

Twelve months ago, James Nathan was a barrister-turned-travel writer, and an amateur chef who dreamed of one day opening a restaurant in southern Spain, where he was living with wife Linsey, 34, and daughter Sophie, now almost three. Then came TV's *MasterChef*. Over the eight weeks of the competition, James impressed both judges and professionals with his natural flair in the kitchen, and was declared the 2008 winner last February.

'The world was my oyster after the announcement,' James explains. 'I did stunts in every kitchen I'd ever dreamed of, from Le Gavroche to Gidleigh Park and The Vineyard, and now Bentley's Oyster Bar & Grill, where I'm chef de partie.' It was a head-spinning few months, but for James, the motivation has always been food, which means hard work. 'I actually love the mundane tasks – I turn up and I graft. I didn't enter the competition to be a celebrity, I did it to be a professional chef, an exceptional chef, and that means spending years learning my trade.'

He met his wife in 1995 when James was a 'surf dude with a camper van' who would escape university in Exeter for weekends on the Cornish coast with Linsey's housemate. 'Linsey was just this beautiful girl,' he remembers. 'I'll never forget the first time I saw her; she looked amazing and had the hugest smile. I thought, "I've got to get to know her."' They married in 2004, shortly before giving up 'boring' jobs and starting a new life in Spain, where they worked on a mountain-biking guidebook. James's new career as a chef has meant a big upheaval for the family, who have now moved back to the UK and currently split their time between Bristol and London.

For this romantic Valentine's feast, James created three brand new recipes. 'I'm really pleased with them,' he says. 'The sweet scallops are great with the salty pancetta, and while lobster is not the most adventurous of main courses, it's probably my favourite food. The individuality of lobsters somehow makes them exotic and a very romantic thing to eat. And, of course, you can't go wrong with chocolate.' So what will Linsey think of this menu? 'My wife generally likes anything I cook,' he says with a smile, 'so this should go down well.' ▶

FOOD TO SHARE:
(left) The delicious poached lobster makes for a romantic main course; (below) James with his wife Linsey



FOOD OF

love

For *MasterChef* winner *James Nathan*, food is all about passion, so Valentine's Day is the ideal occasion to create a lavish feast for two

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PHOTOGRAPHS: DANIEL FARMER



Scallops with pancetta velouté and parsnip purée

James: 'The velouté and parsnip purée can be made a day or two in advance and stored in the fridge, then reheated on the day, so you can spend more time charming your partner!'

Prep time: 15 mins Cook time: 1 hour

3 large parsnips, peeled and quartered lengthways
200ml milk
100g butter, softened, plus a little for brushing scallops
2 pinches ground nutmeg
8 slices pancetta
1 shallot, finely diced
Sprig thyme
250ml white wine
250ml fish stock
125ml double cream
6 large scallops
2 large handfuls spinach

FOR THE PARSNIP PURÉE

♥ Place the parsnips in a pan and add the milk, 200ml water, and a pinch of salt and white pepper. Bring to the boil then simmer, cooking for about 20 mins until the parsnips are nearly falling apart.
 ♥ Very gently lift the parsnips out of the water and place in a blender. Whizz, then add the butter, nutmeg, and a little more salt and white pepper and whizz again until you have a creamy purée. Keep warm.

FOR THE PANCETTA VELOUTÉ

♥ Roughly chop 4 slices of pancetta and fry in a dry, non-stick pan over a medium heat. When it starts to colour, add the shallot, thyme, and a pinch of salt and white pepper. Reduce the heat and leave to sweat with the lid on for about 10 mins.
 ♥ Turn up the heat and add the white wine. Leave to reduce on a high heat until there is barely any wine left. Add the fish stock and reduce by half. Add the cream and reduce by about a third.
 ♥ Pass the sauce through a fine sieve and keep warm.

FOR THE SCALLOPS

♥ Chop the remaining pancetta into 2cm squares. Fry the pancetta in a little oil over a fairly high heat until golden brown. Remove and drain on kitchen paper.
 ♥ Brush the scallops with melted butter, and season with salt and white pepper. Fry them for around 1-1½ mins on each side, until golden brown, keeping them well spaced. Drain on kitchen paper and keep warm.
 ♥ In the same pan, add the spinach and season with salt and white pepper, plus a pinch of nutmeg. Fry until wilted and drain, squeezing out excess moisture.

To serve, spoon the parsnip purée on to the centre of the plate and top with spinach, followed by 3 scallops. Spoon over the velouté, then scatter with the pancetta pieces.

Poached lobster with aioli herb potatoes and salad leaves

James: 'For me, lobster is the most unique-tasting food on the planet. No wonder, then, that I chose a job at Bentley's, where I have to cook crates of them. If time is short, use a shop-bought mayonnaise and add garlic to it for the aioli.'

Prep time: 40 mins Cook time: 20 mins

2 egg yolks
4 cloves garlic, minced
1 tsp Dijon mustard
150ml grapeseed oil
Juice of ½ lemon
Handful mixed fresh herbs (tarragon, basil, fennel and parsley), chopped
2 lobsters, around 750g-1kg each (alternatively, use ready-cooked lobsters or raw lobster tails, available from Waitrose)
10-12 baby new potatoes
Salad leaves of your choice
Olive oil and lemon juice for salad dressing

FOR THE AIOLI

♥ Place the egg yolks, garlic and mustard in the jug of a handheld blender and whizz, adding the oil in a steady stream. Once you have an emulsion, add the lemon juice and season with salt and white pepper.
 ♥ Stir in the chopped herbs. Leave to infuse in the fridge for about an hour.

FOR THE LOBSTER

♥ If you have bought whole lobsters: cook the lobsters for 6-8 mins in a pan of boiling salted water, then transfer immediately to a bowl of iced water. When cold, remove the claws and split the lobster bodies in half lengthways with a large knife. Rinse them in cold water to remove the innards and the black vein in the tail meat (there may not be one). Allow to dry on kitchen paper. Remove the 'arm' segments from the claw and crack the claw. Remove the meat from the 'arm' segments and place in the body cavity above the tail section. Prepare the claws separately. Keep chilled until ready to serve.
 ♥ If you have bought lobster tails: cook and cool as above and split in half with a large knife. Remove the tail meat from each shell and cut into chunks, then turn it back to front and place in the opposite shell, so that the red side of the meat is showing – this makes it look much more attractive. Keep chilled until ready to serve.

FOR THE ACCOMPANIMENTS

♥ Boil the potatoes in salted water until tender. Drain and rinse under cold water. Allow them to cool to room temperature (this is so that the aioli does not split when you add it). Mix the potatoes with the aioli.
 ♥ Dress the salad leaves with oil and a little lemon juice.

To serve, set out the lobsters, potatoes and salad leaves on a large platter or wooden chopping board. Share the platter between you to increase the intimacy.



Chocolate pudding with cream and hazelnut brittle

Prep time: 20 mins Cook time: 20 mins

75g dark chocolate
200ml double cream
1 egg yolk
30g hazelnuts, finely chopped
6 tbsp caster sugar

FOR THE CHOCOLATE PUDDINGS

♥ Preheat the oven to 180°C/Fan 160°C/Gas 4. Place some small coffee cups or ramekins in a deep baking tray.
 ♥ Melt the chocolate in a bowl set over a pan of simmering water. In another pan, place 125ml of the cream and heat until boiling. Pour the cream over the melted chocolate, add the egg yolk, and whisk together.
 ♥ Pour the chocolate mixture into the cups or ramekins. Pour hot water into the tray until it comes halfway up the side of the pots. Bake in the oven for 5 mins, then turn off the oven and leave for a further 10 mins. Remove, allow to cool and either chill or keep at room temperature until ready to serve.

FOR THE HAZELNUT BRITTLE

♥ Grease a baking tray and line with greaseproof paper.
 ♥ Place the hazelnuts in a non-stick pan and dry-fry them until browned. Season with a little salt.
 ♥ In a clean pan, mix the caster sugar with enough cold water to make a sludgy paste. Make sure there is no sugar mixture up the sides of the pan, then heat gently until the sugar dissolves. Continue to cook until it starts to caramelize, then gently swirl the pan and allow to colour. When it is the colour of honey, remove from the heat and add the chopped hazelnuts and a pinch of salt. Quickly turn the mixture out on to the baking tray, spread it thinly and allow to set to a hard brittle.
 ♥ Whip the remaining cream and chill until required.

To serve, add a spoonful of cream to the chocolate pots, then smash the hazelnut brittle and add a few shards to the top.

HOME ECONOMIST: LIZZIE HARRIS



“LOBSTER IS A VERY ROMANTIC FOOD, AND YOU CAN'T GO WRONG WITH CHOCOLATE”



The ingredients used in these recipes are subject to availability and may only be available in selected branches of Waitrose.

VALENTINE'S MENU

All recipes serve two

Scallops with pancetta velouté and parsnip purée

Poached lobster with aioli herb potatoes and salad leaves

Chocolate pudding with cream and hazelnut brittle