

# Dreaming up dishes

Two Cordon Vert tutors rise to a creative challenge

Recipe development is like any form of creativity – you tend to go through stages of inspiration, excitement, and frustration before you succeed! Cordon Vert Head, **Christine Tilbury**, lets us in on some of the secrets of the art.

To create new dishes that taste great, look great, and really work, you need quite a few skills, both practical and theoretical. Not least, of course, a good working knowledge of both the individual ingredients and how they marry with other ingredients and flavouring agents.

The easiest form of recipe development is creating new inventions for a cookbook. This usually means the author has a free hand to use favourite ingredients in new ways and as long as there's plenty of choice, allowing the reader to put together their own menus, all is well. But it gets more difficult when you have to follow a client brief!

I thought members would enjoy an insider's view of how the Cordon Vert team came up with the range of vegetarian/vegan recipes for this year's Christmas campaign.

## Theme for the promotion

The Society's Communications team is responsible for campaigns. It's not easy to find new ideas for the Christmas campaign - we do it every year - but we need a snappy idea to catch the attention of the press. Happily, the team came up with one! 'Saints and Sinners' was chosen: 'Saints' for those watching the calories and 'Sinners' for those who won't even be thinking of calories until it's time for New Year resolutions.

## The brief

So, this year the Cordon Vert team had a double challenge! We needed to design two menus, each with three courses plus canapés. The 'Saints' menu was to be low calorie – 1000 kcal for an entire Christmas lunch - while the 'Sinners' menu could be decadent and carefree. We wanted to use ingredients with rosy, warm Christmas colours, and to stick to things that are readily available from all the main supermarkets – this isn't the time to be stressing cooks out with new and unusual ingredients! Also, very importantly, we know from experience that to stand the best chance of publication in newspapers and magazines, the recipes should be short or medium in length, with a maximum of eight method points (preferably fewer), and no more than ten ingredients (slightly longer for the main course).

## The commission

Cordon Vert always uses its team of experienced tutors to develop new recipes, and this year Sarah Kearns agreed to develop the 'Saints' menu and Marise Maddison the 'Sinners'. Sarah and Marise have very different styles but complement each other well and clearly demonstrate the many ways to be creative.

## The testing

Recipe testing is generally carried out by those members of the Cordon Vert team who have had no part in the recipe development. This year Steven House, Tutor's Assistant, cooked all the recipes following the method exactly. This is actually more difficult than it sounds as an experienced cook will always use personal judgement to make a recipe work! Cooking times have to be noted down, as ingredients can vary in how they cook, as do cooking appliances. Even using different food processors can sometimes make a difference. For example, a recipe may call for ground nuts. If instead of buying ground nuts, the cook grinds nuts using a food processor, the result will not be fine enough to allow absorption of liquids, and this will affect the end result. Another common problem is the varying qualities of tinned pulses, which can, again, often affect the outcome of a recipe. Following Steven's trial run, the recipes were amended based on the notes he had made, and then they were tested one last time by another team member.

As always, we are fighting deadlines and the pressure was on both Sarah and Marise to meet the brief and to deliver on time.

As if all this was not enough, this time we asked Marise and Sarah to keep a diary about the recipe development process, to share with readers.



# Marise and the 'Sinners'



## DAY 1: AFTERNOON

Given outline titles, limits and boundaries for the recipes.

## DAY 2: ALL DAY

Think. Go to bed – more thinking.

## DAY 2: NIGHT TIME

Wake in middle of the night. Have pen and paper by the bed, light on – whoops better not wake him up – turn off light, get out of bed, trip over the dog, curse, go to lounge, collecting dressing gown on way, put on light, settle to do more thinking. Decide to get hot drink to help thinking process. An hour later, decide enough is enough. Have only managed to think of an idea for one recipe. Just four more to go. Very pleased with myself! Creep back to bed. Brain is working overtime. Lie awake for another hour. Decide that bread sauce is a great idea, especially with added booze.

## DAY 3: MORNING

Wake up in the morning – look at middle of the night workings – decide they are no good at all. And as for bread sauce – what was I thinking of?

## DAY 3: AFTERNOON

Can't stop thinking about recipes. Sit down with cup of tea and peruse ancient magazines and recipe books, looking for magic words that will give me inspiration. Read pages and pages of ingredients lists – I need to find ingredients that spark a creative fire in me.

## DAYS 4 AND 5

More anxious days and sleepless nights, but on night five, have five brain-waves. Got them!

## DAY 6

Maybe not! I have at least three good ideas, one that might be OK, but still not got a pudding. Write these up as recipes, do shopping list, go shopping, come home, begin cooking the main course. Hooray! Recipe 1 (main course – cherries and things in puff pastry) is halfway decent. Have it for dinner. OK, but needs a bit of a tweak. Go to bed hoping I may get some sleep tonight.

## DAY 6: NIGHT TIME

Partner getting fed up with me talking about cherries and puff pastry in the middle of the night - in my sleep!

## DAY 7: MORNING

Get up, begin cooking again, tweaking main course and trying the other three recipes. Still haven't got inspiration for pudding. Decide it has to be a hot one. Have main course for lunch. Partner getting fed up with cherries in puff pastry, but vegetables a moderate success. Write up tweakings – main course and vegetables.

## DAY 7: EVENING

Have friends round to try out recipes. Finish cherries in puff pastry – a huge success. Vegetable tweakings fine. Try soup – good idea, but not right yet. Friends very supportive. Getting panicky about puddings being done on time. Email Christine (Cordon Vert Head) to ask for two or three days extension.

## DAY 7: NIGHT

Yet another sleepless night. BUT – pudding recipe on the way. Oranges! Yes – oranges! And liqueur...

## DAY 8: MORNING

Write up pudding recipe, tweak soup, and amend main course and vegetables. Two and a half recipes done, only two and a half recipes to do. Half way there! Feeling more hopeful – getting into it now!

## DAY 8: AFTERNOON / EVENING

Another shopping list, invite more friends around for dinner tonight. Can't do cherries in puff pastry again (would lose partner) so decide to do light dinner of canapes, soup and pudding. Canapes great! Soup great! Wow-ed friends! Pudding... a disaster! Friends leave being very supportive and not mentioning the pudding.

## DAY 9: MORNING

Got to get this right. Type up all recipes and change pudding. Shopping list, do shopping, back to try out new puddings. Puddings for lunch. Not there yet.

## DAY 9: AFTERNOON / EVENING

Make more puddings – good job I bought treble the ingredients. Must have had a premonition. Puddings for tea. Still not right – but vegan cream fabulous. Can I offer just the cream? – suggest buy vegan xmas pudding? Go to sleep with orange slices floating across my eyes.

## DAY 10: D-DAY

Drag myself out of bed and into the kitchen. Look with disgust at oranges and ramekin dishes. Several uneaten, half decent puddings in the fridge. Ignore them. Watch TV for an hour with cup of tea and piece of toast - definitely no marmalade. This is it! Puddings HAVE to be right today. This is GOING to work.

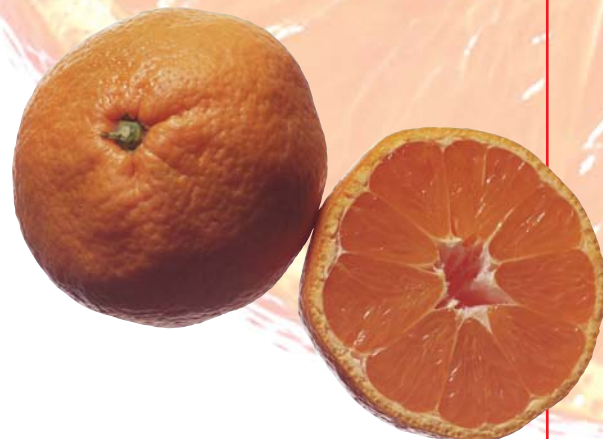
Puddings for lunch and dinner. Invite grandchildren round. Would they like a pudding? (Fingers crossed, searching for tell-tale look of disapproval when they see them.) Yippee – the puddings must look OK – they want one! Brave asking partner if he'd like to join the grandchildren having a pudding. He's very accommodating – says yes, but I notice the grimace hidden behind the smile.

Geronimo! Puddings have worked! Go to bed. Too full of puddings to sleep, but very pleased with myself.

Drift into fitful sleep. Dream that Christine is school teacher telling me off for not getting puddings right. Wake up partner to ask him if puddings really are all right. He reassures me, then drops straight back to sleep. I lie awake for another hour, then get up to write pudding recipe.

## DAY 11

Go through all recipes checking for mistakes. Send them off to Christine (trying to ignore the image left over from my dream last night). Throw out all the remaining puddings - never want to see another orange pudding again.



Having tasted Marise's recipes I can say the sleepless nights were worth it! The recipes are both delicious and stunning! I know too well that getting the ideas can take longer than the actual process of creating and then honing the recipe to perfection, as Marise's account demonstrates. If I had to pick a favourite from the menu she has designed, it would be the simple, delicious Brie soup with cranberry toasts. I think it's the ultimate recipe with simplicity and deliciousness combined - a new Cordon Vert Christmas classic!

Sarah Kearns designed the 'Saints' menu and this was probably the most difficult brief we had ever given her. How do you make a delicious, visually stunning Christmas menu using fewer than 1000 calories? Well... it was tough. Sarah's account doesn't mention any sleepless nights, but Sarah's thinking process happens while she shops... and she shops a lot!

## Sarah and the 'Saints'

Firstly, I read the brief and firmly hold the required colours in my head. Then I think about texture – how to bring crunch and variety into the dish. Then onto ingredients – the menu combination can't be developed in isolation, i.e. the same ingredients can't be used from dish to dish. So, in fact, designing a menu is even harder than being asked to develop four stand-alone recipes which can be mixed and matched with other dishes. I also consulted Marise to see if we were thinking of using similar ingredients, as I didn't want the 'Saints' menu to be too similar to the 'Sinners' menu – yet more restrictions – this was going to be tough!

Keeping all these points in my head, I then put myself into the mind of the person who would be making this menu – someone who wants to enjoy Christmas as much as the next person but without putting on weight and at the same time not feeling deprived – what a challenge! Being an experienced Cordon Vert tutor I must also be careful not to take my knowledge for granted. When writing a method, I like to assume there is no photograph (although in this case, the photos are actually stunning!) so the method must be very clear in its explanation.

So it begins – I get out all my food magazines, which are an excellent point of reference and inspiration. I sort out seasonal magazines to get myself in the right mood and look firstly for colours and shapes. Some magazines produce seasonal lists of fruit and vegetables, so I refresh my memory as it's good to know what ingredients are available - see back page for our new feature! Although it's Christmas, I still prefer to use as much seasonal fruit and vegetables as possible, with a few extravagant optional extras. Then I begin writing ideas down – ingredient combinations, making notes of colours, followed by crunch. Then I scribble out a shopping list and zoom off to shop, keeping an eye open for anything new. I remind myself that as these recipes are going out to the UK press, I need to shop at one of the big national supermarkets and discipline myself to keep away from those delicious little gourmet type shops which may not be available to everyone.

Like Marise, I often use my partner and friends to test recipes – but it's no freebie – they are expected to work for their supper! Lots and lots of questions follow – what do you think of the texture, colour, taste, combination

with other dishes? I write down all their comments and next day go back into the kitchen to amend/ tweak. More shopping and thinking time needed – and this time I go to another main supermarket, just to make sure the ingredients are available in more than one chain.

Oh dear – scrap the main course and start again. More shopping and thinking needed for main course. Layers of jewel-like colours come to me and I make the necessary purchases. Friends come round for supper again! Beetroot and Pomegranate soup plus Canapés, and both vegetable side dishes are a huge success, as is the first attempt at the new main course. Much praise and encouragement from friends followed the finale – Pannacotta desert with mulled plums, with only 258kcal, left them brimming with virtuous joy!

Next day, I type up recipes in the required format and send them over to Christine for testing. Two days pass and after a few questions and some minor tweaking I get the thumbs up – hurray!



Now it's up to you to choose from our two delicious Christmas menus. For a free copy of both of the complete menus, phone 0161 925 2000 or email your request to [xmas@vegsoc.org](mailto:xmas@vegsoc.org). Have a wonderful Christmas and New Year!

Christine Tilbury

