

CAN'T COOK, WON'T COOK?

Robert Crampton is a disaster in the kitchen. His son is a trainee chef. This is what happened when they went to cookery school...



can't cook to save my life; my son Sam, 18, is training to be a chef. I'm pretty much indifferent to food, other than shovelling the stuff down my neck as necessary fuel to pursue my preferred activities; Sam has been passionate about food – buying it, preparing it, appreciating it, discussing it, not least eating it – for as long as I can remember. Me and the lad have got plenty in common: football, boxing, swimming, Bruce Springsteen, genes ... But this food business is undeniably a mismatch.

I've tried every so often to cultivate an interest in matters culinary – discerning those subtle variations and combinations of taste and what have you. But the fact is, I'm just not that bothered. Sam, however – he was apparently born with a fascination for any and all grub-related subjects.

Any halfway decent father wants to engage with his boy's concerns, right? And if he doesn't want to, he tries to make the effort anyway, right? So what's a doting dad to do, eh?

Go on a cookery course together, obviously. A three-day, intensive, residential course, obviously. In Tuscany, obviously. Arguably the regional-food capital of the entire planet. With a mercurial (bordering on histrionic) caricature Italian tortured cooking genius called Sunshine Manitto. And his somewhat sceptical assistant/translator, Annachiara. And two very proper Home Counties ladies called Beryl and Robina. What could possibly go wrong?

Sunshine is his real, God-given name, by the way. "My parents were 'ippies, you know?" he smiles, swiftly resuming his default expression of miserable, dead-eyed, agonised contemplation of the mysteries of the kitchen.

The venue is a villa on an estate called Varramista, half an hour east of Pisa on the road to Florence. Not the best part of Tuscany, perhaps, but then it's all pretty nice, isn't it? The big house on the hill, late 16th century, across the valley from our accommodation, used to be owned by the Piaggio family, whose factory is still located in nearby Pontedera. Now a museum, a vintage Vespa has pride of place in the foyer of the former palazzo. Annachiara catches me admiring it. "Ah, so you know about scooters?" she says. "I don't know anything more about scooters than I do about food," I tell her. "But I know what I like."

Sunshine doesn't make the trip to the Piaggio pile. He isn't fussed about any of that. As far as I can ascertain, Sunshine isn't fussed about anything much, except food. Although, being as he appears an absolutely central-casting Italian, he's probably into sex, clothes and football too in a big way. Not Catholicism though – a legacy of the 'ippy parents.

Certainly loves his opera, though, does

Sunshine. Each lesson is accompanied by booming Puccini on the kitchen speakers. "When I cook," he explains, "I 'ave to 'ave opera. Is normal, yes?" His four English students – me, Sam, Beryl, Robina – politely mumble our agreement, as if to say, "Puccini? Why of course that's what we do. Doesn't everyone?" Annachiara rolls her eyes.

The course lasts three days and incorporates three lessons: two dinners and a lunch. First up, on the evening of our arrival, is something quite complicated called *maccheroni* with Tuscan sausage and truffle butter. *Maccheroni* being a type of pasta that, naturally – under Sunshine's expert, intense, wildly gesticulating



SAM WASN'T ENGAGED IN THE CLASSROOM. THE ONE BIT OF SCHOOL HE LOVED WAS COOKERY CLUB

tutelage – we have to make from scratch.

The pasta and bangers are just the starter, mind. The main is lamb in chianti with a whole load of herbs chopped very, very finely. Chopping things very, very finely is one of Sunshine's abiding rules. He wanted *Chopping Very, Very Finely* to be the title of his first book, which is about to come out. His publisher overruled him and insisted on *My Tuscan Kitchen* instead. "A better title," I offer. Sunshine scowls.

After the lamb we're looking at a chocolate and cinnamon mousse. Better get cracking.

We convene at 6pm, aprons on, blades at the ready. "So, Robert," Sunshine asks, "you like to make your pasta at home?" Sam sniggers. "Not as often as I'd like," I reply, going on to waffle about the pace of modern life, etc, etc. Sunshine agrees enthusiastically. "Yes! Yes! The stress!" He confides that, for many years, he ran his own restaurant in Lucca, but he

Sam Crompton aged 11, at the wedding of a family friend

"was not 'appy. Now," he beams, "no stress." Then he immediately looks downcast again.

Sam never took to school. He wasn't unhappy or stressed – not like Sunshine back in his days as a hard-pressed entrepreneur in Lucca – but as each year passed, Sam's yawning absence of interest in academic work became more and more apparent. He wasn't stupid or lazy or disruptive – he just wasn't remotely engaged by being in a classroom taking in information, then writing about it.

Lots of teenagers, boys in particular, are the same way. I wasn't like that – quite the opposite. Being in a classroom aged 16 was the most optimal environment I've ever inhabited.

The one aspect of school Sam absolutely loved, however, was cookery club. I'm not a religious man, but I confess I have more than once gone down on my knees and offered up a little prayer of thanks for Sam's school cookery club. He was a mainstay for five years. When he said, at 16, that he wanted to leave school and become a cook, it was so obviously the right thing for him to do, my wife and I just said, "Sure."

He's now close to completing his second year at cookery college. He was full-time during his first year, now he just goes on a Tuesday. During the rest of his week, he has been pursuing a variety of jobs – some paid, some (in the shoddily commonplace modern way) not. He's done a number of shifts at two local bakeries, on a food stall in our neighbourhood farmers' market, as a kitchen porter in a restaurant, helping make puddings for a catering business. When he was at school, it was an effort to get the lad out of bed every morning. When he was at the bakery, by contrast, he was up and gone by 5am. Horses for courses, right?

Back on this particular course, Sunshine has parked the pasta-making for the time being, and has us busy slicing up a variety of ingredients – onion, garlic, rosemary, sage, carrot, parsley – into very, very, very small pieces. Sam is hugely more proficient than I am. Working rapidly and efficiently, he does little to disguise his contempt for his father's pile of mushed-up silvery and green stuff. I'd go so far, indeed, as to say the cheeky little bugger was revelling in my incompetence.

Partly it's an experience issue, partly it's a dexterity issue, partly it's a "this matters more to me than it does to you" issue – mostly, however, it's a sheer physical, fit-for-purpose issue. My lower back aches from ➤

standing slightly crouched. My hands ache from wielding the knife. (You know that cramp you get in your palm, at the base of the thumb?) My head aches from the welcome prosecco I downed on arrival. And my ears ache from Sunshine's nonstop monomaniac monologue about, well, about food. Always food.

Food sourcing. Food economics. Food sociology. Food history. Occasionally, food philosophy. The latter element – although Sunshine's English is more than passable – he deems sufficiently nuanced and important for him to deliver in his native tongue. After which rapid incomprehensible burst, he turns expectantly towards Annachiara to translate.

Sunshine is a decent bloke. I like him. There isn't an ounce of unpleasantness in the guy. And yet, he's a 42-year-old male and Annachiara is a 30-year-old female. It's a significant difference. Annachiara, moreover, has studied in Britain – in Glasgow, specifically – for four years. She is, in short, a modern European woman.

"He says," this young lady can hardly bear to inform us, "that you must treat your kitchen like you would treat your, er, woman." She winces, blushes, stares at the floor. An awkward silence ensues. Sam raises an eyebrow. The silence lengthens. Annachiara finds something fascinating to examine on the ceiling.

Beryl, bless her, eventually steps in to save the day. "The trouble is," she offers, with what sounds like hard-won wisdom, "some men don't always treat women very well, do they?" We all nod sagely. Sunshine makes a face, pouts, shrugs, starts talking about carrots.

An hour or so in, chop chop, I'm just about holding my own. That's partly because, despite appearances, Sunshine runs a fairly relaxed ship and there isn't any time pressure. And let's be honest, provided you're able to go about your business without hassle from anyone or any clock, cooking is mostly a matter of getting the logistics right. Getting all your ducks – or onions, egg yolks, Tuscan sausages, whatever – in a row. At this level, at any rate.

Mostly, however, I'm feeling relaxed because over the preceding 60 minutes I've managed smoothly to adopt the persona to which I instinctively revert in any food-prep scenario. That persona being the role of "Tidy Bob".

Tidy Bob is a name Sam and his sister Rachel bestowed on me a long time ago. It is a mocking reference to my kitchen-based predilection – in the absence of a higher skill – for ostentatiously performing a series of menial tasks in the hope of being seen as making a contribution. Stacking, washing, drying, binning, sweeping, self-importantly transferring items from one plastic container to another; most of all, wiping anything horizontal within dishcloth range – surfaces, fixtures and fittings, I'm not fussed. It can



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all always do with a good smear. London, Italy, it makes no odds – effortlessly, my three classmates craning to hear Sunshine's thoughts on vegetable stock, I choose to hang around in the background sounding busy.

Highly satisfying, I must say. Gotta work with what you've got, haven't you?

I don't mean to sound scornful of my son's chosen field, any more than he is of mine. Impractical as I am, I am far more in awe of those individuals (engineers, musicians, carpenters, tailors and, yes, cooks) with the talent to create something far more beautiful and useful than mere squiggles. We word-wallahs have our place – every human since the dawn of time has always loved a story – but for my money, the ability to make something properly necessary is the superior skill. And while as things stand what I'm good at ranks higher – and pays better – than what Sam's good at, it hasn't always been that way, and I suspect won't be in the future.

Perhaps it's simply a case of admiring what you can't do yourself. But I think it runs deeper than that. Two and a bit years ago, Sam – then in the run-up to his GCSEs – announced he wanted to ditch orthodox middle-class education in favour of training as a chef. I duly wrote a column celebrating his decision. I argued that as a society – having not long since been way too restrictive granting access to book-based knowledge – we had, in recent years, gone too far the other way. We had, I wrote, become absurdly hung up on forcing all-comers into the conventionally approved model of what constitutes proper learning. I said, in short,

that my lad wanted to dump school and follow a trade instead. Which was cool by me.

I received more emails, letters and calls supporting, praising and in general endorsing that article than following anything else I've had published in this newspaper in 23 years.

Tells you something, I think.

Tells me something, anyway. Something I sort of knew already – but it's always good to have your inclinations confirmed by public opinion. The obsession of successive British governments – Tony Blair's in particular, but not just his – with paper qualifications seeking to certificate quasi-academic achievements, some of them frankly bogus, is misguided. The mass of the population – upper, middle and so-called lower class – knows it is. My wife and I could probably have cajoled Sam into A levels, maybe even into a degree. At the end of which, I guarantee, he'd still have wanted to be a chef. Who's to say he's wrong? Not me. People will always need to eat.

Besides – sausage, lamb, mousse and all the other gubbins in the can, just the pasta left to rustle up – I find myself, contrary to expectations and despite having been on my feet and deprived of alcohol (Sunshine has imposed a booze ban during the prep phase) for two solid hours, rather enjoying myself. How so? Because the generation of your own pasta is, it turns out, pleasantly therapeutic. What's more, being a hefty sort of a fellow, I'm actually well suited to flattening the life out of a lump of egg, flour, water, olive oil and salt. Who knew? I quite like the Puccini as well.

Sam isn't at all happy. When he thinks nobody is looking, enviously having registered his supposedly hopeless parent stretching ahead, Sam mounts a jealous assault on my efforts. Blatant sabotage, damn him! I see him coming and shoulder him aside. I won't be able to do that for much longer – might as well make the most of it while I still can.

The next day, I get quite carried away while deep-frying slices of aubergine. "Never rated aubergines," I tell Sunshine, shaking the pan, shimmying my hips. "Always thought of them as albeit mineral-based bags of tasteless super-heated water. You've made me see the light." Sunshine grins, although I'm pretty confident he doesn't understand a word I'm saying.

"Sammy!" I announce. "I've found my signature dish! When we get home, we're going to open a fried aubergine fast-food outlet, turn it into the new Mickey Ds."

"Whatever you say, Dad," groans Sam.

Complain all he wants, I reckon we've bonded. ■

Robert and Sam Crampton were guests of Flavours Holidays, which offers three-night short breaks in Tuscany from £899 per person. The next course is September 12-15 (0131 343 2500; flavoursholidays.co.uk)