

WORLD WOMAN

I didn't have a focaccia how to pasta Italian kitchen challenge



NO GOOD: With the mortar and pestle and (below) with Lorenzo

It was a recipe for total chaos. Take one top chef and her assistants, sprinkle in a bunch of people who sell ready-meals, stir in a fussy Italian pasta-maker, add a few foodies who write for specialised magazines – and top it all off with someone whose idea of cooking is making Pot Noodles.

It was just as well Gordon Ramsay wasn't around because he would have had a frying fit if he had seen yours truly in the kitchen.

Not any old kitchen either, but posh Ballyknocken House Cookery School in Co Wicklow.

My cookery teachers were Ballyknocken's owner, top chef Catherine Fulvio and Lorenzo Menucci, whose family have been making pasta for over 100 years.

The Italian master pasta maker, who supplies dried pasta and sauces for the Roma brand, was here to teach the Irish how it should be done.

With four generations of expertise behind him back home in Lucca, Tuscany, he was ready to give us all a good pasta-ing at the Roma Italian Food Experience Day.

His eager students included Peadar Kearney, boss of Shamrock Foods, Anne O'Brien of Musgraves wholesalers who distribute the ready-made stuff and reps from Odlum's flour who provided some of the raw ingredients for our day in the kitchen.

For these foodies, it was Ready, Steady, Cook. But for me it was an embarrassing reminder of my school-days when I was the worst pupil in the Home Economics class.

Still, it was about time I learned to cook to one of my favourite foods. My love affair with pasta has been simmering since I first learned to spell using Alphabeti Spaghetti. I recently found another reason to love it – it's the staple diet of Ronaldo and his Real Madrid team-mates. Just like them, it's both healthy and tasty – and a girl always wants a-more.

Italian food is just perfect for flirting, as it's a bit sloppy and every kind of pasta has a double-meaning name. And even when my saucy Italian dish-of-the-day turns out to be a pesto, I just tell him to focaccia off.

Cooking it should be fun, I thought



GERALDINE COMISKEY, worst in her school at home economics, spends some time at a cookery school learning from the experts how to cook Italian food for a bit of la dolce vita

as I watched Catherine knead the dough until it was elastic

"It's a messy way to make pasta – but, we might as well be messy!" she laughed.

Then she fed it into a gadget and wound the handle and – hey presto! Out came a long sheet. It was like a magic trick.

She also showed us how to shred it into tagliatelle and pinch it into bow shapes, before mixing up fillings for the ravioli and making Sicilian-style red pesto to go with the spaghetti.

Next it was Lorenzo's turn. He was so proud of his country's traditional food that we expected him to tick us off for not milling the wheat by hand. But he surprised us all by admitting he prefers instant pasta – and sauce out of a jar!

"This's too much hard work", he said. "In my factory, machines make pasta, it makes thousands of tonnes in five minutes."

As Catherine hung the tagliatelle

TUCKING IN: Geraldine and pasta

over rods to dry, he shook his head, laughing: "It's primitive!"

He also poked fun at me as I wrestled with a pestle and mortar, trying to grind basil and pine-nuts for pesto.

"In my home we use a blender for that", he pointed out.

Lorenzo, who does all the cooking at home for his girl-

friend and four housemates, said time was too precious to be spent slaving away in the kitchen when you could be eating the stuff.

Normally I'd agree with him, but there was something strangely appealing in kneading dough with my hands. It was like being a child playing with Plasticine.

In fact, I nearly got into a flour-fight with Shamrock Foods boss Peadar Kearney – we both wanted to mix the flour and eggs. I was the first to get my hands into the gooey mess.

Still, I listened up when Lorenzo told us how to cook pasta "al dente" – so it's chewy but not gluey.

His recipe for perfect pasta is 100g of pasta to one litre of boiling water and 10g of sea salt. The cooking time depends on the pasta, but it usually takes 10 minutes to cook it al dente.

Lorenzo noticed that we Irish put a lot more sauce with our pasta than the Italians, who usually go half-and-half.

"The pasta is full of carbohydrates so it's great for energy and does not make you fat", the svelte Lorenzo explained, pointing out that Italian children are reared on it.

Catherine, whose husband, Claudio, is Sicilian, revealed that she feeds her children pasta for breakfast.

But we enjoyed it the adult way – with wine.

I was chuffed when I recognised some of my own ravioli on the plates.

I had cut them square to use up the spare pastry – just like a proper Italian mamma I skipped the main course which included Tuscan beef.

But I still found room for some rustic polenta (cornmeal), Focaccia bread – and a delicious dessert of Amaretto truffle tart smothered in mascarpone.

After that, I was pasta point of no return.



..but my saucy teacher made me feel at Roma!

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