



House party leaves me full of food, knowledge and new-found respect for chefs



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DEBONING a bunny rabbit isn't something I've ever jumped at the chance to do.

And I realise here, stood in the kitchen at Domaine St Raymond, faced with a lump of flesh bearing a vague, shapely similarity to my childhood pet Maizey, I dart in the opposite direction.



MARKET: Chef d'excellence Robert Abraham chooses the best local ingredients at the food market held in the 13th century village of Revel, said to be one of the oldest food markets in France

It sparks a similar reaction with Carol Trimborn, who has travelled to take part in this experience from South Africa: "The spine feels the same as my cat," she quips.

"Ah, you wusses," shouts Selena Pitt from the other side of the kitchen, before heartily laughing at our reluctance to handle raw meat (I was a vegetarian for years).

Then, with a swift motion of her knife she shows those around her just how it's done.

It's our third day on the Gourmet Explorer course, a four-day, five-night cookery course run by The French House Party.

The company, owned by British Moira Martingale, operates this and a series of other courses out of her sizeable, detached country property near Carcassonne in the Languedoc-Rousillon.

"This is an amazing place," says Charlene Peters, looking through the property's huge floor to ceiling windows out over surrounding countryside.

Charlene is another member of the group who has travelled from Boston, America, to take part in the course.

We're ten women in total - the house can cater for up to 16 in shared rooms - and, to my surprise, the others who make up the group have also travelled from South Africa, Malta, Australia, Ireland, and England.

"We found it on the web and we just love cooking so thought we'd try it," says Debbie Battershill, from near Durban, SA.

Moira's French House Party has obviously made its mark on the international map.

From the off, it's clear we're an eclectic group of women, of ages varying from 31 to their mid-60s, with a hugely varied experience of cooking and cultures.

I wonder how we'll all fare in a kitchen for four days with only one, large stove between us and two French chefs at the helm who are barely able to speak English.

On arrival, I'm shown to my room, Abricot, a strikingly decorated, light twin room overlooking the property's private pool.

It's comfortable enough with a complimentary bottle of wine and water atop a silver-painted tallboy.

To my delight, I discover lilac, fluffy bathrobes hanging on the bathroom door, slippers in the cupboard, an ample amount of towels for the taking, plus a hairdryer and for use in the room.

Once the others have arrived, we tuck into a light lunch before being introduced to our chef d'excellence, Robert Abraham, for a brush-up on kitchen safety and a steady introduction to gourmet French cuisine: making canapés of mini spring verrines, shrimp samosas, gazpacho with baby carrots and cocktail tomatoes with soft goat's cheese to accompany our evening meal.

The first thing I pick up on here is that delicacy and presentation are paramount when it comes to gourmet food.

"Present things really simply and let the ingredients speak for themselves," says Robert, who has 26 years of experience in l'art culinaire.

Following a round of fizz on the terrace, we sit down to a four-course dinner cooked by Robert's own award-winning hand - it marks the beginning of a four-day immersion in all things French and food - not forgetting the wine.

A highlight of the Gourmet Explorer course is a visit, with Robert, to the 13th century market town of Revel where locals still sell their produce in the cobbled town square under a beautiful timber structure as they have done for generations.

I wander off on my own to get a feel for the place and find Weiss Rabiah and her husband, Pierre Alain, who also happens to be a chef.

They are distributing leaflets at the side of the marketplace, and both are brimming with enthusiasm for the food to be bought here.

"The pear yoghurt on that stall there is the best in the world," says Alain, nodding to a little stall in the thick of it all.

"And there is a foie gras business just down a little side street there which has been going for generations," he adds.

They both believe there is no place like it on earth when it comes to fine, French cuisine and wholeheartedly recommend the area's cassoulet revelois and pate de campagne dishes.

En-route back to the group, through an endless French chatter of sellers pushing offers, I pass perfectly presented stands selling olive oil, saucisson, huge wheels of cheese which would dwarf a small child, and an old man wearing a beret selling a simple selection of lettuces and roses.

He's smiling, despite not doing much trade, and it looks like he's here just for the sheer enjoyment of being part of it all rather than making a mint.

I find Robert and the rest of the group armed with fresh ingredients, ready for the start of some serious food preparation and feasting.

Today, we have to make our own lunch and three-course evening meal.

Back at the ranch, we are straight into the frying pan like a baptism of fire - decapitating dead pigeons and descaling red mullet.

We spend two days with Robert, preparing ingredients and making dishes like a verrine of cockles in green apple jelly (which didn't go down too well with everyone), cod steak with curried sea-bed mussels and carrot puree, siphoned creamed rice with mango compote, not to forget the fillets of red and the young Lauragais pigeon.

The great thing is that Moira prepares recipe booklets for you to take home so you can have a go on your own and share your favourite dishes with friends.

Mid-way through the course we swap chefs, with Jean-Marc Boyer, one of France's dynamic young chefs with a Michelin star to his name and experience working at the Ambroise and the Ritz in Paris leading the way in four cookery sessions.

We learn to make gambas roasted with tarragon, cream of broccoli with crispy mussels, lamb kofta and brioche, to name a few.

Despite our inability to communicate, he manages to draw diagrams as direction.

The Gourmet Explorer course also includes visits to La Cite, the beautiful walled medieval city of Carcassonne, where we dined at an exclusive restaurant La Marquiere and had chance to stroll through the cobbled streets, buy gifts and pause for a vin rouge.

There are also trips to an olive oil factory and a vineyard and wine tasting at the house with Alison Mugford and Linda Wearn, who run a catering company in Minervois.

By the end of the stay, I was full - of food and knowledge and a new-found respect for a chef's profession.

If there was room for anything else, that was topped up with fine wine.

Personally, the main joy came from the fruits of our labours and conversations with new-found friends, even if it was light-hearted banter over deboning a bunny.

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