

Vantage Magazine

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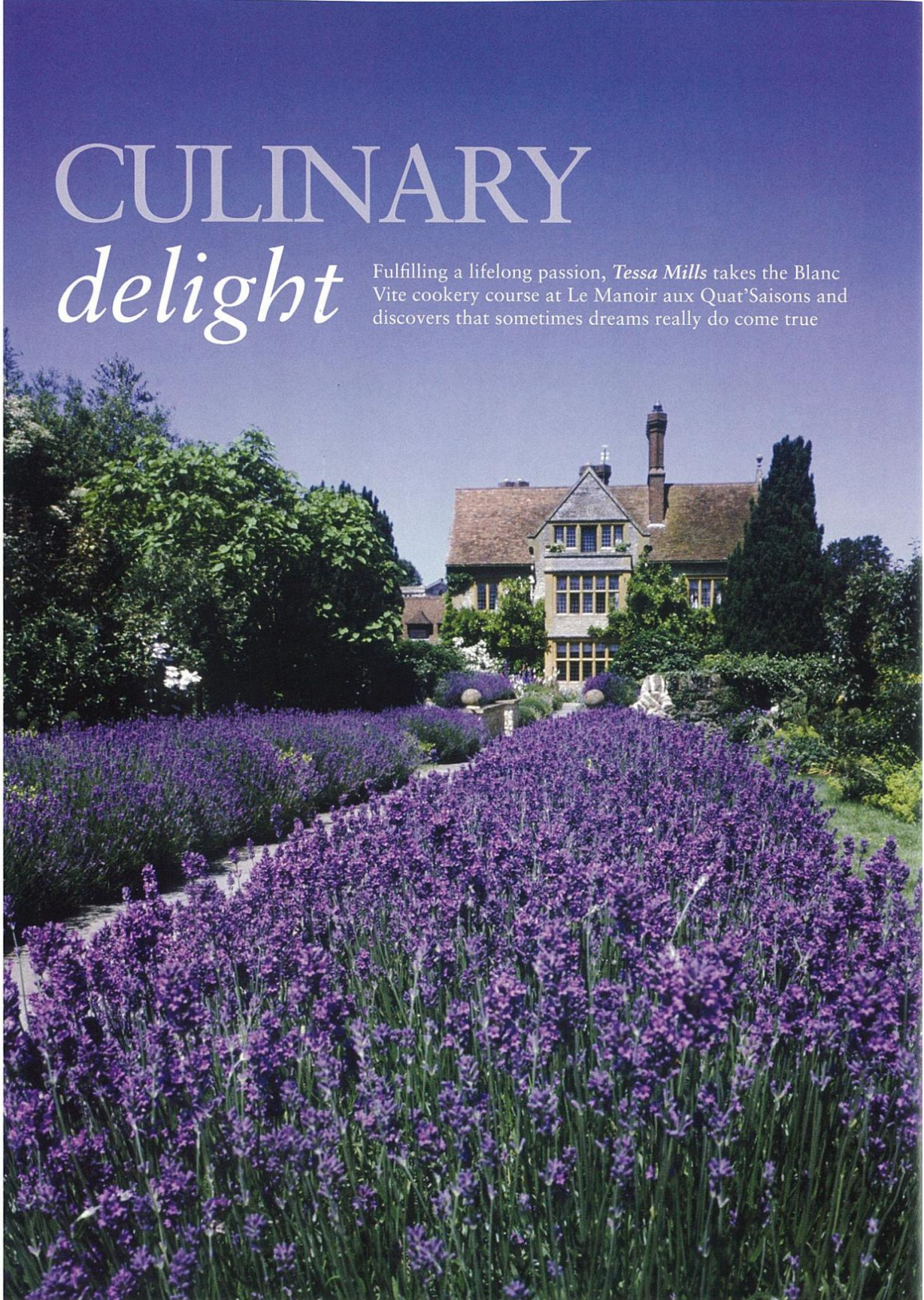
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VANTAGE

CULINARY

delight

Fulfilling a lifelong passion, *Tessa Mills* takes the Blanc Vite cookery course at Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons and discovers that sometimes dreams really do come true





Doing a cookery course at Le Manoir has been a dream of mine for over 20 years. Having been lucky enough to eat in the excellent restaurant at the hotel a couple of times, the chance to see behind the scenes and learn some tips from the experts who work with Raymond Blanc on a daily basis seemed like a wonderful opportunity.

Le Manoir runs a series of courses throughout the year including beginners bread-making, fish & shellfish, chocolate and vegetarian focus days, four day residential courses and a series of options for children. I was doing the Blanc Vite, their most popular course, which covers (as his seminal book *Blanc Vite* did) the basics of professional cooking, aiming to indulge those with a passion for food who would like to benefit from some industry expertise. In short, the course simply and efficiently teaches you how to cook French with good ingredients at home.

Friendly approach

The day starts off with coffee and biscuits in the reception area, and we meet the rest of the people taking the course – only nine others, so we’re a close knit group – before going through to our cooking space. The Cookery School is housed inside the actual hotel

kitchen, with large windows, making us feel connected to the larger goings on at the hotel, but at the same encasing us in our own culinary bubble. Warm woods, spacious benches and soft lighting remind us all of our own kitchens, which is exactly the point, explains Mark Peregrine who runs the courses. “We didn’t want to create an environment that felt industrial. We want people to learn the kind of tips and techniques here that they can then use in their own kitchens, hence the homely approach.”

It really works, I feel instantly relaxed, faced with the same utensils and tools we would have at home, knowing that I could replicate what I’m learning here in my own kitchen without having to invest in lots of complex machinery. Aprons and chefs coats (which we get to keep) are handed out, and we’re assigned a partner to work with. All along the way Mark informs us about what is happening, injecting instructions with humour and helpful anecdotes. Mark has worked with Raymond Blanc in various guises for over 30 years, and is warm, generous with his expertise and a great teacher.

Best ingredients

In the same way that we only use the more standard kitchen tools and accessories, ingredients are simple and readily available items such as chicken,

tomatoes, artichokes, scallops, beans, steak and eggs; what sets them apart is the quality. Mark is quick to explain that investing the extra expense in good quality produce can be the difference between an ordinary dish and an extraordinary meal.

Mark then unveils the menu we will be cooking, and I don’t think I’m alone in not believing we can cook all this in one day. First up is poached eggs with tomato fondue, followed by two soups – gazpacho and French bean soup. Then we make two salads – poached artichokes with mustard dressing vinaigrette, and a salad of grilled squid with provencale vegetables. The main dishes are comprised of fillet of sole with bouquetiere de legume, steak maman blanc (Blanc’s mother’s own recipe) and roast chicken. Desserts are classically French - clefoutis, lemongrass and lime leaf crème pots, and shortbread with summer fruits and Chantilly cream.

The menus change from course to course, depending on the seasonality of the produce and the time of year, but the range of dishes is designed to ensure that classic French cooking is made approachable, as well as passing on some tips and advice.

Tools and tips

And so we start cooking. Throughout the course Mark maintains a really good balance between practical work





and demonstration, and the whole day is planned seamlessly, ensuring each dish is ready for us at the right time.

We watch Mark cook the dish first, and then taste it, ensuring we know what it should look and taste like. Then we cook our own and finally sit down to eat it, and this food provides our meals throughout the day. So we start off, logically, cooking our breakfast, learning the perfect way to cook poached eggs, and serving them with a rich, sweet tomato fondue. After this we marinade some of the fish and meat ready for it to be cooked later on, learn to make top quality pastry ready for our desserts and get an invaluable lesson on how to whip up the perfect French vinaigrette.

Following this we cook artichokes, learning to use lemon on the base to stop the flesh browning, before moving on to make the French version of pesto, known as 'pistou', which has garlic, basil and lemon but no pine nuts or parmesan in it.

Next up is a whole squid, each of us tasked with preparing our own squid, grilling it and making the leafy green salad accompaniment.

The whole picture

After making an amazing selection of soups and salads, it's time for lunch, which has been specially laid out for

us while we were cooking, and we sit down to eat the fruits of our morning's labours accompanied by a glass of wine, the merits of which are explained to us by the kind sommelier who pops in to say hello. Mark is helpful throughout, answering our numerous questions and explaining the theory behind some of his tips and techniques.

After lunch we cook the main dishes. Roast chicken is a revelation, simply coated in butter and put in the oven, while beef fillet is cooked slowly over a low heat, creating a succulent, rich steak, cooked to perfection.

At this point it's clear some of our group is starting to feel the effects of a full day's cooking, and, at exactly the right time, Mark suggests a tour of Le Manoir's famous vegetable and herb gardens, from which they get 20 per cent of their produce during the summer. A potter in the fresh air, exploring the incredible range of pungent herbs and exotic vegetables across the acre and half plot is a wonderful treat and provides a useful perspective when we consider what we've already been lucky enough to cook with.

Finally we head back to our room for coffee and the cooking of desserts, rolling out a simple clefoutis, as well as some wonderful shortbread, along with an inspired lime and lemongrass pudding. Desserts are refrigerated

in individual boxes for those of us staying on at Le Manoir that evening, ready to collect the next morning.

And then the course is over, finished neatly with afternoon tea, certificate giving and handing out of some rather amazing goodie bags.

Treat yourself

I was lucky enough to be staying that night at Le Manoir, and highly recommend this as a perfect ending to the course. I stayed in one of their exemplary suites, dotted around a leafy courtyard with its own private terrace and acres of space. Dinner that night was served in the lovely restaurant, and we found the special tasting menu to be a perfect reflection of everything I'd learnt that day, as well as a superlative example of the quality of food at Le Manoir.

The Blanc Vite course, and all the courses here, are without doubt exemplary; tuition was informative, friendly and infused with the kind of expertise that only a professional could impart. With a place so steeped in food history and universally recognised for its excellent culinary credentials, what better way to improve your cooking and learn from the best? ■

*Courses start from £335
www.lemanoir.com*