

A bland curry for the cautious or a noble dish for a Mughal emperor? Do you add nuts and fruit? Is yoghurt better than coconut milk? Our editor, Cindy-Lou Dale, takes to the kitchen at the Kent Cookery School.

Korma, a princely dish that once embellished the banquet tables of the stately Mughal court, rich with nuts and cream and profoundly scented with lavish spice, has become a byword for bland, an unadventurous kid's starter curry – a catchphrase for mild and creamy. To right this wrong, I set off to the Kent Cookery School and learn how it should be done.

The Courtyard at Mersham Le Hatch with its upscale restaurants, businesses and farmers market, borders a 190-acre deer park and a thousand-year-old woodland. It's one of the most tranquil settings in Kent and where, across a cobbled courtyard inside a listed barn, I find Kent Cookery School.

The glass-fronted entrance gives access to an enormous 'class room'. There's no sign of sterile stainless-steel, instead I'm looking at a fully equipped country kitchen with 12 dedicated work stations, rustic oak beams and antique furniture.

I've always wanted to know how to blend spices and make an authentic Indian curry, which doesn't come out of a jar, so I enrolled for the 'curry club' evening class and learn how to make a seafood Korma. Soon the room fills with other foodies, all keen to learn from James Rosser, our chef and host for the evening.

The kitchen is small enough to be comfortable yet there's plenty of space.

It's appointed with several self-contained work stations where you have your own cooker, oven and every conceivable utensil you could possibly need.

Chef James is a man of many talents. He encapsulates that one good lecturer you had at uni, your favourite comedian, and a talented master-chef, which makes the whole evening a fun and hugely informative experience.

His teaching style is easy-going, yet it's all clearly well-structured and organised as

everything is in place, ingredients measured out and ovens switched on. The course is geared to the wishes of the attendees. Should you be looking for direction, then it works on that level. If you want to understand the science behind it, then this is covered too.

We're encouraged to team up, chat, share knowledge, ask questions and learn about spices and the construction of Indian food and flavours. This is peppered with just the right mix of instructions and demonstrations at key stages, zero pretensions about cooking, and much laughter, which helps enormously and made me realise it's a lot easier than I first thought.

Before we start cooking Chef James explains the importance of grinding fresh spices and understanding the foundations of a good curry, and suggests we be generous with spices as they'll not only add flavour but also texture.

I find that most supermarkets sell spices in deceptively small containers, so I buy larger packets from Asian supermarkets, which encourages me to spoon in the spices with a freer hand. (I store them in the freezer to prevent them from going stale.)

As a youngster James wanted to be a pilot, but his dad (then a manager of a Park Lane hotel) jokingly suggested he consider becoming a chef as he wasn't smart enough to be a pilot. Thus, James was washing pots in a professional kitchen when he was 12. Aged 14 he secured a place in the apprentice scheme. He went to West Kent College and has since worked alongside some of the big names in the culinary world, including the Roux brothers and Richard Phillips of Thackery's, a Michelin-starred restaurant in Tunbridge Wells. James became executive chef for an award-winning gastro pub company in Kent, working 100-hour weeks and opening a new gastro pubs every six months.

Soon we were making onion seed and garlic naan bread, where I learnt a few tricks like of kneading with the heel of my hand; mix the sugar with the yeast – never add salt as this kills the yeast; how to bake it in a regular oven; and, to hurry the whole proofing process along, by warming the flour in the microwave for 30 seconds.



COOKING UP A KORMA STORM



We eventually get to making the Korma where I learn about ghee - always use ghee (clarified butter) instead of oil as it gives a rich flavour to the curry gravy, without the oil slick. I also learn that frying ground spices should be done at low heat so that they retain their colour and flavour. And at the very end, the magic of adding garam masala - it's a great finishing touch.

For me, the main event is the lemon rice. It's simply a religious experience of spices like mustard seeds, curry leaves, green chillies, turmeric, cashew nuts and lemons. When using whole spices, allow them to crackle and pop in the pan before adding other ingredients, as this helps them to release their flavours.

Chef James assures us he uses only fresh seasonal produce from local Kent producers - like additive free flour and cold-pressed rapeseed oil from Eckley Farm; prawns from Sankeys, sustainable vegetables from David Catt & Sons, and free-range eggs from Wanstall Farm down the road. Anything inferior would reflect in the plated food.

At the end of the evening, we plate up and sit at a communal table to enjoy the fruits of

our labour, and later leave with doggie bags as we'd cooked far more than we could eat.

Harnessing new cooking skills is an alternative way of spending a Friday night, and at £65 per person makes for great value too. And oh boy, what a joy to find out how Indian food should really taste!

Kent Cookery School offers a wide range of cooking courses to suit everyone. Whether it is a gift for a loved one or a treat just for you, their team of expert tutors will ensure your day is one to remember. From bread making

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to patisserie, and everything in between, be it full day, weekend or evening courses. They cover all bases. Once a month the live theatre of their 'chef's table' is open for dinner. [AC](#)

www.kentcookeryschool.com

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Written and photographed by Cindy-Lou Dale

