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Food

SEPTEMBER 2023

Blackberry & bay
custard tart
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BACK TO SCHOOL





*Clockwise from far left:
the sourdough starter;
Dan the magician; mixers
in the kitchen; finessing
focaccia; the finished product*



PHOTOGRAPH ADOBE STOCK

It's September, so why not capture those new-term vibes and learn some new skills at one of these top workshops?



SOURDOUGH MASTERCLASS WITH DAN LEPARD

Cookery School, London

I confess to being no stranger to sourdough. It was something that took my fancy some years ago – long before the pandemic inspired a nation, when it briefly felt like what to do with effervescent sourdough discard was a communal obsession.

Bread is a lifelong journey, however, and any enthusiast would jump at the opportunity to learn with Dan Lepard, Aussie expat baking legend and founder of the bakery at nose-to-tail London restaurant St John. (Read more about Dan from page 84). Dan runs regular day classes alongside partner David at Cookery School, a sustainable and socially responsible haven of culinary learning in central London, which operates an anti-waste, renewable-energy-powered ethos in its kitchens.

With us all hunkered down in a basement training kitchen, the experience is intense. The morning is spent at a rapid pace: there's classic sourdough, oil-laced focaccia and an enriched saffron bread to plough through, so a level of speed is the paradoxical reality of an inherently slow process. Terms like 'autolyse', 'hydration' and 'direct-dough method' are dropped into conversation – but Dan and David, who work the room saying encouraging things and helping with techniques, reassure us that there'll be time for questions and explanations later.

Students work at individual stations, directed from the front and via a helpful recipe booklet. Dan also carefully demonstrates particular techniques – a crucial part of the course, which helps fill in some of the gaps during the morning rush. If Dan ever goes too fast, David steps in to ask the pertinent questions. With a mix of newbies, those looking to learn a bit more and a cohort on a semi-professional eight-week cookery course, it's an effective dynamic. Once the hard work of mixing and covering methodologies is done, there's a luxurious pause for lunch – Dan's fresh focaccia, mountains of cheese, pâtés and salad plus wine, coffee and truffles.

Post lunch, things are decidedly more relaxed – for the students, at least: David is toiling hard in the background, baking everyone's loaves to take home. There's plenty of time for questions, discussion and for Dan to share stories of his starry past and present. Sourdough isn't the easiest thing to do in a day, but students are sent home with everything they need to get practising straight away – sourdough starter, scraper and a bag of Shipton Mill flour, plus the intangible inspiration of Dan's pragmatic, hands-on approach to help them on their way.

Jessica Gunn did the one-day course with lunch, £300; cookeryschool.co.uk »

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