

Master Chocolatier Mark Tilling has a collection of gold medals to rival several Olympians. He holds the highest place ever won by a Briton in the World Chocolate Masters; last year, he won the first series of *Crème de la Crème*, the BBC2 'professionals' equivalent of *The Great British Bake Off*. But does he want a Michelin star, or his own TV series? No. Determined to pass on his expertise, Mark is happiest giving lessons in pâtisserie and chocolate-making. *The Taster* asked him: what makes you so content?



LAST WORD: CHOCOLATE



INSTAGRAM @mwtchocolate

TWEET @MWTchocolate

WEBSITE squires-school.com

EMAIL school@squires-school.co.uk

What was your favourite childhood chocolate? And your favourite now?

Easter was the biggest time. There weren't that many eggs you could buy, so the old Dairy Milk chocolate egg was always a wow. My favourite Easter treat is, my wife always buys me a joke present like a Cadbury's Creme Egg. But after doing a lot of chocolate courses, I really like hot cross buns

Easter eggs seem to recur in your life – you won *Crème de la Crème* with a chocolate egg sculpture. Are you a chocolate fanatic?

I'm more interested in what you can do with chocolate, than eating it. I love it as a medium to work with; you can make completely different things and showpieces. We just went through 60 kilos of chocolate for a five-day chocolate course, but that is mostly tasting rather than eating for pleasure. You can get a bit sick of it

If chocolate isn't your favourite food, what is?

Cheese. I love cheese, cheese is my favourite thing. You can't find it in my house. If my wife buys it, it's quickly gone

Moment that changed your life?

Going to work in London in The Lansborough Hotel. That's what made me a better chef. It wasn't always down to cooking but how to work better, plan ahead. I learnt so many things about organisation. The chefs I worked with were really hard – you said 'ugh, what horrible people' – but now, I still know them and we're great friends and I thank them for what they did. I'd say to anyone coming up through the ranks, you must go to London, experience the busyness and London life. I still go to London to see what other people are doing. Harrods and Harvey Nicks are quite innovative. The internet is great at helping you find new inspiration, too. Instagram is the best

You currently teach at Squires International Cookery School. How do you find it?

It is easier than working in a hotel. [Mark has also worked for Lainston House Hotel, Hotel du Vin and the Michelin-starred *Le Pave d'Auge* in Normandy.] My hours are much better these days! Some people are scared of passing on knowledge, they think it's theirs, but I think you need to

tell everybody everything or else the industry is not going to survive. I go to local catering colleges in Guildford, Northampton, Devon; I'm going to Birmingham this year as well. And I'm about to go to San Francisco to do some filming for an online channel. I've taught abroad in Russia, Spain, France, Italy

Why do you think so many people are taking courses now?

I get lots of people who want to start their own businesses. I tell them it's a good industry to get into, but there's a lot of competition, you have to find a niche. It's very interesting, we get lawyers and solicitors, builders, nurses, all walks of life. They all seem to want a better life by going back to what their passion always was. Everyone wants to learn, it's great

What's the most popular course you teach?

Our three-day French pâtisserie class. We make all sorts of pâtisserie – chocolate, fruit-based, mousses, glazes. People see things on television and ask for them. When *Bake Off* did entremets gateaux, we had to set up a special class. I most enjoy teaching sculpted chocolate showpieces (see left)

Where do you source your chocolate?

Barry Callebaut, a Swiss firm – we use Callebaut which is their Belgian brand. Callebaut is easy to work with, it's consistent, doesn't change when you work it, doesn't cost too much and it has a good flavour. Cacao Barry, the French brand, is more expensive but fuller flavoured. You go on to use Cacao Barry once you've got all your tempering and other techniques right

Do you make vegan chocolate?

We always make chocolate from scratch. I've got a machine that grinds beans, it takes 13-15 hours to grind beans down and then I just add sugar and vanilla. It's good, we eat it in the class as well, I did one last week using beans from Grenada

Would you like your own restaurant, maybe a Michelin star?

No. I have a good life and people I've spoken to, they love what they do but they put me off. You basically live in the restaurant. I wouldn't want what I'm doing to be affected by running a business; my passion is teaching, creating new dishes and new classes. I'm always learning new techniques. I'm never going to be a millionaire but every day I love coming to work

Last meal?

Cheese. No, no particular cheese. A cheese selection. And Scotch whisky, neat with ice ■

Mark is currently Master Chocolatier and Head Tutor at Squires International Cookery School in Farnham, Surrey. To find out about taking a course with Mark, visit squires-school.com

Squires Kitchen is a member of the Independent Cookery Schools Association (ICSA), which encourages excellence in teaching. For more info, visit independentcookeryschools.co.uk



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