

# My name is Helen and I'm a domestic goddess

Helen Lederer – self-confessed canapé klutz – learns how to whip up some elegant snacks in an instant

The festive season is always a risk. Usually work parties involve such excessive food and drink, I end up looking for a new job afterwards. Last year, I tried a less formal approach for seasonal networking. I called up a few key people and asked them to casually drop in: "Nothing special – just things on sticks".

Luckily, I have a pre-party precaution strategy called my "people about to nose around in my house" routine, which usually works for me. Stationery is stuffed into the airing cupboard, phone numbers and all officialdom go into the biscuit tin, personal and deeply private bathroom sundries are collected up into a bag and hung out of the window, e.g. embarrassing ointments, expensive face cream and thousands of stolen mini hotel soaps that you don't want your guests to think are an obsession.

But as the doorbell rang (and rang), I realised my invitation may have been a jot too casual. People hadn't mentioned how

many other people they might be casually bringing; some even arrived with children, a dog and an elderly relative. Next thing I knew, hungry guests were starting to brew up and make their own sandwiches.

So this year I resolved that what I needed was an über show-off party platter for a respectful sense of occasion – if only to stop people helping themselves to old tins of soup, or bedding down for the night.

I seriously needed expert tutelage, so I too could be one of those who can "throw a party", but in a good way. After all, a canapé is officially only a small slice of bread cut into various shapes and garnished with stuff on top – cheese, meat, foie gras, you name it (but

possibly not liquorice or beetroot).

Time to be properly canapised with a lesson from The Urban Kitchen, run by the beautiful Toral Shah. She arrived with just a small bag of utensils, some recipes and a smiling washer-upper called Jigna.

She assured me I'd soon be able to make five varieties of fast, show-off but easy canapés – in less than an hour. At this rate, I could throw a party every night. I even enlisted my teen Hannah, who I felt would be effective insurance in the unfortunate event of me inviting people round for seasonal cheer and forgetting I was out at another one.

We were about to create a platter of herbal pancakes with red onion marmalade, mini frittatas, cheesy beignets and cherry galettes and, for the sweet-toothed (moi?), some choccy things with icing. Frittatas,

galettes and beignets? Who could settle for shrimp paste on mighty white ever again? Even better, all the ingredients were in my under-stocked cupboards. I mean, even I can't binge on self-raising flour, oil and raw eggs.

First we were introduced to Teflon, a sort of nappy liner for food, which felt very seductive and is even, I'm told, washable should you be so inclined. I found myself calmly melting chocolate in a bowl in a saucepan and folding (no cheapskate whizzing ever again) the chocolate into a flour and egg mix, then plopping the goo onto my nappy liner for baking.

There was no time to gloat because the puff pastry needed attention (i.e. unwrapping). We rolled it out (two minutes), covered it with home-made pesto (three minutes), topped it with tomato and cheese (five minutes – Toral is a stickler for symmetry, as am I now) and discovered we'd made our first ever galettes in ten minutes flat. Some muffin tins then played host to an egg and herb mix (frittatas, darling) and there was me thinking you use them for cakes.

This was all accompanied by a cheery conversation about a hen night do where Toral provided a butler in the buff (and this isn't a fusion style of toad-in-the-hole, because I asked). The purple peppers, smoked paprika and sexy Teflon all come from the supermarket, so as long as I've got some puff pastry, flour and the odd egg I'll be in a constant state of alert for easy entertaining. This time I've instructed guests to dress up and "arrive hungry". I've given myself half an hour tops to get ready (after all, I like a nice bath).

For full details on courses, private classes or catering by The Urban Kitchen, call Toral Shah on 07956-513016 or visit [www.theurbankitchen.co.uk](http://www.theurbankitchen.co.uk). w&h



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