between little rolets and hefty crown princes grown on the farm, and baskets of Norfolk Royal apples (the variety's only commercially grown crop in the UK) are ripe for transforming into wintry strudels. Pick up a few handcrafted cards and decorations while you're there and you'll be all set for Christmas. *JB. hopshop.co.uk*



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