

# of the ancient world

**I**T HAS been said that my cooking is so bad that people used to wait for the smoke alarm to go off before coming to the table. To remedy this ignorance I was recently enticed to visit Petra in Jordan to learn the true art of Levantine cuisine. Middle Eastern cookery is a bachelor's best friend because it's quick to produce, tasty, and the ingredients are fresh and easily available.

Petra is well known for its amazing ruined city sprawled across rose-red valleys. Temples, houses and a 3,500-seat arena have been carved from the red sandstone, but just yards from the entrance to the ancient city is Petra Kitchen, the brainchild of Wendy Botham, a jolly Texan who started the school last year.

My partners in crime included chatty octogenarian Americans as well as youthful Kiwis and South Africans. All were up for the challenge, which was needed because the meze-like cuisine meant working on around 10 different dishes.

Jordanian cuisine takes its lead from Lebanon, which influences most Middle Eastern cooking.

Starters always seem to include a soup – my favourite was lentil – and then on to the meze, which might be tabbouleh (cracked wheat, mint, tomatoes, onions) and fattoush (cucumber, tomato and radish, seasoned with lemon, salt, cloves and mint) served with toasted flatbread.

**T**HERE is little in the way of spices except for liberal amounts of paprika. The staple dish in all mezés is hummus served on its own, whizzed up with tomato or even with minced lamb on top. But most tasty – personally – is falafel, a mix of fava beans, chickpeas, garlic, onion and spices.

After all that, the main course seems a bit superfluous but white fish or lamb in a tahini sauce or lamb cooked in yoghurt might pop up. The American couples quickly got involved, even if the men were a bit bemused.

"Why am I making my own dinner and paying for it?" asked Bob, from Oregon. The Kiwi backpackers loved it. Jeanie and her partner, Tom, were returning to Wellington and this was the last stop.

"This has been really interesting," she said, "and it's all stuff I'll be trying back home." When

## Culinary lessons don't have to be a chore, as KIERAN FALCONER discovers when he cooks up a storm in the historic city of Petra, Jordan

visiting Petra itself, I found the entrance to the city can be a trial of trinket sellers, donkeys and camels.

Once inside, there is a long, narrow gorge called the Siq. Local Bedouin boys offer you donkeys or a pony and trap to take you in.

Every twist in the canyon offers a vista of wind-hewn sandstone smoothed into eye sockets, cliffs and crests.

After a mile heading slightly downwards, you suddenly catch your first glimpse of the Treasury.

Framed by the dark canyon, it is a breathtaking vision of rose-red classical

columns, pilasters and statues. There is nothing more fabulous than to see this symmetrical order come out of the rocky chaos of the Siq.

**S**TATUES of amazons and old gods are worn shapeless, the steps bowed from millions of feet. From here you walk into a city once home to 35,000 people to find mile after mile of empty shops and homes.

Back in the kitchen, my sleeve is tugged by one of two ladies who keep watch over us. They

speak no English, so you can tell how good you are only by the gradient of their eyebrows.

Much more genial is the diminutive chef Hosan Mashalah, who is hardly your typical Gordon Ramsay.

He has patient almond eyes, calls you "Sir" and demonstrates as many times as needed with genuine humour.

Once dinner is ready, the ladies and chef become waiters in a disconcerting role reversal.

The lights are dimmed, the meze dishes spread out and the pop of a cork heralds excited chatter about who has been

where. By 10pm you bid farewell and while staggering back you can just hear, above the din of the cicada, that lonesome braying of donkeys echoing among Petra's canyons.

And they hadn't even tasted my food.

**● GETTING THERE:** *On the Menu* (08708 99 88 44/[www.holidayonthemenu.com](http://www.holidayonthemenu.com)) offers a seven-night tour of Jordan from £749pp including two days touring Petra, four cooking sessions with dinner, a shopping trip to the souk with the chef, and accommodation with B&B. Royal Jordanian Airlines (020 7878 6333/[www.rja.com.jo](http://www.rja.com.jo)) has flights from Heathrow to Amman from £300. Jordan Tourism Board: 020 7371 6496/[www.visitjordan.com/uk](http://www.visitjordan.com/uk).



**TASTY CUISINE:** Preparations at Petra Kitchen