

From classrooms to cordon bleu

Changing direction helped former teacher **Mary Markovich** stay positive while being treated for ovarian cancer

WHEN MARY Markovich's fourth child flew the nest, she found she no longer wanted to go back into the classroom. Instead, at 55, she became a student again herself, enrolling at the prestigious Le Cordon Bleu culinary college in London. This change of direction, Mary says, helped her to stay positive when just a few months later she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and underwent a radical hysterectomy followed by months of intra-venous chemotherapy.

The day after she learnt the cancer had finally gone, Mary, from St John's Wood, was on a dais at London's Dorchester Hotel receiving the coveted Le Cordon Bleu medal for passing all three sections of the school's cuisine course.

Now Mary, 57, is halfway through the college's three-part patisserie course and has her eyes set on becoming a freelance events chef.

Why were you reluctant to return to teaching?

I did enjoy teaching junior schoolchildren but my youngest daughter Katie was leaving to study in Texas and so I didn't want to commit myself to a teaching job while she was settling in over there. I also have two grown-up sons studying in the United

States and my eldest daughter is teaching in Manila so I felt I needed the flexibility to be able to fly out to see them if necessary.

What drew you to Le Cordon Bleu?

My children had flown the nest and so I was ready to try my hand at something new. I've always loved cookery and in the past had done day classes in Indian and Italian cookery. When we were living in Thailand I became friendly with a British woman who had done one of Le Cordon Bleu's patisserie courses at the London school. She told me how great it was. In the early summer of 2010 I picked up a syllabus. After looking at it I couldn't wait to put my name down and get started.

Does it live up to expectations?

Definitely. I love every minute of it. There are 60 of us in a class and ten to a kitchen. There's a mix of ages - I've met another woman my age and a man of 45 and there are lots of women in their 30s.

What skills have you learnt?

My first term was devoted to the basics. We were taught knife skills and all about the different cuts of meat. Then we were shown how to cook classic dishes like Boeuf Wellington and Chicken Fricassee.

The chef would spend three hours demonstrating how to prepare a dish and the accompanying sauce. Afterwards we had three hours in which to do the dish ourselves. The chef would then come over and taste it and tell us whether we had got it right or wrong.

At the start I was told I was adding too much salt and not reducing my sauces enough. The best part is taking home what you cook. My husband Greg really enjoys consuming whatever I've been cooking.

Are there anxious moments?

As you progress and start the superior section of the course you have to learn to be much faster and more organised. You have to prepare a full meal with more complex dishes and you only have four hours in which to do this. For every minute you go over the time limit you lose two per cent of your marks. As I was going through my cancer treatment at the time it was tough going.

You also have to do a written exam at the end of



Above: Le Cordon Bleu London students in a practical cuisine class

Right: Le Cordon Bleu London Intermediate Patisserie Student Mary Markovich

Left: The cutting of the ribbon to officially open Le Cordon Bleu's new International Flagship school at 15 Bloomsbury Square

Find out more

Le Cordon Bleu, tel: 020 7400 3900, or see the website: www.lcblondon.com.

each part of the course. You are given three dishes to practise and memorise. Then the day of the exam you draw the name of the dish you have to cook out of a hat. First you have to write out the recipe and method and then you cook it. Three chefs then judge it on taste and presentation and assess your kitchen skills.

When did you find out you had cancer?

I had passed my basic and was about to start the intermediate section in January 2011, when I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. It was a tremendous shock because I had been feeling good and worked out in the gym regularly.

In the February I had five hours of surgery during which I had a full hysterectomy and 38 lymph nodes were removed. Unfortunately there was still some cancer left in my chest and so I had to have eight hours of IV chemotherapy every three weeks for the next five months. But I only missed two weeks of my course as a result of my surgery and the school helped me to catch up.

I tried to work my classes around my doctors' appointments and chemo. Everyone was very supportive. The chefs were wonderful and if I was feeling a bit weak

I was allowed to sit down. My classmates figured out why I had been missing and helped me to lift heavy pans and carry my bags into school. It was only towards the end of my chemo that I felt so exhausted I had to leave classes early.

The day before I graduated last June I learnt all the cancer had gone. Greg and I celebrated by going to visit our children.

What next?

I'm halfway through the patisserie cycle and have learnt all about making croissants, choux pastry and different kinds of bread. We're now preparing more sophisticated desserts and cakes. By the summer I hope to be able to work for a catering company and cook at events around The Olympics and Ascot.

Would you encourage others your age to enrol?

Yes. It is one of the most rewarding things I've done. You have to work hard, stay focussed and get the dishes absolutely right to graduate. I shall always be grateful to Le Cordon Bleu for helping me stay positive when bad things were happening in my life.

Interview by Judy Hobson

