

Coolum's food for thought

After a day in the kitchen one could easily develop a quite unsociable habit, but could also pick up a delightful set of cooking skills, writes **Brian Crisp**

I'VE BEEN swearing a lot lately. I don't know why. I've never really had a potty mouth but a few weeks back people started chipping me about my colourful language.

It was right after we'd spent the weekend at Coolum Beach. We stayed at the jaw-droppingly beautiful Angkasa, ate twice at the magnificent Harvest restaurant and attended a cooking class.

F---! That must be it.

One day at a cooking class and I've turned into Gordon Ramsay — except his language, rather than his cooking, is the only thing I've f----- managed to mimic.

These days the trend of people attending cooking classes is rising faster than a soufflé. Everyone is anxious to be able to pukka up their tucker, just like Jamie.

So to give me the edge in the kitchen I signed up for an Italian cooking class with Tonya Jennings at her On The

Ridge cooking school. Tonya runs the classes from her home on Kureelpa Falls Rd, on the Blackall Range Tourist Drive, which has stunning views back to the coast over Coolum.

She took an unusual path into the kitchen. For most of her working life she toiled as a librarian in Melbourne. And even today you can still see signs of her former life if you look closely enough. She has the best collection of cook books imaginable — all arranged alphabetically in sections — and she still wears the trademark librarians' sensible shoes.

Her blonde spiky hair, cherry-coloured glasses and upbeat classroom demeanour remind me of Zoe Wanamaker, in her role as Madam Hooch in the film *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.

Class starts at 9.30am with coffee and cake and an explanation of exactly what lies ahead. There are eight of us — two males — who by the end of the day, according to Tonya, will cobble

together four antipasto dishes, make from scratch our own pumpkin and pine nut-filled pasta, create chicken saltimbocca as a main and whip up a three-course dessert of coffee pannacotta, almond shortbread and affogatto with home-made ice cream.

And, best of all, once it's made Tonya promises to serve it to us.

We start with the dessert. It's not long before the mystery of pannacotta has been solved and it's on to the antipasto.

Tonya's apprentices work in pairs as she glides from station to station checking on the progress. A little more oil, she suggests. Perhaps you might cut those tomatoes a tad thinner. Her manner is always encouraging, even when the room is filling with smoke.

When the last of the buffalo mozzarella is wrapped in prosciutto and heated it signals the time to crack open the champagne.

Bubbles, and the sharing nature of Italian food, encourage conversation

and soon everyone is swapping their success, and disaster, cooking stories.

The mood is relaxed as we gather again around the long table to assemble the chicken, butterflied, stuffed with cheese, and wrapped in prosciutto and basil. Then it's on to lunch served by Tonya.

For \$145 this is extraordinary value. Not only did we learn how to cook it but we got to eat it — with a few bottles of champers and Mad Fish wine thrown in for good measure. This was much appreciated, at least by me, as it was Saturday and that's my day as the designated drinker.

YOU know a restaurant is good when you keep going back. But how good is it, when you go back the next night?

That's what we did at Harvest in Coolum. We dined there by accident on Friday night with friends James and Cath. Also by accident, rather than design, we ordered four different mains and ended up exchanging forkfuls of

food, saying, "Wow, you have to try this. It's just fantastic."

Anyway, Coolum has a lot of restaurants, so the next night we pledged to try some place different. It didn't happen.

"We don't come up here that often," my wife said. "Perhaps we should go back to Harvest."

There wasn't much argument and we soon found ourselves seated outside, under a heater to keep away the winter chills, at this busy beachside restaurant.

Chef Gary Skelton — formerly of Season at Noosa and Edge in Surry Hills — uses seasonal produce to create simple, mouth-watering delights.

If you feel hungry the next morning, and there's a chance you won't, just further down the David Low Way you'll find My Place, a large and popular breakfast spot on Sunday mornings.

It's hard not to enjoy the fresh juices, eggs and coffee as the sun rises over Coolum beach.



FANTASTIC ... Tonya Jennings, left, teaches her skills at her On The Ridge cooking class.