

Taste of success

If you're baffled by bread-making, puzzled by pastry or stumped by sorbet, one gourmet cookery school in Pays-de-la-Loire could help you unlock your inner domestic god or goddess

WORDS: CLAIRE SARGENT IMAGES: WALNUT GROVE COOKERY SCHOOL

As a self-confessed foodie, Freya Harvey admits that her friend thought it was hilarious when she married a professional chef. For the past decade, the couple have been putting their shared love of quality cuisine to good use running the Walnut Grove cookery school on the outskirts of Livré-la-Touche, a peaceful village in Mayenne department of Pays-de-la-Loire.

Previously the pair ran a gourmet restaurant near Brecon in Wales, with Freya, 42, in charge of front-of-house in between looking after their three sons (Luke, now 14, Richard, 12, and Anton, 11), and her husband Maynard, 41, as head chef. So with a successful business under their belts already, what made them up sticks with their young family and relocate to rural France? "The restaurant was great, but very stressful," says Freya. "When I had the boys I'd have a week off for the birth and then it was back to work. It was very tiring with tiny children, so we wanted a change of lifestyle."

Meanwhile, Maynard's father Richard was retiring to France and urged them to join him. "He kept saying 'why don't you get a property there, it's so cheap?' and the idea just sort of stuck," recalls Freya. She admits that the move was a leap into the unknown – neither spoke the language, and while Maynard had happy memories of holidaying in France as a child, Freya had never even visited the country before going to view properties there. "I'd even done a trip around Europe with a friend and missed France out – we started off in Italy!" she laughs. But on first seeing their future home in rural Mayenne – a viewing arranged by Maynard's estate agent uncle – it was love at first sight. "It was the second house we looked at and we just



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knew it was the one – even though it needed loads of work," she says.

After selling their business, the couple moved to Mayenne in the spring of 2000, when baby Anton was just a month old. "We arrived on April Fools' Day," recalls Freya, admitting that they wondered at the time if it was prophetic. While renovating their farmhouse, the pair came up with the idea of a cookery school offering fun gourmet tuition, and enlisted Maynard's old friend and fellow chef Benedict Haines to join them.

"It made sense having two chefs – we can give people a lot more attention in the classes, and it's more fun for us as well," Freya says. For the school they found a separate property five miles down the road, with a barn that would make a perfect kitchen space, and overlooking a beautiful grove of walnut trees. To support themselves while Maynard installed the professional-quality kitchen they began by offering fully-catered pampering breaks, until Walnut Grove cookery school finally opened its doors in summer 2002 and business really took off.

Since then, hundreds of guests

This page: Freya, Maynard and their boys – Luke, now 14, Richard, now 12 and Anton, now 11 Opposite page, clockwise from top left: the chefs at Walnut Grove use delicious local ingredients; the boys chill out at home; "People come as punters and leave as friends," says Maynard

have arrived from all over the globe to brush up their culinary skills in this tranquil corner of northern France, two hours from the heart of the Loire Valley. "Usually around half our guests are from Britain, around 30% are American, and the rest from all over – Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Asia," says Freya, who looks after guests, acts as marketing manager and helps out behind the scenes while courses are underway. She adds that running the school is much more sociable, as well as less exhausting, than a restaurant. "We only ever have eight people in a class, and they're always from an interesting mix of cultures and all walks of life." As Maynard adds: "People come as punters and leave as friends." The couple have received invitations from all over the world, which they hope to take up at some point.

Under Benedict and Maynard's expert tuition, guests at all levels of culinary ability develop the confidence and understanding to create modern gourmet cuisine. "Obviously the roots of that are in traditional French cooking, as all gourmet food really is, although our menu has influences from over the world," Freya says. The ingredients, however, are likely to be from closer to home. "We use local and organic produce wherever possible – the fish comes from a supplier in Rennes, the fruit and veg is sourced locally, and the meat is from the local butchers," says Freya. Guests are given the chance to visit some of the school's regional producers for themselves – from a 19th-century windmill where buckwheat flour is ground the traditional way, to a nearby *fromagerie* for a demonstration of cheese-making, or a local cider farm to taste some of the region's deservedly





Top: pupils perfect their dishes, the Harveys fell in love with their Mayenne home at first sight; guest bedrooms at Walnut Grove are light and airy. Freya adores the family's new outdoorsy lifestyle



renowned apple-based tipples. Needless to say, France's formidable culinary reputation is a big draw – as Maynard says, "It's the home of fantastic food, and so many lovely seasonal ingredients." So what did the French make of them setting up their own English-speaking cooking school in the heartland of *cordons bleu* cuisine? "Good question!" Freya laughs. "The first people we told were really dismissive, but we got them back by cooking for them – they said it was the best meal they'd ever had. They were from Paris – local people tend to be more polite and don't actually say what they think, so it's hard to know!" Getting to know those locals and settling into village life was much easier with a family, as Freya points out. "When you move to a place with young children, schools are a good way of getting to know people. We've found people to be very nice and friendly, in general (there are always exceptions!). Especially once you start speaking

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French – they really appreciate you making an effort, and will go so much further to help out." While the whole family are now pretty fluent in their adopted tongue, Freya says that the boys have the upper hand after attending the tiny village kindergarten and growing up bilingual. "Luke's fantastic – if I have to write business messages in French he'll

Top: the all-important Walnut Grove dining room; the dishes Maynard creates are very much in the cordon bleu tradition

correct them and get them absolutely perfect. It's handy having my own translation service on tap," she laughs. After 10 years in France, Freya admits that they still have to pinch themselves at times. "We've got a much more relaxed lifestyle here. The courses run in spring and autumn, so those are our really busy times – but then we get most of the winter off, and six weeks in the summer. That's ideal, because we can spend all that time with the kids," she enthuses. "We'll go off camping, or take our puppy for walks in the beautiful local forests. Maynard's got a Ducati 1098 motorbike, so when the weather's good he goes off for a ride in the countryside." Another thing keeping this family of foodies busy is the vegetable garden, where they grow a lot of their own produce. "The boys have their own little garden patch too, where they grow sunflowers or whatever takes their fancy," says Freya. "Now they're

older we can say, 'Can you go out and pick a basket of salad?' and they know what to get, which is handy!" Completing the rural idyll and providing more deliciously fresh ingredients for the kitchen, the family also keep chickens for the eggs, and sheep for the lambs. So is there anything about Britain they miss? "Traditional pubs, and fish and chips," pipes up Maynard. However, they admit that a bowl of *mondes-frites* with a glass of rosé or muscadet will usually hit the spot instead. So what advice would they give to others contemplating a similar move? "Really do your homework," says Freya. "It can take a while to get a business to the point where you can live off it, so you either need lots of capital to keep you going, or a back-up way of making money. A good way to find part-time work is to consider temping – we were lucky because Maynard and Benedict could temp as chefs while we were getting the school ready. "Don't fall for the *gîte* dream either – too many people seem to think you can buy one and live off that, but the market is swamped so it's a supplementary income, not a sole income. There's a fair bit of red tape to get through, but we don't dwell on that when there are so many positives." Those positives certainly seem to be in healthy supply. "There's such a lovely quality of life being out in the country – it's clean, it's fresh, you can grow your own food, no traffic, houses are cheap," says Freya. Maynard adds, "It feels like you're leading a millionaire's lifestyle, but for not much money in the grand scheme of things." For both, one of the biggest pluses has been raising their children in France. "We have a lovely outdoorsy life, and so much space," says Freya. "There's a wonderful treehouse that Maynard and Benedict built for the kids, and now they're older we've been able to let them go off walking over the fields. It feels really safe, and knowing that they've got that sort of freedom is really special. You just can't buy that, can you?" It is hard to disagree. **LF**
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