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The emphasis is firmly on informality and fun, but pay attention and you pick up not only the recipe, but also a wealth of tips and shortcuts along the way. The recipes are emailed to you at home afterwards, together with a video clip for a close-up view of any tricky techniques.

Our Asian menu featured two complimentary recipes, Kerala Prawns Curry and Crunchy Thai Chicken and Peanut Cakes. After a warm welcome from Alex over coffee, we moved into the kitchen, clad in aprons and ready for the off. First our chef Vladimir talked us through the ingredients and how to prepare them, then it was eyes down to peel ginger, slice onions and chop chillies.

The hour flew past and as we plated up, dead on midday, our stomachs were rumbling from all the delicious smells. Nor were we disappointed. The succulent prawns were delicately flavoured with green chillies and coriander, turmeric and fenugreek, and the chicken and peanut cakes accompanied by a fresh sweet chilli sauce. Add Basmati rice and a hunk of French bread, and you have the ingredients of lunch that's packed with flavour and bound to impress.

There's plenty of time to relax and enjoy your meal - buy a glass of wine for an extra treat - as well as to browse the shelves of the cook shop, which stocks a variety of interesting gadgets as well as food books and flavourings. Best of all, we both felt confident enough to try the recipes in our own modest kitchens at home.

Passing the upstairs kitchen on our way out, we could see a group of students clustered round their chef in rapt concentration, and as we headed out into the bustle of Wigmore Street, we couldn't help wishing we were staying on with them.

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Inspired to recreate the dishes you ate on holiday? L'Atelier des Chefs offers quick, affordable classes, whether you want to cook lunch in your lunch hour or linger over the secrets of a dinner party menu.

Launched in Paris in 2004, L'Atelier des Chefs proved an instant success, opening 10 other schools in Paris, Belgium, Dubai and London within five years. The London branch is conveniently situated in Wigmore Street, just a short walk from Oxford Circus, and more schools are planned for London and major UK cities over the next few years.

The formula is simple. Bookable one month in advance, courses range for a 30-minute 'Eat, Cook and Run' to a four-hour Masterclass, and cover a wide range of cuisine from French to Asian, Italian to Mediterranean, as well as fish and shellfish, meat, and vegetarian options.

The Wigmore Street school and cookshop has two demonstration kitchens where chefs help students to prepare the dishes of the day, which they then eat round a communal table. With a maximum of 20 cooks per class, everybody gets a chance to be hands-on.

L'Atelier des Chefs also hosts corporate events and I'd enjoyed two of them before booking a one-hour Asian cookery class with a friend - a style of cuisine we both enjoy eating but rarely cook at home. Classes take place every day except Sunday, both during the day and early evening, and we'd chosen one in the 11-12 slot which left the rest of the day free to enjoy the capital.

Talking to our fellow cooks over a welcome coffee, we met two sisters who had caught the early morning train from Shropshire and Norfolk to enjoy a day out together in London. A young woman from north London had bought the experience as a birthday treat for her dad from Kent, and a young couple were enjoying a shared passion for Asian cookery.

L'Atelier des Chefs offers a range of voucher options, which can provide an easy present solution for food-loving friends and family - prices start at £15 for a 30-minute class and are redeemable against both cooking classes and in-store purchases.

Tricks of the trade

There's no need to worry about any lack of experience. The pace is fast but your chef has already weighed and measured all the ingredients you need for the day. All you have to do is watch the demonstration then get stuck in as a group. Tasks are shared out, so if you're not good at slicing prawns, offer to chop the peanuts instead.

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