



Camping clever: Guests at Paperbark Camp can use kayaks at Currumbene Creek free of charge, take it easy (inset left), and wine and dine on the restaurant veranda (below)



other places to try

- Cockatoo Island, Sydney Harbour; from \$125, 8969 2100, cockatooisland.gov.au
- Royal National Park, walking and camping package, departs Cronulla; from \$850 (two days, one night), 1300 317 200, thecoasttrack.com
- Tandara Luxury, Lane Cove River Tourist Park, Lane Cove; from \$390, 1300 729 133, lanecoverivertouristpark.com.au

Down by the river: Lee and Hanna Goldfinch at Lane Cove



Daily Telegraph

EXPERIENCE best



magic puddings



Baking your own gifts is deliciously rewarding, writes **Xanthe Kleinig**

WHAT does Christmas mean to you? Brasserie Bread training manager Matt Brock starts his class with that question, encouraging the half dozen students in his airy training kitchen to get talking over a half glass of champagne.

The answer is invariably food. A bunch of strangers are gathered around the artisan bakery's scrubbed steel benches, suddenly enthusiastic about roast turkeys, cold seafood lunches and their nanna's suet puddings.

Matt says that while most of us associate the festive season with fruit mince pies, puddings and gingerbread men, few people find time to bake them.

This class – part of Brasserie Bread's learn-to-bake program – is all about rectifying that. Today we'll learn how to make individual Christmas puddings, fruit mince tarts and decorate some pre-made gingerbread.

All good homemade gift ideas, or a class itself would make a great present for an aspiring foodie.

It all feels a bit *MasterChef* as Matt hands me a matching apron. Waiting on the bench is a mixing bowl, beater and spatula, every one of them far more professional-looking than the bits and pieces sitting around in my kitchen cupboards at home.

Most of the ingredients have been measured and weighed out for us ahead of time and under the bench is a bowl of Guinness-soaked organic raisins, currants and sultanas.

Brasserie Bread's ethos is that of the artisan – everything handmade – so there's no KitchenAid to do the mixing here. First up, we are creaming butter

and sugar for the pudding. It is surprisingly easy (it sure helps when someone else has taken the butter out of the fridge ahead of time!) and I soon have a whitened paste in my stainless steel bowl.

Matt encourages us to taste the ingredients as we go, a key part of developing a good palate, he says.

Eggs are added, plus the fruit Matt prepared earlier. The secret ingredient is some of Brasserie Bread's sourdough bread crumbs, plus a combination of spices – nutmeg, cinnamon and mixed spice – to taste.

We place the mixture in foil trays and Matt sets up a steam bath for their two-hour baking. Once cooked, they keep for months.

The pastry for the fruit mince pies, I discover, is anything but easy, becoming too soft to work with after 15 minutes at room temperature.

Matt has us mixing up a very "short" mix – so full of butter that it needs to be refrigerated for half an hour before it can be used.

We roll it out for our pie bases and their lids, but by the time I have them put together and ready for pinching they are so soft that my classmates are calling my tarts "rustic".

Twelve minutes in the oven, though, and they taste almost as good as the ones you can buy.

At the end of the class, I have two puddings, half a dozen fruit mince pies and decorated gingerbread to take home. And that's what Christmas means to me – good food, made with a bit of love, and plenty of it to share.



Sweet touch: Xanthe Kleinig tries her hand at gingerbread bling, puddings and mince pies



festive baking ideas

- Brasserie Bread, 1737 Botany Rd, Banksmeadow; various dates, \$130, 1300 966 845, brasseriebread.com.au
- Sparkle Cupcakery, 132 Foveaux St, Surry Hills; various dates, \$99, 9361 0690, sparklecupcakery.com.au
- Gingerbread House-making, Pennant Hills, Epping and Hornsby libraries; various dates through December, family \$25, bookings essential, hornsby.nsw.gov.au

