

# Kitchen capers

EIGHT CHILDREN IN ONE KITCHEN MIGHT SOUND LIKE A CASE OF TOO MANY MINI COOKS SPOILING THE BROTH BUT, AT DUBAI'S NEWEST ENTERTAINMENT CONCEPT, NOTHING COULD BE FURTHER FROM THE TRUTH.





**A** recipe for disaster,' was my initial thought when a colleague suggested I squire a brood of eight, nine to 11-year-olds to a newly opened cookery class in Dubai.

Memories of curriculum cookery during my own schooldays immediately flooded back: the lemon meringue pie that tasted of washing-up liquid (sabotaged, I suspect, by my cookery partner Belinda Potter); being shouted at by Mrs Teabay, our harassed cookery teacher, for constantly opening the oven to see if my Chelsea buns had risen (they never did) and fracturing my wrist swinging on the desks during the interminable wait for my Christmas cake to cook (it burnt). I ditched group cookery in favour of hockey soon afterwards – a far less dangerous pursuit.

But despite my understandable reservations, here we are in the deeply groovy enclave of Dubai Media City known as the Loft Offices, at Cooking Sense, the first professional amateur cooking school in the Middle East – which happily, even from the outside, looks more like a cool Manhattan apartment than the forbidding culinary classrooms of my memories.

It gets even better once over the threshold. A large, Welsh-style dresser at the doorway gives way to the sort of kitchen to make domesticated women (and plenty of men I know) weep: acres of mahogany cupboards, gleaming marble surfaces and endless stainless steel appliances. At one end of the enormous room there's a rustic table – enough for up to 12 class participants (at a squeeze) to gather around and relish the fruits of their labour. Up the chic open stairway, a comfortable mezzanine sitting area in shades of fondant pink and chocolate brown allows for a spot of reclining (or cushion fighting in the case of our participants) before and after the toils of cooking;

there's even a cute little bathroom up there. You could say it's a home from home, apart from the fact that few homes can claim to be as stylishly laid out.

### Cooking Sense

The woman behind Cooking Sense is Samira Rengert, a German national who has lived in Dubai for several years and personifies the efficiency for which her countrymen are famed. For Rengert, Cooking Sense is the fruition of a dream that caused her to turn her back on a corporate career and focus on building a business borne out of her passion for cooking.

"My initial thought was to open a restaurant but, with the fierce competition now in Dubai, I decided to look for a gap in the market – and Cooking Sense was it," she says.

Less culinary school and more entertainment concept, Cooking Sense is not only about cooking but about meeting interesting people, learning new skills and spending quality time with friends or colleagues in a convivial atmosphere. "Cooking is a great stress-buster and learning to do it this way means that you don't even have to do any of the clearing up and washing up yourself," laughs Rengert.

Of course it's also about passing on rapidly disappearing skills to the younger generation and, from the calm and efficient

way Rengert is dealing with *Yummy Mummy's* band of mini chefs, it's difficult to believe she's not been doing it all her life. "Children love to cook; they get such satisfaction and fun from the process and I can honestly say I never have a problem controlling them," she says (remarkably, without gritting her teeth).

On the menu for today's cooking class is zucchini cake washed down with white drinking chocolate but, in Cooking Sense's weekly

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children's cooking classes, everything from hummous to hotpot is created. "We not only cook things that taste good but we also incorporate lessons in healthy eating and table etiquette, so it's an all-round experience," she explains.

### Who's cooking?

As well as fun group cooking classes for youngsters, the company is often called up on to teach teenagers how to cook: "It's a shame, but many mothers now say they don't have the time to teach their sons and daughters basic cooking skills – mainly because they don't have the time to cook or bake themselves. As a result, a whole generation is growing up not knowing where to begin in the kitchen," says Rengert.

As our mini chefs get to work, busily dividing themselves into groups to mix flour, grate zucchini and crack eggs, Rengert explains how the concept has taken off, especially for the young guns of Dubai Media City:

"Our lunchtime classes are very popular with Media City workers who come in either by themselves or with friends and colleagues. We give them quick, nutritious recipes to follow under the supervision of our chefs, and they get to cook and eat all within an hour."

The venue has also become a magnet for jaded singletons who are fed up of the bar and restaurant scene and want to do something different after work. "It's a great way to get people together – cooking together is a great ice-breaker and you get a delicious recipe and some new kitchen skills as well as a fun evening out," she says.

As well as lunch, dinner and supper menus, the school offers classes on diverse but culinary inspired topics such as natural cosmetics from the kitchen, table decoration and varied diets for those suffering from conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

Rengert has enlisted the help of three professional chefs to take the classes but, of course, if you'd rather prefer to turn up at Cooking Sense with a bunch of friends to be waited on – no problem. Simply crank up the sound system, relax with a cool glass of whatever you feel like turning up with and let the chefs take the strain.

"The whole concept is very versatile," says Rengert. "Cooking here can be an intimate event for a few friends, a way to meet a whole new set of people or a part of a corporate event that brings all nationalities and management levels together in an excellent team-building activity."



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With the zucchini cake out of the oven and hot chocolate poured into mugs, our mini chefs settled down (at a table set by themselves) to tuck in enthusiastically. The cake was declared a resounding success (style trend for the coming year will be zucchini birthday cakes if our mini chefs are to be heeded.)

What was interesting to observe was an unmistakable camaraderie between the group that you simply don't get after an hour at the PlayStation – there was also a burning desire to get into the kitchen as soon as they got back home.

"We'll be back," we vowed as we shouted our thanks and headed to join the Media City rush hour outside, heartily agreeing that this is one school we'd all be happy to take extra lessons. *ym*

### Samira's zucchini cake

- 250ml vegetable oil
- 400g brown sugar
- 4 eggs
- 450g flour
- 1/2 tsp cinnamon powder
- 3/4 tsp baking powder
- 3/4 tsp bicarbonate of soda
- 450g zucchini (grated)
- 200g ground nuts or almonds



Mix all the ingredients in a large bowl, transfer to a cake tin and bake in a preheated oven (medium heat) for approximated 20 minutes. Let the cake cool and add a topping if you like.

### White hot chocolate

Serves two

- 2 cups/480ml whole milk
- 115g white chocolate
- pinch freshly grated nutmeg
- handful pink marshmallows



Heat the milk in a pan until bubbles start to appear and it is hot through. Remove from the heat and stir in the chocolate until melted. Add the nutmeg to taste and pour into two mugs. Scatter with plenty of marshmallows and enjoy!