

What's the worst thing you can imagine happening in your kitchen – a flood, an electrical firestorm, a collapsed soufflé? Having some efficient stranger rooting through your cupboards and – worse – your fridge, examining the contents, marvelling over the sell-by dates and then chucking it all in the bin? Yes, the last by a mile. Which is why, when Justine Kanter, the founder of Kitchen Coach, a company that aims to improve your culinary environment as well as your cooking, suggested she came and reorganised my kitchen – I had a little spring clean first. Not that she noticed.

'Gosh, but you've got a lot of... stuff... here,' she says, carefully placing quotation marks round the 'stuff' in question. 'Why have you got all that bicycle gear on the dresser? And what's this?' Actually, it's a collection of large bowls that live in a gravity-defying stack on the kitchen telly. 'It's an installation,' I tell her. 'Culinary art.'

Once you have got used to her brisk behaviour, it's curiously calming to have Kanter in your kitchen. She may be cross but, like doctors encountering something really disgusting and not batting an eyelid, she appears completely unfazed by even your worst domestic shortfalls. And that's lucky because, since she turns up on your doorstep in chef's whites carrying a serious black bag of knives, you're not inclined to get into an argument with her.

'A sharp knife makes all the difference,' Kanter insists. 'You should invest in a knife sharpener, either a stone or a knife-sharpening steel. Sharpen them every time you cook,' she says, as she sets to on mine. 'It really doesn't take long.'

Like most people who have children to cook for, I have a certain repertoire of recipes that I know will go down well with the assembled offspring, and are

KITCHEN KUDOS

With both her cupboards and culinary habits in need of a makeover, Carolyn Hart called in a coach. Photographs by Katya de Grunwald



Right Justine Kanter, the Kitchen Coach, takes charge of Carolyn Hart's kitchen, reorganising the cupboards and introducing her to new recipes such as Yotam Ottolenghi's smoky frittata (recipe overleaf)

easy to produce. I don't even have to look them up in a cookbook, so proficient have I become at things such as lasagne, tomato sauce, roast chicken, Yorkshire puddings and so on. But today, Kanter wants to change all that. She wants to inject a little excitement into the daily culinary round, and to this end is teaching me how to make something interesting out of a cauliflower (hitherto a thing my children refuse to eat, but which I love), chocolate brownies (my children want them; I can't produce them with the right – to their mind – sticky consistency) and lamb kebabs (I have always considered making kebabs way beyond the call of duty). She is adamant that producing this kind of classy grub for one's family is no more difficult and no more time-consuming than cooking something run-of-the-mill such as shepherd's pie or macaroni cheese.

I'm not so sure. 'They'll love it,' Kanter assures me. 'And it'll get you out of a rut, make you try new things. The trick is to get all the prep done before you go to work in the morning. Then it'll all be ready and waiting when you come home.'

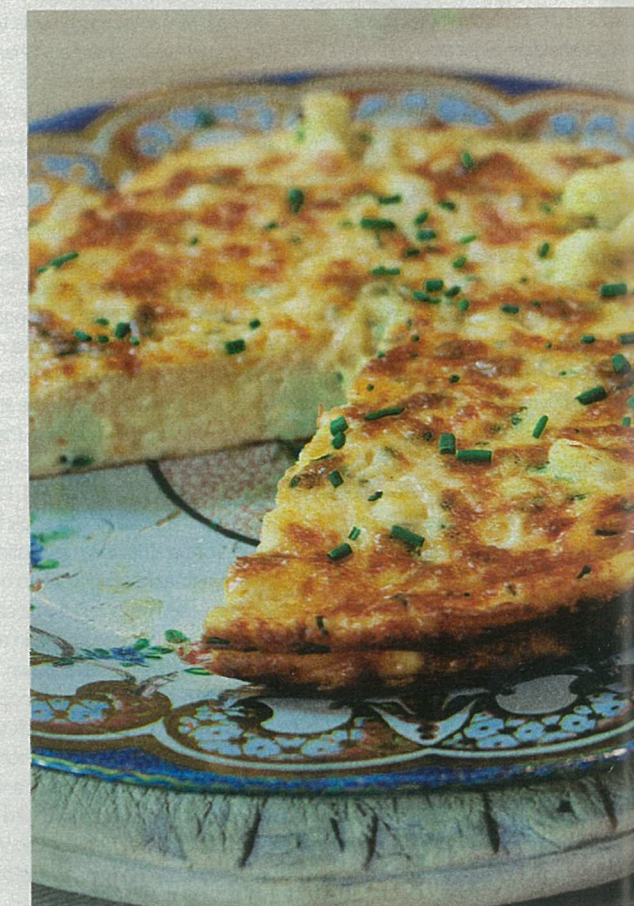
I'm even more not sure about this. Trekking up and down stairs 20 times in a morning to retrieve things I've forgotten doesn't leave much time for slicing courgettes or sweating onions for a fish stock. But before we can get into an argument about this, first of all Kanter has got to sort out the kitchen and do a cupboard edit. 'There are some things you should always have in the fridge,' she says, opening the door and peering inside. 'Celery, onion, garlic, cider, sherry.' Naturally my fridge doesn't contain anything of the sort; what it does have is leftover cheese, some salad leaves clinging to life and a selection of out-of-date jars of chutney, jam and yogurt.

I have a five-year cut-off point for past-sell-by-

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dates,' Kanter tells me pointedly. 'I'm going to give this a blast of cleaner,' she adds. 'Do you mind? I don't want to upset you... I'm going to give the top shelf a wipe. Every fridge has this kind of thing in it,' she tells me consolingly, as we consign a hundred elderly bottles to the recycling bin.

Kanter has been an enthusiastic foodie most of her life, working as a chef in the kitchens at Langan's Bistro in London and at one time running her own company called Banana on a Bike, a tailor-made packed lunch business for schools – the children ordered it, the parents paid for it and Kanter delivered it on a bike. But the business folded, so Kanter took herself off to the Cordon Bleu school to do a diploma. 'After that,' she says, 'I didn't want to work in a restaurant, but I did want to impart some of the wisdom I'd learnt.' Kitchen Coach was the answer – based on the idea that Kanter would turn up in people's homes and teach them how to organise their kitchens properly, and then how to cook in them. 'I've taught teenagers, children, retired men, a couple of bankers who wanted to be more involved in the kitchen, women who want to expand their repertoire. I can teach you how to



Justine Kanter's recipes from one of her favourite chefs, Yotam Ottolenghi

Carolyn loved food but was bored and frustrated by her usual repertoire. She wanted to make quality meals that could easily be stretched. Yotam Ottolenghi's recipes seemed the answer – combining beautiful flavours with original ingredients.

Smoky frittata serves 4-6

Scamorza affumicata is an Italian curd cheese that melts fantastically well. It is highly effective in adding depth and pungency to vegetarian dishes.

- 1 small cauliflower, cut into medium florets
- 6 eggs
- 4 tbsp crème fraîche
- 2 tbsp Dijon mustard
- 2 tsp sweet smoked paprika
- 3 tbsp finely chopped chives
- 150g smoked scamorza, grated (including the skin for extra flavour)
- 50g mature cheddar, grated
- 2 tbsp olive oil

Simmer the cauliflower in a large pan of boiling salted water for four to five minutes, or until semi-cooked. Drain and dry. Preheat the oven to 190C/gas mark 5. Break the eggs into a large bowl. Add the crème fraîche, mustard and paprika and whisk well, making sure the eggs and crème fraîche are thoroughly blended. Now stir in the chives and three-quarters of the cheeses, and season well.

Heat the olive oil in a large ovenproof frying-pan. Fry the cauliflower for five minutes, until golden brown on one side. Pour over the egg mixture and use a fork to spread the cauliflower evenly. Cook on a medium heat for five minutes.

Scatter the remaining cheese on top, then carefully move the pan to the oven. Cook for 10-12 minutes, or until the frittata is well set. Remove from the oven and leave to settle before cutting into wedges. Eat immediately, with a peppery green salad.

From *'Plenty'* by Yotam Ottolenghi (Ebury, £25)

Courgette-wrapped lamb kebabs

serves 2-4. Kebabs or koftas – Middle Eastern meatballs made with mince and spices – offer endless possibilities for combining flavours and textures. The bread we use here can be replaced with potato, couscous or bulgur wheat. Many alternative herbs and spices also work.

The kebabs are made fancy by the courgette wrapping. But if you prefer to keep it casual you could omit the courgettes. The kebabs can be made in advance up to the stage where you finish them off in the oven; you can then chill them and finish the cooking at the last minute.

- 2 tbsp pine nuts
- 50g stale white bread, crusts removed
- 300g minced lamb
- 55g feta cheese, crumbled

- 1½ tsp ground allspice (pimenta)
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- ¼ tsp ground nutmeg
- 1 clove of garlic, crushed
- 1 egg
- 15g flat-leaf parsley, finely chopped
- light olive oil for frying, plus a little extra for brushing
- 2 medium courgettes

for the sauce

- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 2 cloves of garlic, crushed
- 400g Italian tinned tomatoes, chopped
- a pinch of dried chilli flakes
- 10 basil leaves

Start by making the sauce. Place the olive oil and crushed garlic in a saucepan and stir over a medium heat for one to two minutes, just until the garlic cooks lightly. Add the canned tomatoes and season with the chilli flakes and some salt. Bring to the boil, then reduce to a gentle heat and simmer for 25 minutes, until slightly thickened.

Remove from the heat, taste and adjust the seasoning. Set aside. Toast the pine nuts in a small frying-pan for four to five minutes, shaking the pan occasionally, just until they get a little colour. Remove from the heat and leave to cool. Soak the bread in cold water for two minutes, then drain and squeeze to remove the water.

Crumble the bread into a large mixing bowl and add the lamb, crumbled feta, pine nuts, spices, garlic, egg, chopped parsley and half a teaspoon of both salt and pepper. Time to roll up your sleeves. Mix all the ingredients together with your hands until well combined. Shape it into fingers, 10x5cm. There should be 12.

Pour a 5mm depth of olive oil into a large frying-pan and shallow-fry the kebabs for one minute on each side or until they have taken on a nice brown colour. Remove from the pan and set aside on a baking tray.

Preheat the oven to 200C/gas mark 6. To prepare the courgettes, use a small knife to slice off both ends and then cut long, thin slices down the length of each courgette (a mandolin will make this job much easier). You will need 12 slices. Brush each slice with a little olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Place a ridged griddle pan over a high heat and leave it there for a few minutes to heat up well. Lay the courgette slices on the hot pan and cook for two minutes on each side, so that they get distinctive char marks. Remove to a tray and leave to cool.

Wrap each meat finger in a slice of courgette and arrange them in a single layer in a baking dish, seam-side down. Bake in the oven for eight to 10 minutes, until cooked through.

To serve, bring the sauce back to the boil, tear the basil leaves roughly and stir them in. Arrange the kebabs on serving plates and serve the sauce in a bowl alongside. Drizzle with olive oil to finish.

From *'Ottolenghi: The Cookbook'* by Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi (Ebury, £25)



make anything, from a great bolognese sauce to the perfect tarte tatin.' Since she has two teenagers of her own – boys, the oldest of whom 'grows all his own vegetables', she says proudly – and a partner who doesn't cook, she is well versed in chivvying people tactfully round a kitchen.

And word has got out. Kanter finds she is often given as a gift voucher, for example, for a mother-and-daughter session. 'I just come to your house,' she says, 'and then we have fun cooking. I'm really good for people who can cook but have got stuck. I can produce tricks to save time like topping and tailing beans in one go and chopping an onion so that it doesn't reduce you to tears, help you create better food, straighten out your kitchen, hopefully give you an injection of enthusiasm and confidence.

'Blimey,' she exclaims, having moved on from the fridge to the larder. 'I usually say let your cupboard dictate what you cook, for example if you've got loads of tins of cannellini beans and sardines then have that for supper, but in your case mostly what you'd have is food poisoning...'

Soon there's a further pile of culinary rejects and Kanter thinks it might now be safe to do a little cooking in my newly streamlined kitchen. 'Before cooking, put all your chopped ingredients in separate bowls,' she says. 'This is how you chop an onion, not like that.' Although she is fitting about the kitchen like a hyperactive pinball, there's no slacking allowed on your part. Before long I am making a bouquet garni for a stock: very fiddly – leek skin stuffed with parsley stalks, bay leaf, celery shreds and thyme tied up with a bit of string (her string comes from John Lewis), and have learnt a brilliant way to top and tail a packet of green beans ('Line them up in the packet and then just cut the end off. It's very pleasing to have everything ready to tip into the pot'). Now she has moved on to the tomatoes for the kebabs, immersing them in boiling water before skinning them. 'I wouldn't do that,' I say, unwisely. 'Why not?' she says. 'Because you can't be arsed?'

Got it in one, really. Though the time taken over a skinned tomato is as nothing compared to the time I am now taking to slice thin strips of courgette, spray them with oil and fry them on both sides before wrapping them round the lamb like a tiny shroud for a Yotam Ottolenghi recipe. Kanter's aim is to complete two dishes in two hours. Today we manage three, but apart from the time spent fiddling with string and the shrouds, I haven't done any more than I would have had I made a shepherd's pie or any other staple. And the difference in taste and presentation is amazing. Even my children notice they have had high-class food for supper.

'My big piece of advice,' Kanter says, as I help her lug all her gear out through the front door, 'is to make everything I cooked with you again by yourself as soon as possible – then you'll remember it all.' I haven't, of course, but my kitchen is a lot cleaner and easier to work in since Kanter's visit – just throwing out the old jars was immensely therapeutic; and the knowledge that should I ever fancy a fish stock or a shrouded lamb kebab I can certainly produce it, has been thoroughly empowering. Post-work suppers will never be the same again.

Kitchen Coach prices start at £65 an hour, minimum session time is two hours. Justine Kanter also does gift vouchers, and lessons for pairs and groups, which lowers the cost (kitchencoach.biz)



Kanter's essential kitchen utensils

- knife sharpener
- oven thermometer
- silicone pan handle cover
- heat diffuser
- butcher's string
- palette knife
- several chopping boards
- electronic scales
- Microplane grater
- small plastic prep bowls

Kanter's essential ingredients that no kitchen cupboard should be without

- table salt
- white pepper
- Dijon mustard
- groundnut oil
- ingredients for mirepoix (carrot, onion, celery)
- ingredients for bouquet garni (leek, bay, thyme, parsley, celery)
- chorizo
- anchovy essence
- smoked paprika
- unsalted butter

Goopy chocolate brownies

makes 12-15. You can omit the nuts if you have children who don't like them.

- 250g dark chocolate (70 per cent cocoa solids), broken into chunks
- 30ml espresso coffee
- 200g unsalted butter
- 3 large eggs
- 230g caster sugar
- 260g plain flour
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 80g macadamia nuts (optional)

Preheat the oven to 180C/gas mark 4. Butter a 25cm square springform tin and line it with baking paper. Melt the chocolate, coffee and butter in a heatproof bowl over a pan of simmering water. Remove from the heat. Whisk together the eggs and sugar until pale and creamy. Pour in the chocolate mixture and sift in the flour and half a teaspoon of salt. Mix until combined, then add the vanilla. Spoon into the tin, add the nuts if using and bake for 20-25 minutes. Test with a skewer, which should come out gooey. The top should be quite firm and the centre should still be wobbly and soft. Don't worry – it is cooked and will be deliciously fudgy. Leave to cool and then cut into squares.

Above before and after: Carolyn Hart's kitchen surfaces are given a makeover by Kanter