

Secrets shared

Liz Nicholls finds a recipe for healthy family cooking (and eating), thanks to Kate Saunders' Blackberry Cottage in Ashampstead

Mothers who, like me, have a child who is a fussy eater on their hands will know how infuriating it can be. No matter what subterfuge I use to hide vegetables in various dishes, my six-year-old finds them, and then refuses them, with an ungrateful zeal. However, I have Kate Saunders to thank for a failsafe way to make both cooking and eating much more fun and healthy.

Kate's chocolate brownies are they best we've ever tasted – melt-in-the-mouth sweet, gooey and rich. You would never guess that one batch has been whipped up with enough spinach to keep Popeye going for a whole weekend.

"It's taken a lot of trial and error," says mum-of-two Kate, founder of Blackberry Cottage. "But, when we got these brownies right and took them to a farmers' market, they flew off the stand like proverbial hotcakes and I knew there was real interest. I did wonder originally whether people would think I was a bit cuckoo making cakes with vegetables in, but that's just not the case. Everyone's reaction has been so delighted and, well, we've all heard of carrot cake, so it's not really any weirder than that!"

Kate is a trained sports massage practitioner who has worked with Olympic and Paralympic gold medallists. Working with athletes means food and nutrition has always been a hot topic of conversation and Kate has always had a passion for cooking and baking.

The aforementioned chocolate brownies arose when one of Kate's clients was in despair over her daughter, who refused to eat any vegetables or even much fruit. She baked up some of the kiddies' favourite, stuffed full of the nutritional green goodness, and not only were they gobbled up in seconds, the mum and daughter asked for more. "From this point on I knew I'd found a niche and Blackberry Cottage began," adds Kate.

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Not only does Kate sell her cakes locally and via her website, she offers fun cookery classes where guests can learn how to make her goodies using vegetables such as courgettes, parsnips, butternut squash, sweet potato and many other vegetables. Kate uses much less refined sugar (in some recipes, none at all) and different flours, including gluten-free, so her courses are hugely popular with people struggling with niggling dietary requirements as well as those looking to become more healthy and gardeners looking for inventive ways to use up a glut of seasonal veg.

"We have a great laugh, it's always fun," says Kate. "And, of course, if you cook with your children, it always makes them much more curious about trying new things!"

Amber and I spent a very pleasant Saturday afternoon with Kate – helped by daughters Hannah and Gemma – making traybakes of Willy Wonka-esque proportions, without the sugar crash afterwards. And it is a pleasure to spend time at Blackberry Cottage – Kate's family home which was a derelict shell when she and husband Tim bought it 14 years ago (it was so strangled by brambles that one visitor even uncovered a van in the thicket).

Now, Kate's dreamy cream country kitchen overlooks the garden, clucking happily with chickens and framed by Medlar and Bramley apple trees and, beyond them, the stunning Berkshire countryside.

Since Blackberry Cottage began three years ago, it has won numerous awards – even Theo Paphitis of *Dragons' Den* fame has recognised the business with an award – and Kate has been invited to appear at the Good Food Show in June, as well as finishing off her new cookbook.

At this rate, she'll be helping us all contribute to our five a day without a grumble.

Visit www.blackberrycottagefayre.co.uk