



A riverside retreat

Entrepreneurs Claire Langdon and Maggie Nuttall became friends through a reality TV show which changed their outlook on life. Now they're making their own dreams a reality by opening a vegan business together.

INTERVIEW: OLIVIA GREENWAY

You might be forgiven for walking straight past the pretty little café near the mini roundabout at Richmond Bridge. Not only is it the town's first dedicated vegan restaurant, but it is run by two women who only met last year – thousands of miles away in Thailand – and back then knew hardly anything about vegan food. They were two of the participants filmed in *The Retreat*, a reality show broadcast on BBC2 late last year fronted by *DIY SOS* presenter Nick Knowles. For 28 days, everyone in the group followed a plant-based diet, practised yoga, fasted, exercised and underwent counselling.

It's no coincidence that their new café is also called The Retreat. At 32, Claire Langdon claims the retreat experience 'saved my life', while 56-year-old Maggie Nuttall says 'it's given me a purpose'. Barely a year ago, things were quite different. Maggie had been made redundant from a high-powered post-production TV job a couple of years previously and felt unsettled. 'I was

just drifting and I also felt a bit worthless. I lost my mother too and we were very close.' Claire had spent a great deal of 2015 off work through stress. 'I loved my job as a police officer, but severe depression completely floored me.'

A holistic experience

Separately, they were both invited by the producer to take part in *The Retreat*. Did they eat healthily before the show? 'Not at all,' Claire laughs. 'I had a terrible diet. Shift work and eating well don't go hand in hand. I was downing fast food and takeaways, chocolate bars, white bread sandwiches and drinking energy drinks and Diet Coke!' Maggie was a bit better, but still admits she 'drank too much wine and regularly ate meat'.

So what were their expectations of taking part? Claire says she had reached her personal rock bottom and felt a retreat experience could only help her. Maggie decided to go with an open mind. 'I thought,

what have I got to lose? I might even learn something.' Although *The Retreat* was no quick fix – they had their ups and downs during the experiment – both lost over a stone in weight and genuinely felt much better, both in themselves and about themselves. They resolved to not only continue with a plant-based diet when they got back home, but wanted to somehow share their new love of vegan food with others.

Quiche and cupcakes

Fast forward a year and the two women, now firm friends, have quietly soft-launched their café, with the official fanfare surrounding the opening happening in June – hopefully with celebrity guest Nick Knowles, a silent partner in attendance – to coincide with the show being aired on Netflix. With 18 covers inside and four seats outside, they serve brunch at the weekend and light lunches during the week. Looking at their big smiles and obvious passion for the venture, they

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CLAIRE AND MAGGIE'S TIPS AND TRICKS FOR VEGAN NEWBIES

- Nutritional yeast is your new best friend. Use it in quiches when making cashew 'cheese' fillings and sprinkle it over steamed vegetables.
- Gently heating spices at the beginning of cooking helps intensify flavour.
- Never throw away bananas. Peel, slice and freeze them, then use for baking and for smoothies.
- Apple sauce can replace eggs in some muffin recipes.
- Use flax seeds as an egg substitute in cakes. Whisk 1 tablespoon of ground nutty flax seeds with 3 tablespoons of cold water, then leave to thicken for about 15 minutes before using.

have slipped surprisingly easily into their new lifestyle. 'We had a very busy Mother's Day – people are starting to find us. We try to prep as much as we can on Mondays when the café is closed, but of course our salads are made fresh on the day.'

While they both make the freshly prepared plant-based food for the café, Maggie makes her signature brownies and the savoury items, such as the quiches and vegan sausage rolls. Claire has a sweet tooth, so majors on cupcakes and truffles as well as cakes, such as her delicious lemon rose and pistachio ring cake. They get their recipes from 'everywhere' but Maggie has adapted some of her own recipes to be vegan. 'I come from a family of cooks and chefs and have always been a good home cook, so I just needed to do some tweaking.' They offer a large gluten-free selection and since they



make all the food themselves, can advise customers on all the ingredients.

'The café is quite tiny and we don't have a proper kitchen, so we have to work around it,' admits Maggie. 'But it's in a great position in the centre of town – near the river, park and the shops – so should guarantee a regular footfall.'

More Retreat café openings are planned when this one has bedded in and the ambitious pair would like to open their doors in the evenings too. 'Not every evening, but Wednesday to Sunday could be on the cards,' says Maggie. 'We just need time to work out menus and other practicalities.' I left them to their chopping, mixing and rolling, but with rave reviews appearing online already, these two plant-based entrepreneurs are gearing up to a successful summer and a very bright future.



The Retreat lentil Bolognese V *

Serves 6

Prep 10 mins | Cook 1 hr 10 mins

3 tbsp olive oil
2 onions, finely chopped
3 carrots, finely chopped
3 sticks of celery, finely chopped
3 cloves garlic, crushed
500g dried red lentils
2 x 400g cans chopped tomatoes
2 tbsp tomato purée
2 tsp oregano
2 tsp thyme
3 bay leaves
1 litre vegetable stock
500g spaghetti or spiralised courgettes (courgetti)
nutritional yeast or grated cheese, to serve

1 Heat the oil in a large saucepan and add the onion, carrot, celery and garlic. Cook gently for 15–20 minutes until everything is softened.

2 Stir in the lentils, chopped tomatoes, tomato purée, herbs and stock. Bring to a simmer, then cook for 40–50 minutes until the lentils are tender and the sauce is thick and rich. Add a splash of water if needed and season to taste.

3 Spoon the sauce over the top of the cooked spaghetti or courgetti, sprinkle with nutritional yeast or grated cheese, and serve.

■ PER SERVING (WITH SPAGHETTI) 722 cals, fat 9g, sat fat 1g, carbs 119g, sugars 17g, protein 33g, salt 0.24g, fibre 15g

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V Sprinkle your sauce with the nutritional yeast rather than the grated cheese, to keep this dish vegan-friendly.

● Visit www.theretreatkitchen.co.uk for opening times or pop into the café at 16 Hill Rise, Richmond TW10 6UA. The Retreat, with extra commissioned footage, is to be shown on Netflix in June.