

KITCHEN

RECIPES FROM THE HEART OF THE HOME



NIGELLA LAWSON

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Acknowledgements

About the Book

Compendious, informative and engaging, *Kitchen* offers feel-good food for cooks and eaters that is comforting but always seductive, nostalgic but with a modern twist – whether express-way easy-exotic recipes for the weekday rush, leisurely slow-cook dishes for weekends and special occasions, or irresistible cakes and cookies in true “domestic goddess” style. It answers everyday cooking quandaries – what to give the kids for tea, how to rustle up a meal for friends or an impromptu kitchen party in moments, or what to do about those black bananas, wrinkled apples and bullet-hard plums – and since real cooking is so often about leftovers, here one recipe can morph into another...from ham hocks to pea soup and pasties, from braised chicken to Chinatown salad. This isn’t just about being thrifty but about being creative and seeing how recipes evolve.

As well as offering the reader a mouthwatering array of inspired new recipes – from clams with chorizo to Guinness gingerbread, from Asian braised beef to flourless chocolate lime cake, from Pasta alla Genovese to Venetian carrot cake – Nigella rounds up her kitchen kit must-haves (and, crucially, what isn’t needed) in the way of equipment and magical standby ingredients. But above all, she reminds the reader how much pleasure there is to be had in real food and in reclaiming the traditional rhythms of the kitchen, as she cooks to the beat of the heart of the home, creating simple, delicious recipes to make life less complicated.

The expansive, lively narrative, with its rich feast of food, makes this new work a natural 21st-century successor to Nigella’s classic *How To Eat*, this time with a wealth of photographs from the instructive to the glorious, and accompanied by a BBC TV series.

190 recipes, including over 60 express-style at 30 minutes or under.

About the Author

Nigella Lawson is the author of bestselling books – *How to Eat* (‘may just be the best cookery book ever’ *Daily Telegraph*), *How to be a Domestic Goddess* (British Book Awards 2001), *Nigella Bites* (WHSmith Award 2002) Forever Summer (‘images of warmth and Mediterranean climes’ *Time Out*), *Feast*, (‘a voluptuous and delicious piece of food writing’ *Guardian*), *Nigella Express* (no. 1 bestseller with over 1 million sales) and *Nigella Christmas* (‘everything to make your Christmas sparkle’ *Independent*) – which, together with her successful TV series and her recent iPhone App, *Nigella Quick Collection*, have made hers a household name around the world. She lives in London with her family.

Also by Nigella Lawson

HOW TO EAT

THE PLEASURES AND PRINCIPLES OF GOOD FOOD

HOW TO BE A DOMESTIC GODDESS

BAKING AND THE ART OF COMFORT COOKING

NIGELLA BITES

FOREVER SUMMER

FEAST

FOOD THAT CELEBRATES LIFE

NIGELLA EXPRESS

GOOD FOOD FAST

NIGELLA CHRISTMAS

FOOD, FAMILY, FRIENDS, FESTIVITIES

KITCHEN

RECIPES FROM THE HEART OF THE HOME

NIGELLA LAWSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LIS PARSONS

Alfred A. Knopf Canada

FOR MY FAMILY



List of Recipes

Beef

Asian braised shin of beef *with hot and sour shredded salad*

Barbecued beef mince

Bolognese patties

Carbonnade à la flamande *or beer-braised beef casserole*

Cheesy chilli

Date steak

Ed's mother's meatloaf

Meatloaf sandwich

Minetta marrow bones

Risotto Bolognese

Roast rib of beef *with wild mushrooms and Red Leicester mash*

Texas brisket

Venetian lasagne

Warm brisket sandwich

Bread

Chocolate chip bread pudding

Coconut and cherry banana bread

Crustless pizza

Irish oaten rolls

Panzanella

Pumpkin scones

Cakes

Apple and cinnamon muffins
Banoffee cheesecake
Blueberry cornmeal muffins
Buttermilk scones
Buttery cream-cheese frosting
Chocolate orange loaf cake
Chocolate peanut butter cheesecake
Coconut and cherry banana bread
Coffee and walnut layer cake
Devil's food cake
Flourless chocolate lime cake *with margarita cream*
Guinness gingerbread
Lemon polenta cake
Maple pecan bundt cake
Marmalade pudding cake
Old-fashioned cheesecake
Red velvet cupcakes
Seed-cake
Strawberry and almond crumble
Swedish summer cake
Venetian carrot cake

Cheese

Blue cheese dressing
Cheesy chilli
Curly pasta with feta, spinach and pine nuts
Frittata sandwich
Halloumi with beetroot and lime

Mortadella and mozzarella frittata

Pappardelle with butternut and blue cheese

Red Leicester mash

Chocolate

Blondies

Chocolate banana muffins

Chocolate brownie bowls

Chocolate chip bread pudding

Chocolate chip cookies

Chocolate dipping sauce

Chocolate key lime pie

Chocolate Martini

Chocolate orange loaf cake

Chocolate peanut butter cheesecake

Churros *with chocolate dipping sauce*

Devil's food cake

Everyday brownies

Flourless chocolate lime cake *with margarita cream*

Hot chocolate

Rice Krispie brownies

Sweet and salty crunch nut bars

Curries

Patara lamb shanks

South Indian vegetable curry

Tomato curry *with coconut rice*

Desserts

Baked egg custard

Banoffee cheesecake
Chocolate brownie bowls
Chocolate chip bread pudding
Chocolate key lime pie
Chocolate peanut butter cheesecake
Cinnamon plums *with French toast*
Coffee toffee meringues
Drunken fool
Frangelico tiramisu
Gooseberry and elderflower crumble
Grasshopper pie
Guinness gingerbread
Lemon meringue fool
Lemon polenta cake
Marmalade pudding cake
No-churn Piña Colada ice cream
No-fuss fruit tart
Old-fashioned cheesecake
Orange and blackberry trifle
Pear pandowdy
Raspberry Bakewell slice
Strawberry and almond crumble
Treacle slice
Vanilla custard

Drinks

After Eight
Americano

Baby Guinness
Black Velvet
Blackberry vodka
Bloody Maria
Chocolate Martini
Crème de menthe Frappé
Elderflower Gimlet
Elderflower Spritzer
Florida Fizz
French Martini
Giddy Geisha
Grasshopper
Lagarita
Petunia
Pink Margarita
Prosecco Sporco
Raspberry Cooler
Sake and Tonic

Eggs

Baked egg custard
Coffee toffee meringues
Chinatown chicken salad
Egg and bacon salad
Fiery potato cakes with fried eggs
Mortadella and mozzarella frittata
Pepper, anchovy and egg salad
Toad in the Hole

Fish and seafood

Clams with chorizo

Coconutty crab cakes

Golden sole *with tarted-up tartare sauce*

Japanese prawns

Korean calamari

Lemony salmon with cherry tomato couscous

Mussels in cider

Pantry paella

Roast seafood

Salmon and sushi rice *with hot, sweet and sour Asian sauce*

San Francisco fish stew

Scallops with Thai-scented pea purée

Smoked haddock my mother's way

Speedy seafood supper

Thai roast scallops

Fruit

Apple and cinnamon muffins

Apple and mustard sauce

Banoffee cheesecake

Blackberry vodka

Blueberry cornmeal muffins

Chocolate banana muffins

Chocolate key lime pie

Chocolate orange loaf cake

Cinnamon plums *with French toast*

Coconut and cherry banana bread

Drunken fool

Flourless chocolate lime cake *with margarita cream*

Gooseberry and elderflower crumble

Gooseberry chutney

Jumbleberry jam

Lemon meringue fool

Lemon polenta cake

No-fuss fruit tart

Pear pandowdy

Pork and apple hotpot

Raspberry Bakewell slice

Strawberry and almond crumble

Swedish summer cake

Lamb

Greek lamb chops with lemon and potatoes

Indian-rubbed lamp chops

Lamb with rosemary and port

Patara lamb shanks

Redcurrant and mint lamb cutlets

Shoulder of lamb with garlic, thyme, black olives and rose wine

Nuts and pulses

Mexican lasagne

Peanut butter hummus

Sweet and salty crunch nut bars

Pasta

Curly pasta with feta, spinach and pine nuts

Italian tomato and pasta soup

Lone linguine with white truffle oil

Minestrone

Pappardelle with butternut and blue cheese

Pasta alla genovese (*with potatoes, green beans and pesto*)

Pasta with pancetta, parsley and peppers

Quick calamari pasta

Slut's spaghetti

Small pasta with salami

Spaghetti with Marmite

Pork

Beer-braised pork knuckles *with caraway, garlic, apples and potatoes*

Cidery ham stock

Clams with chorizo

Cocktail sausages

Conker-shiny spare ribs with pineapple and molasses

Chorizo and chickpea stew

Ham and leek pies

Ham and leek "Welsh" pasties

Ham hock and soya bean salad

Ham hocks in cider

Home-made pork scratchings *with apple and mustard sauce*

Mortadella and mozzarella frittata

Pantry Paella

Pigs in blankets *with mustard dipping sauce*

Pork and apple hotpot

Sherry-glazed chorizo
Slow roast pork belly
Speedy scaloppine *with rapid roastini*
Spicy sausage patties with lettuce wraps
Toad in the Hole
Wholegrain mustard and ginger cocktail sausages

Poultry

African drumsticks
Chicken, bacon and avocado salad
Chicken escalope sandwich
Chicken fajitas
Chicken teriyaki
Chicken tortillas
Chicken with 40 cloves of garlic
Chicken with Greek herb sauce
Chinatown chicken salad
Crisp chicken cutlets *with salad on the side*
Dragon chicken
Homestyle jerk chicken *with rice and peas*
Korean keema
My mother's praised chicken
Plain roast chicken
Poached chicken with lardons and lentils
Quick chick Caesar
Roast chook with leeks and squash
Roast duck legs and potatoes
Spanish chicken with chorizo and potatoes

Spatchcocked poussin *with baby leaf salad and sourdough croutons*

Speedy scaloppine *with rapid roastini*

Spring chicken

Sweet and sour chicken

Tarragon chicken

Thai chicken noodle soup

Turkey meatballs in tomato sauce

Rice and noodles

Coconut rice

Coconutty rice soup

Mixed meat pilaff

Pantry Paella

Rice and peas

Risotto Bolognese

Saffron rice cakes with bacon

Saffron risotto

Squink risotto

Thai chicken noodle soup

Vietnamese pork noodle soup

Salads, snacks and sides

Avocado quesadillas

Avocado salsa

Butternut, rocket and pine nut salad

Chicken, bacon and avocado salad

Chinatown chicken salad

Egg and bacon salad

Fiery potato cakes with fried eggs
Gooseberry chutney
Ham hock and soya bean salad
Hot and sour shredded salad
Indian roast potatoes
Leeks in white sauce
Pepper, anchovy and egg salad
Parsley pesto
Quick chick Caesar
Red Leicester mash
Rapid roastini
Roast potatoes
Rocket and lemon couscous
Panzanella
Salad on the side
Spiced pumpkin chutney
Standby starch
Sweet potato supper
Tabbouleh
Tangy parsnip and potato mash
Thai tomato salad
Wild mushrooms with leek and marsala

Soups

Cidery pea soup
Coconutty rice soup
Garlicky soup
Italian tomato and pasta soup

Minestrone

Soup made with garlic and love

Sunshine soup

Thai chicken noodle soup

Vietnamese pork noodle soup

Sauces

Apple and mustard sauce

BBQ gravy

Blue cheese dressing

Chocolate dipping sauce

Curry sauce

Garlicky chicken sauce for pasta

Greek herb sauce

Hot, sweet and sour Asian sauce

Jumbo chilli sauce

Mustard dipping sauce

Onion gravy

Parsley pesto

Salmoriglio sauce

Spring chicken sauce for pasta

Tarted-up tartare sauce

Tomato sauce

List of Express Recipes

Recipes that take 30 minutes or under from first move to plate

Beef

[Date steak](#)

[Minetta marrow bones](#)

Bread

[Irish oaten rolls](#)

[Pumpkin scones](#)

Cakes

[Buttermilk scones](#)

Cheese

[Blue cheese dressing](#)

[Curly pasta with feta, spinach and pine nuts](#)

[Halloumi with beetroot and lime](#)

[Mortadella and mozzarella frittata](#)

Chocolate

[Chocolate brownie bowls](#)

Curries

[South Indian vegetable curry](#)

[Tomato curry *with coconut rice*](#)

Desserts

[Drunken fool](#)

[Lemon meringue fool](#)

[Orange and blackberry trifle](#)

Drinks

Americano

Baby Guinness

Black Velvet

Bloody Maria

Elderflower Gimlet

Elderflower Spritzer

French Martini

Giddy Geisha

Lagarita

Petunia

Pink Margarita

Prosecco Sporco

Raspberry Cooler

Fish and seafood

Clams with chorizo

Golden sole with *tarted-up tartare sauce*

Japanese prawns

Korean calamari

Lemony salmon with cherry tomato couscous

Mussels in cider

Pantry paella

Quick calamari pasta

Salmon and sushi rice *with hot, sweet and sour Asian sauce*

Scallops with Thai-scented pea purée

Smoked haddock my mother's way

Speedy seafood supper

Squink risotto

Thai roast scallops

Fruit

Cinnamon plums *with French toast*

Drunken fool

Lamb

Indian-rubbed lamb chops

Lamb with rosemary and port

Redcurrant and mint lamb cutlets

Pasta

Curly pasta with feta, spinach and pine nuts

Lone linguine with white truffle oil

Pasta alla genovese (*with potatoes, green beans and pesto*)

Pasta with pancetta, parsley and peppers

Quick calamari pasta

Slut's spaghetti

Small pasta with salami

Spaghetti with Marmite

Pork

Chorizo and chickpea stew

Clams with chorizo

Ham hock and soya bean salad

Mortadella and mozzarella frittata

Pantry paella

Sherry-glazed chorizo

Small pasta with salami

Speedy scaloppine *with rapid roastini*

Spicy sausage patties with lettuce wraps

Poultry

Chicken, bacon and avocado salad

Chicken fajitas

Chicken teriyaki

Chinatown chicken salad

Korean keema

Quick chick Caesar

Speedy scaloppine *with rapid roastini*

Sweet and sour chicken

Tarragon chicken

Thai chicken noodle soup

Rice and noodles

Pantry paella

Rice and peas

Saffron rice cakes with bacon

Thai chicken noodle soup

Vietnamese pork noodle soup

Salads, snacks and sides

Avocado quesadillas

Avocado salsa

Chicken, bacon and avocado salad

Chinatown chicken salad

Egg and bacon salad

Fiery potato cakes with fried eggs

Ham hock and soya bean salad

Hot and sour shredded salad

Leeks in white sauce
Peanut butter hummus
Pepper, anchovy and egg salad
Quick chick Caesar
Rapid roastini
Rocket and lemon couscous
Standby starch
Tabbouleh
Thai tomato salad

Sauces

Blue cheese dressing
Jumbo chilli sauce
Parsley pesto
Salmoriglio sauce

Soups

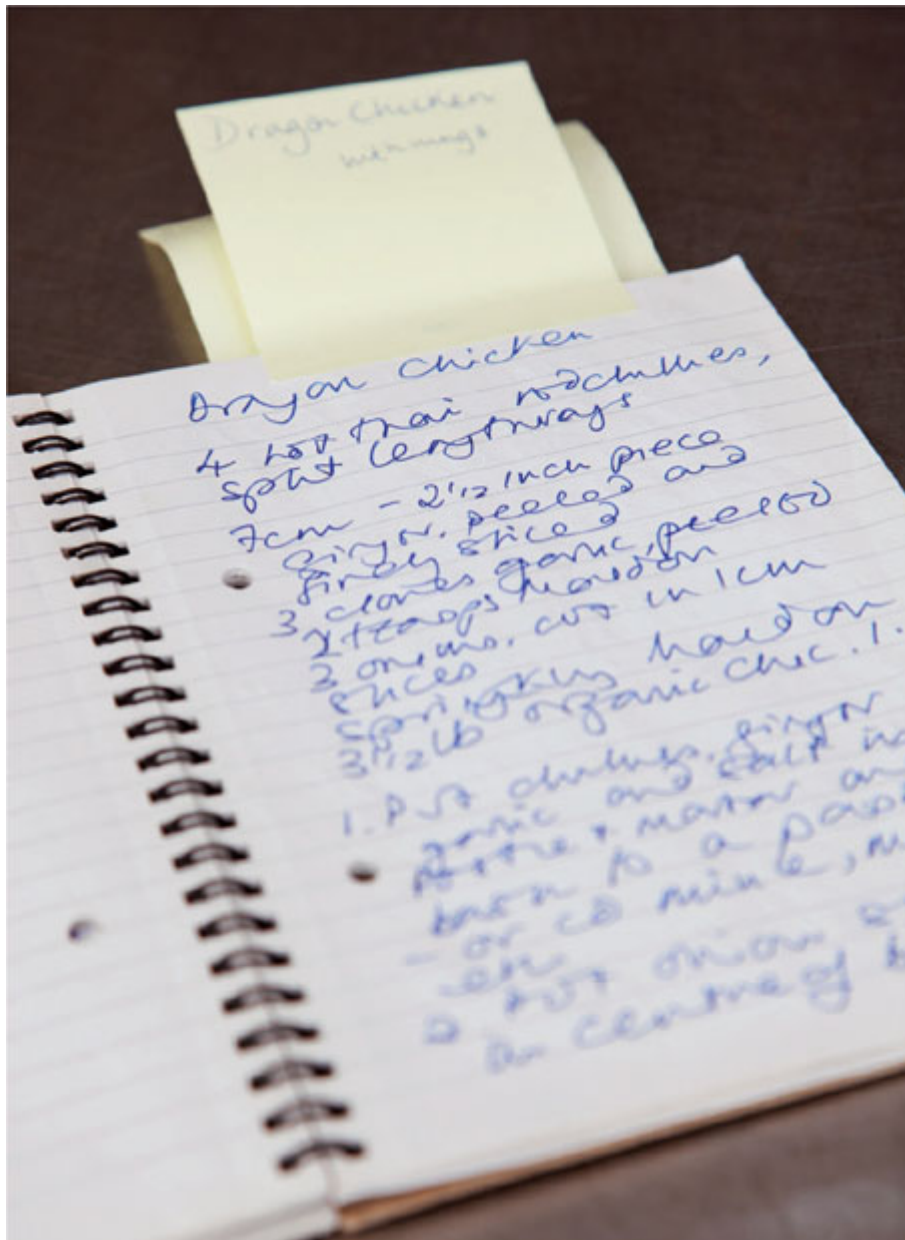
Thai chicken noodle soup
Vietnamese pork noodle soup

NOTE FOR THE READER

- ♥ All eggs are large, organic
- ♥ Dishes containing raw or partially cooked eggs should not be served to those with weak or compromised immune systems, such as pregnant women, the elderly or the very young
- ♥ All dark chocolate is minimum 70% cocoa solids
- ♥ All olive oil is regular (not extra-virgin), unless stated
- ♥ A 'breakfast cup' measure comes to approx. 250ml in a measuring jug
- ♥ Leftovers, if to be kept, should be covered and refrigerated or frozen as soon as cool, and kept no longer than indicated. Never re-heat previously frozen or re-heated food
- ♥ Where no suggestions are given, it is not advisable to make ahead or freeze
- ♥ When making jam or syrup, be extra-careful, always watch the pan and do not stir unless advised
- ♥ For stockists of specialist items, see my website www.nigella.com
- ♥ For quick recipes, taking 30 minutes or under, turn to the List of Express Recipes
- ♥ Always be sure to read a recipe right through before starting to cook

INTRODUCTION

Or what the kitchen means to me, and why I live in it



This is a book I've been wanting to write for a very long time. The idea first came to me almost ten years ago and has been simmering away on the back burner ever since. Maybe I just needed to spend more time in the kitchen before I could write about it. And by "in the kitchen", I mean, rather, in a number

of kitchens. They have all been different but with one crucial element in common: they're where I feel most at home.

But, if this is the starting point of the book, it's not one I ever stray far away from. I know it's impossible to prove a negative but let me start, about face, by telling you what this book isn't. It isn't a handbook or a manual. It isn't a lifestyle guide or aspirational treatise. It most definitely isn't intended as a work of social history, although I do believe that any cookbook ultimately ends up as one: the history of what we eat is indisputably the history of how we live and who we are. In fact, this book is simply the story of my love affair with the kitchen. Whatever the opposite of the currently still fashionable genre, the misery memoir, might be, this is it: a comfort chronicle.

Please, listen to me, though, when I say that my focus does not emanate from the belief that cooking holds any inherent moral qualities or reveals essential purity of purpose and congratulation-worthy virtue. Certainly not: it wouldn't occur to me to feel guilty about eating food I hadn't cooked – so long as I enjoyed it – any more than I ever have or would feel guilty about buying clothes rather than sewing something to wear myself. The born-again fervour and judgemental outlook of the status-conscious cook seem to me positively to preclude a happy life in the kitchen – or, indeed, out of it. I don't cook because I feel I ought to, but because I want to. And, of course, there are times when I don't want to. That's life. Sometimes reality has the edge over romance: albeit I have said before, and hand-on-heart declare again, that for me the kitchen is not a place I want to escape from, but to escape *to*, I will confess that there are times when the idea of cooking doesn't fill me with joy or make me radiate enthusiasm.

What I've discovered, after what feels like a lifetime's cooking, is that anything which holds true in the kitchen, is just as true out of the kitchen. This is one of my mantras and I fear it won't be the last time you hear me chant it. And I'm sorry if it reeks of homespun philosophy, but that's just what it is. So, while it may be the case that occasionally – at the end

of a long day or when I'm so exhausted that just staying upright seems a challenge – I approach cooking with something less than my usual gusto, I nearly always find that just getting on with it can make me wonder what I was dreading in the first place, and why. But then, the same applies to so many obligations and undertakings that loom over us in life, outside of the kitchen, too. Fear – of disappointment, inadequacy, failure – seems to make fools of us, causing us to forget what we all unfailingly learn from experience: that not doing what frightens us makes us fear it more rather than less. Perhaps some day I'll write a book called "Feel the Fear and Cook it Anyway", although to some extent I suspect that this is, indeed, the subliminal message of every book I've ever written.





I understand why cooking can hold so much terror and the kitchen seem a place of stress not solace. I'm sure this is partly to do with the contemporary cult of the chef, and is further fuelled by the hysterical pursuit of perfection that defines the age we live in. I am not a chef, am horrified when thus defined and resist, without a shred of disingenuousness, the miscast role of expert. Again and again, I say and can never seem to say enough: if we really needed qualifications and expertise before we stepped into the kitchen, human beings would have fallen out of the evolutionary loop a long time ago.

I remember being struck once by an episode in one of those (many) restaurant reality shows: the contestants were

asked to make a mushroom risotto and were then castigated for having – each one of them – produced a dish quite unlike another's. I can see this makes sense in a restaurant kitchen: consistency is all. But for me, the fact that everyone makes a dish a little differently, that what comes out of our kitchens bears our own stamp, is precisely the essence of real home cooking. Not adhering to professional standards in the kitchen doesn't show our limitations but is indicative of our liberation and individuality.

A real chef would have an apoplectic fit and a nervous breakdown – simultaneously – if forced to cook in my kitchen. The surfaces are cluttered, the layout messy and getting messier by the day (and, overall, I've no doubt my kitchen would fail many a health and safety test and law of ergonomics). But I love it, even if it is more of a nest than a room. My kitchen is full of online bargains and the results of many serendipitous shopping expeditions – unusual china, cutlery, vintage bits and bobs, heavy-duty casseroles that are left out because they won't fit neatly in drawers or cupboards – all of which I love particularly because they were bargains and are gloriously random. The clutter of a kitchen is part of its charm, so why worry that it isn't as clinically bare as a restaurant kitchen: it shouldn't be. I've still got, propped behind one of my hanging frames, a card clock that I used about eight or so years ago to teach one of my children to tell the time. I couldn't remove it now: it's part of our history; and that's what a kitchen means to me.

We all dream about the perfect kitchen with its well-appointed fittings, gleaming surfaces and top-of-the-range equipment. It's both roomy and cosy at the same time, boasting lots of space and lots of light, but most of all it is the setting for our ideal life. This is a kitchen that I've never cooked in, let alone written about.

Whatever stove you have, it has to work for you, however haphazardly. However restricted the space, that has to work for you, too. However dated the design, it must work for you. And it will. Some of my fondest cooking memories are of

producing mega-meals out of the rented kitchen of a holiday home in Cornwall. Not only did the electric hob never get very hot but it kept turning itself off. One oven burnt like a furnace, the other ran insistently cold, and I often felt I was conjuring rather than cooking, as I juggled trays and ovens at regular intervals to stop one thing from burning while ensuring that another really was cooking. Knives and saucepans were sub-standard and in scant supply. But none of this mattered, because a kitchen, however inadequate or alien, has the ability to make you feel, once you've cooked in it a few times, as though you've marked out some safe and reassuring space of your own.

But there's more to it than that. The kitchen isn't just the room in which I cook, it's the place where I live. There's a dynamism to a kitchen that seems to draw people in. Part hub, part haven, the kitchen is where, I've always found, people speak more freely than anywhere else. Maybe it's because when you're cooking, you can talk and listen without shining the light of your attention too closely on those who may need to talk or be listened to. I feel I am much more likely to find out what might be worrying a child, or to let an otherwise self-contained friend unburden herself, while I'm in the kitchen, gently busying myself with chopping a carrot or stirring a soup. There's a naturalness to the way one both carries on with the task in hand and listens, which seems to inhibit communication less than a more assiduous and fussy focus, however devoted.



Don't get me wrong: the kitchen is not just a sanctuary or some sort of warm and comforting cave. Its dynamism comes in part from the fact that, more than any other room in a house, the kitchen brings and welcomes the outside in. You may not add a new cushion to the sofa in the sitting room regularly, or hang new pictures in the hall every other week, but the kitchen relies on constant replenishment and continual refuelling. I admit I am messier than the next person, but for me food shopping becomes part of the decor: the shape of a new bottle of oil on the counter, a jar of something too pretty to go into a cupboard, a bowl of fruit on the table; things constantly appear and disappear, making the kitchen look a little different, while staying reassuringly the same.

I've written before of the pull of paganism, and I rather relish having the seasons make their presence felt in my kitchen, if only in the way the fruit bowls fill – whether they're bulging with cherries or Clementines, or presenting a darkly mellow Indian-summer tableau of grapes, figs and blackberries – and the vegetable baskets are stocked. For me, fruits in season are both display and dessert; I can happily dispense with both flowers and pudding when the kitchen table is laden with harvest-home produce. And I regard nothing as beyond my remit: if I see some gorgeous vine tomatoes, I

leave them on display (and, anyway, tomatoes should not really be stored in the fridge), letting them tumble on top of a cake stand or wooden board. Not that I'm against flowers – so long as they don't crowd out food or eaters, or interfere with the eyeline when you're sitting at the table. In fact, what does it for me is an ordinary, old kitchen jug filled with fresh herbs or unfancy flowers that look as if they have just been picked from the garden. I have no garden, so I must create the illusion.

And, unafraid as I am to put the kitsch in kitchen, it all gets a little more fanciful towards evening, when my weakness for a fairy light (and I run the gamut from pearl to chilli-peppers) turns the place into a magical grotto. It's a conceit I rather like. I need my kitchen to work, but I also want it to enchant.





I've tried to indicate, lightly, the way my kitchen works for me in the run of chapters that lie ahead. I've separated them into two sections, Kitchen Quandaries and Kitchen Comforts, although I feel strongly that the *answers* to such quandaries as dog the usual working week should offer comfort, too. And, please, bear in mind that the way I have grouped the recipes – whether suggesting a speedy midweek supper or a blow-out on Sunday – is essentially autobiographical rather than dictatorial: I write according to how I cook and live. But I don't confine myself and nor should you. These are suggestions, not orders. I try to be practical,

because advice in the kitchen (or, indeed, out of it) is of no use otherwise. To this end, I have often appended ideas for what to do with whatever you may have left over from a particular recipe, under the legend (and, please, just humour me here) *Making Leftovers Right*. For me, these rhythms of the kitchen are what mark the cook out from the chef, and make us feel purposeful and productive. What's more, this sort of greedy opportunism and thriftiness combined are essentially what real cooking is all about, and what this book is all about.

The life of a kitchen takes in many moods and many meals. The recipes in this book try to reflect and, more, to celebrate that fact. In common with my other books – those I wrote before and after I left the ideas for this book bubbling away on the back burner – this one is based on the premise that the kitchen is an enduring place of comfort and that the food which comes out of it provides essential sustenance not just for body but for soul, too.



KITCHEN CABOODLE

CAST-IRON SKILLET

ENAMELLED CAST-IRON COOKWARE

BUFFET CASSEROLE

PANS

ROASTING TIN

FRYING PAN

WOK

GRIDDLE

BAKEWARE

KNIVES

CARVING FORK

OVEN GLOVES

MEZZALUNA

KNIFE STORAGE

DRAWERS

CUPBOARDS

FOOD PROCESSOR

FREE-STANDING MIXER

STICK BLENDER

ELECTRIC WHISK

THERMOMETERS

VEGETABLE MILL

POTATO RICER

GRATERS

WHISKS

SCISSORS AND TEASPOONS

CLIPS

TIMER

RICE COOKER

When I was young, and even longer ago, cookery books used to contain counsel called, according to the French classical tradition, “*batterie de cuisine*”, in other words, a slightly panic-inducing list of all those pieces of kit and equipment that any cook worthy of the title should own. Don’t worry, I shan’t be visiting that kind of finger-wagging bossiness on you. I mean, really: how much or how little you buy for your kitchen is up to you. And even then, no one has a free rein. There are likely to be constraints before you even start: budget being one, space another.

Anyway, most kitchen items are a luxury, and a very pleasurable indulgence; all that is actually needed for the cooking itself is fire, a receptacle and something to stir with. Still, I am hesitant about sounding too austere on the matter. As Imelda Marcos was to shoes, I am to the whole covetable arena of kitchen items and equipment (foodstuffs included). How then, could I advise too spartan an approach in you? For me, buying stuff for the kitchen is one of the great joys of life. While I’m not entirely innocent of extravagance, the truth is many gadgets cost a lot less than clothes, and what’s more you don’t have to try them on.

Still, it is all too easy to clutter up a kitchen with stuff you want, or feel you might need, but cannot find room for, even without spending a lot of money. My advice is not to buy anything – even if you’ve found it on eBay for a pound – if storing it is going to outweigh the advantage of using it; there is nothing more annoying than having to heave bowls and pans out of densely packed drawers and cupboards every time you

need to prepare or cook something. If you can't house a piece of kit in relative comfort, it's better to make do without it.

Similarly (maybe this is just because I am a lazy wimp – though, in my defence, a lazy wimp with a history of back problems), I don't think it's worth having any piece of equipment, however brilliant, if you can never quite summon the effort and strength to lift it. Enormous unwieldiness can be my undoing. In the same way, equipment that needs too much care and attention defeats me in the end. I love cast iron, the high-maintenance male of the kitchen equipment world, but I have given away all my **cast-iron skillets** bar one, since their stagger-inducing weight, too much for my limp wrists, combined with the seasoning they require, make me end up resenting as opposed to cherishing them.

I make an exception for **enamelled cast-iron cookware** – although I sometimes feel I'm emitting the serve-accompanying grunt of a lady tennis player as I heave casserole from cupboard to stove – simply because they cook so well and you can serve food in them, too, so you save on equipment and washing-up. That said, they are, I agree, eye-wateringly expensive. Over the years, I've built up a collection, and the small- and medium-sized round **casseroles** (respectively 26cm diameter/5.3 litres and 24cm/4.2 litres) are among a number of items that get enough usage to merit their being left helpfully by my stove. But if I had to choose just a single piece among this collection, it would probably be the one that's often referred to as a buffet casserole (though I don't know why) and is wide, shallowish, slightly dome-lidded and incredibly versatile. I mostly use the bigger of the two sizes (30cm diameter/3.2 litres), but if you were cooking more often just for two, the smaller one (26cm/2 litres) would make more sense.

And, although the enamelled cast-iron ware is expensive, it is extraordinarily enduring. In fact, one of my casseroles – a legacy from my mother – had been a wedding present to my parents, and they married in 1956. Not for nothing are such sturdy beauties known in America as

“heirloom pieces”. There are two courses of action that follow from all this: the first is that you save yourself money without sacrificing quality by buying this type of cookware second-hand (or pre-owned as they say Stateside). Regard it as vintage. And, as I say, since a casserole bought in the Fifties is still going strong *chez moi*, I don’t see that it matters if the one you buy happens to be old. The other corollary here is that you should either go for the good, expensive stuff or buy cheap and be prepared to replace when necessary. The middle ground – unless there is a particular design you can’t resist – is not worth considering. This is particularly apropos when it comes to saucepans, frying **pans** and roasting tins. In that non-existent world without budgetary restraints, all would be copper-bottomed. The heat really is more evenly conducted, so food doesn’t stick as much; thus the benefits are reaped in both the cooking and the washing-up. Still, I have quite a few cheapotins that I simply know I must line with foil if the pan is not to need two days’ soaking and a good 40 minutes’ scrubbing later.

Don’t make the mistake, either (and this goes with all purchases related to cooking and eating, even the value you place on having a dining room), of concentrating more on the times you entertain, overlooking how much more often – even as a profligate socializer – you eat normally, that’s to say, without flourish or company. To wit here: I find a small **roasting tin** that comfortably takes a chicken makes a huge difference to everyday cooking; what’s more I think the juices that run off are stronger, and the skin crisper and the top more desirably caramelized, when the bird or joint being roasted is contained in a tin that hasn’t too much room to spare. Plus, it’s easier to store and lighter to lift. My particular preference is for a 28cm round roaster that does a chicken wonderfully, is perfect for cooking (in the oven) a hungry teatime’s allocation of sausages, a toad in the hole, a good 12 lamb cutlets, a one-pan roast dinner for two, and so on. I always feel less foolish when I’m not making more washing-up than the size of what’s being cooked warrants. If you feel it easier to find a more normal rectangular tin, then I’d go for one about 30 x 20cm.

And do see the notes in [Kitchen Confidential](#) regarding the other option, tin-wise, which is the throwaway foil tray.

Now to that modern necessity, the non-stick **frying pan**: I don't really believe anyone can do without a good non-stick pan; but non-stick pans generally being as they are, most people have to. It's true that over the years they've improved enormously, but the reality is that even with the best non-stick pans, unless you are good about never using anything metal or scrapey when you cook, and only clean with specially non-abrasive scourers, their lifespan is limited. I've never bought a non-stick pan I haven't had to replace, and although I'm prepared to believe my kit gets more of a battering than it might in many kitchens, anecdotal evidence proves to me that I am not alone. Still, I don't give up. I love a non-stick pan, and especially one that has either a removable or ovenproof handle, so that I can sear on the stove before roasting, baking, braising or grilling. And I also need a non-stick **wok**; I know it's inauthentic, but I have never been able to make a proper Chinese iron wok work. I manage to make everything stick and the metal pitted. Plus, the virtue of a non-stick one is that you can use it to make pasta sauces and paella and suchlike, thus giving it more flexibility in the kitchen. Other non-stick must-haves for me are non-stick **griddles**, one ridged (for meat) and one smooth (for pancakes). But when I say must-have, I say it in the modern, consumer-society sense. None of the above is a necessity; they are that greedy contemporary creation, everyday luxuries.

I had a late start baking-wise, but as is so often the case, I have the evangelical zeal of the convert; and nowhere is that more obvious than in my **baking** supplies. Every time I open a cupboard I risk being buried in an avalanche of madeleine moulds, flan rings, springform and bundt tins, along with a fluttering confetti of muffin cases. Don't worry: I'm not going to suggest you follow suit and have a cake tin for every eventuality. Only you know how often you bake. If never, stop reading now and move to the next paragraph. Otherwise, I'd say a capsule collection would consist of a 12-bun muffin tin

and a 900g (2lb) loaf tin, and the paper cases to go with each (and see [Kitchen Confidential](#) for further notes on stopping cakes from sticking), plus a pair of 20cm sandwich tins, a 23cm springform cake tin and, for deliciously low-effort (it's the shape of the tin that does the work) a bundt pan. But watch it: this lark is addictive.

Proper chefs are most particular about their **knives**. Indeed, so particular, they carry their own set wherever they go. But I am no kind of chef, proper or otherwise, and while I have favourites among knives, am not prepared to make a fetish of them. Nor do I think you need many: a small vegetable knife, a medium-sized knife and, if you want another, one that is somewhere between a hacking knife and a cleaver, relatively short and with a wide blade that tapers to a point, is enough. This last I use not for any kind of frightening butchery, but simply to cut through dense or large vegetables, to slice cheesecakes and carve meat. It makes such an enormous difference if your knives are sharp, it's like the feel of a car when it's just been serviced, but I am hopeless at sharpening. The days are long gone when knife grinders came door-to-door, as I remember their coming to my grandmother's house (along with the Frenchman on his bicycle selling onions – and I'm not even joking), so I'm afraid I am easy prey for anyone bringing out a new-fangled knife-sharpener.

And, yes, a **carving fork** helps, but a normal one will do, too; better still, a pair of trident-like **forks**. I have a pair, bought on the high street probably twenty years ago, and I use them every time I cook a roast, both to transfer the joint from tin to board and to hold it in place while I, clumsily, carve. You're not meant to puncture the skin of meat, as you want all the juiciness contained, but the only other way I can lift a heavy joint is to wear **oven gloves** and lift it without tools. That has its drawbacks, too. (Although now might be a good time to say that the most useful oven gloves, I find, are made of a kind of cushiony silicon and can be cleaned in the dishwasher.)

The one sort of knife I couldn't manage without (and I know this as I carry one with me when I stay in rented houses with unfamiliar equipment) is a **mezzaluna**. This half-moon-shaped (hence the name) double-handled knife has unfairly acquired a reputation as some sort of expert-only piece of equipment. I admit it looks, initially, daunting – even dangerous – but if you think about it, you'll see it is the very opposite of the expert-only choice. I am very clumsy, what New Yorkers would call a complete klutz, and I know that when I chop – herbs, vegetables, chocolate, nuts – with the mezzaluna, both my hands are engaged and thus it is impossible for me to cut myself.

And as to how you store your **knives**, I go for a heavy-duty magnetic strip, stuck to or hung on the wall nearest to the cooker; one of the advantages of this method is that you can stick your mezzaluna here, too. Anyway, I have never happily got to grips with the other options. Of these, the second-best choice would be a knife block, but I'm not particularly keen and one of my prejudices against them is that they clutter up the work surface, and there is never enough of that, as it is. The worst option as far as I'm concerned is possibly the safest, and that's the drawer. I can't be doing with keeping knives in a drawer. It is a real bore to keep putting the blade-cover that comes with each knife back on every time you've finished with it and so inevitably you (or I) won't, and as inevitably you'll end up cutting yourself (or someone else will). If you have small children, this will be of particular consideration. Of course, you can put drawer locks on, but any drawer you keep knives in is a drawer you will want to be opening often, and it will drive you mad if you put catches on it.

No, a magnetic strip or two, extra-strong, that knives will stick to firmly, high up on a wall, accessible to you but not to anyone small, is the answer. It's true, at first I was a bit anxious; I didn't really like the idea of hanging potential weapons in welcoming reach of the first burglar, rapist or serial murderer who happened to stroll into my kitchen, but I decided in the end that one really can't be worrying about such

things. And anything's better than having to scrabble about in a drawer.

Talking of which, my perfect kitchen, or best possible kitchen in an imperfect world (which is the most any of us can hope for) banishes **drawers** as much as is feasible. Truly, I believe the fewer drawers a kitchen has, the easier it is to work in. I find, almost infallibly, however well I know the contents of each drawer, I always open the wrong one to find whatever I'm looking for. And if it is the right drawer, it's the last thing I find in it. So my advice is to make those drawers you do have small, that's to say, shallow. Everyone thinks they need big capacious drawers to fit all manner of things in, but that just gives you more of a desperate rummage each time you need something, and the wonderfully roomy drawers become a disorganized disaster zone in no time. I can't even cope with a cutlery drawer: I stash knives, forks and spoons in separate hole-punctured containers, decorating my counter like three splaying, metal floral displays. The only drawer I actually put in on purpose is what I call my mug drawer: a large (but not deep) drawer expressly for keeping many mugs in one layer. I can't be doing with a mug-tree, and piling mugs up in cupboards is a nerve-racking business, so my innovation (a couple of kitchens ago) of a mug-drawer is – and I speak as something of a tea-addict – invaluable.

Otherwise – and to make matters on the surface (literally and figuratively) seem more complicated – I try and minimize the amount of **cupboards** in my kitchen, too. Having started off with fairly small (or, indeed, very small) kitchens, I always felt that cupboards would intensify the feeling of constraint and narrowness. Obviously, it would be pretty well impossible to do without cupboards altogether but in a small kitchen definitely, and in any kitchen preferably, it is better for those cupboards you do have to be below the work surface. I don't say that everything else should be spare and bare; no kitchen I have had has ever been that. So, above work surface level, why not just have open shelving? And I speak as a messy

person: even a clutter of crockery looks better to me than an imposing wall of cupboard doors.

And then there is the hanging space. Any wall that can be used for the purpose, I fit with rails from which I hang all pots and pans, spatulas, measuring cups, colanders, sieves, scissors, indeed anything that can be made to hang. And if there are no walls available, and space allows it, then I suspend some rails down from the ceiling and hang these over the cooker.

I know that more practical people than me will immediately worry about the fat and grease and dust and dirt. The trick, and here we come full circle back to the beginning, is to keep only those things that you use often enough so that they will be regularly washed as it is. Besides, we live in the dishwasher age now, so a quick de-griming cycle is generally possible.

Of course, the main obstacle to my breezy planning is that we generally inherit kitchens and the shape they are in is thus often dictated by previous owners. Still, taking out some cupboard doors and making good the mess that ensues, or putting up some hanging rails is no great undertaking.

As in the kitchen, so in this book: space and time are at a premium; I don't think you would thank me for itemizing each and every piece of equipment I feel I need or wish to advise you to consider – or even to avoid. Perhaps that's just as well. Still, I would feel remiss if I moved on without listing some of the other props that make life easier for me in the kitchen. I start with the heavier-duty items, such as a **processor** and a **free-standing mixer**. Nobody can truly be said to need either, but a processor certainly makes chopping on a large scale easier, and a free-standing mixer makes anything to do with baking easier and has, furthermore, the advantage of being, unlike the processor, a beautiful entity in itself, to the extent that it may be left out on the kitchen surface – an adornment rather than an eyesore. A processor is usually kept out of sight, and yet has to be easily accessible: it is not worth having one if it's a huge upheaval to get it out every time you

use it. And soup is much better liquidized in a blender than in a processor.

Cheaper alternatives to all three of the above would be, first, a **stick- or hand-blender** (which can do the work of the blender and processor and is indeed superior to both when dealing with small quantities) and, second, a hand-held **electric whisk**, which can – with your help – take over the tasks of the free-standing mixer. I have nothing against a knife, chopping board, bowl and wooden spoon, but there are times when a little bit of whizzing gadgetry can make the difference.

Less high-tech, but worth consideration – even if you think of yourself as a spontaneous, no-measurement cook – is an oven **thermometer**. You would be surprised to discover how out-of-true the thermostat on an oven can be. And all ovens vary: some really do burn hotter or cooler, whatever the gauge says. Certainly, experience is the best teacher, but it's worth being able to check scientifically as well. And it's not a bad idea to invest in a meat thermometer as well: it saves you having to slice into a joint before seeing if it's cooked to your liking. Although I tend to favour the pressing-by-hand method – if the meat springs back readily, it's rare, if it has a little give, it's medium, and if it's unyielding, it's shoe leather – there are times you really want to know.

Otherwise, I do have a few other low-tech requirements: a **vegetable mill** is in many ways superior to a processor or blender (of whatever kind) for those cooking-occasions which require you to sieve and purée; it does both at the same time, and is very useful for making mashed potato. But my gadget of choice for making fabulous mashed potato is the **potato ricer**. In America they are very keen on potato ricers, although mine is, in fact – as I think many are – Italian. This object consists of a cylindrical cup with small holes in the bottom; it has a handle to hold it by and a hinged lever that presses a lid down into the cup, rather in the way of a garlic press. You put a potato in the container and push down with the lever and the potato comes out through the holes – more like vermicelli than rice. It may sound fiddly and slow to mash potatoes by putting

a spud at a time into the ricer and squishing it through the small holes, but really it isn't, and here's the upside: you don't have to peel the potatoes before you start. The ricer extrudes the mashed potato flesh while the skin sticks inside the ricer, though you must lift it out (using the tip of a sharp knife for ease) and discard as you go.

Similarly, I find grating with the processor somehow an exhausting prospect: it's not that it's hard to do, but the washing-up generated seems disproportionate to the job. Hanging from my rails are a good supply of Microplane **graters** – fine grade for garlic, ginger and Parmesan, coarse for Cheddar-type cheeses – and stashed away in a drawer is an old-fashioned rotary grater, which I use when the amount of cheese needs to be weighed first, or exceeds my friction-grating patience.

I find I can't have enough **whisks**, and although I keep different varieties in the kitchen, the ones I use most (and even take with me to other people's houses) are the little ones known as magic whisks. At their most basic, these are little stainless steel handles with a loop of wire at one end, and further little loops wound round that loop, looking rather like a children's drawing of a beard. These basic whisks can be used to make sauces, emulsify dressings, remove lumps, whip up pancakes and so on.

The other two items I find it impossible to have too many of are **scissors and teaspoons**. However many I buy, I always run out or lose them. One day, I know I'll come across a mysterious, hidden cupboard in the house piled high with scissors and teaspoons; until then I am forced to restock constantly. None of this stuff needs to be expensive, however. I find bog-standard kitchen scissors up to all tasks I'll ever attempt, including spatchcocking a chicken. And I am more than happy with plastic or melamine teaspoons: in fact, I rather love them, and keep them in old-fashioned French terracotta yogurt pots, out on the kitchen surface (near the kettle since you ask), or in other odd little containers I pick up online or on my travels.

Another item you cannot, in my book (which this is), do without is a plentiful supply of plastic **clips** for sealing opened packets of rice, couscous, frozen peas, you name it. They're cheap, and save a lot of expensive and irritating spillage.

The last of my basic requirements is a **timer**, or rather several timers. These must be portable, or else you're stuck in the kitchen and this defeats the whole object, which is the freedom, perversely, that a kitchen timer gives you.

As someone who can be suckered into buying just about any kind of kitchen appliance, it is interesting how few I feel are actually worth buying. There is, however, a piece of equipment which, before I'd used one, I'd assumed might be another wasteful extravagance, but now wouldn't be without: an **electric rice cooker**. It isn't a coincidence that all rice-eating cultures have a version: these things, which range from basic to luxury, really do work. I wouldn't bother getting one, however, that didn't have a keep-warm facility as well as the usual steaming function. I cannot tell you how much easier it makes your life when you can come home, pour rice and water into the cooker, flick on a switch and just walk away without having to think about it again. And this makes a difference across the board: from feeding children to giving dinner parties. I promise you, it's so much better to club together with friends or colleagues to give someone who's just had a baby one of these than any sort of baby equipment. After my first child, I ate nothing but cheese and chocolate; after my second, and post-rice cooker, I managed to eat a little more healthily. And when my children were small, I'd put the rice cooker on before going out, and know that I could spend a few hours at the ball-pond, swimming pool, park, museum or wherever and come back knowing supper was more or less on the table. All you need to add is some corn niblets or shredded chicken or grated carrots and you're done. And now, when I'm tired and know supper has to be cooked, I click on the rice cooker and am happy in the knowledge that not a potato needs to be peeled and there is one less pot on the stove or in the oven to keep an eye on. Similarly, leftovers can be – as the mantra of

this book has it – made right, by that familiar, reassuring click of a switch.

But before smugness sets in, I feel I must list those greedily bought gadgets that, once home, languished gathering dust in a cupboard under the stairs before being sent, defeatedly, off to the charity shop. I'm ashamed to admit that some of the below went straight – box-fresh, as second-hand sellers say – there without even being granted temporary sanctuary in the cellar.

My Kitchen Gadget Hall of Shame

Although I regard insomnia as an aid to recipe writing, I fear it is no friend to shopping sanity. When I look down the list below, it becomes apparent that all-too-many of what can only be labelled freak purchases have been made online, in the middle of the night and while under the influence of the derangement that comes from sleep-deprivation as well as from the fixation on idiocies as well as anxieties which is the cause of that sleep-deprivation in the first place. It's a mess. And not just in my head: imagine the state of my cupboards!

Super-professional electric ice cream maker

Purchasing this was no act of midnight madness: I actually went to a proper commercial catering equipment outlet to buy this. In my defence, and its, this is more than a piece of equipment, it is a kitchen art installation. It is hugely beautiful, and makes ice cream just as you'd want it to. However, even though it's a commercial machine (which explains its burdensome bulk) it still doesn't make very large quantities. Plus there is no detachable bowl, so washing-up is a nuisance. But a poor workman blames his tools; the truth is I just don't make proper ice cream often enough to have this monster of a machine gleaming reproachfully at me daily from the kitchen surface it dominates. Hence the [no-churn ice cream](#), and the fact that this object has been in a dusty understairs cupboard for a couple of years and is about to take up residence in a touchingly optimistic friend's country kitchen.

Healthy-eating electric grill

I know, I know: what was I thinking? Who was I kidding? Myself, for starters. But just as (and here's an unlikely issuer of the utterance in question) Samuel Beckett said that "probably nothing in the world arouses more false hopes than the first four hours of a diet", so there is nothing that arouses more pleasurable self-delusion than those swollen, sleepless,

post-prandial hours when, yes, actually a diet tomorrow seems positively welcoming. (But then, well full-up, the planning of a diet can seem excitably delicious.) I rather suspect that it was just such a night that ushered in this unwanted item. It's nothing personal, not as far as the grill is concerned, anyway; or rather, as the old Dear John letter goes, it's me not you. And while I was slightly embarrassed at giving just such a piece of equipment to Oxfam, I felt that the benefit to all parties outweighed the irony and poor taste.

Electric bread maker

I would never have bought one myself, since (1) it is the kneading that I enjoy about bread-making, and (2) I don't think having a warm, fresh loaf of bread to eat around the clock is going to do me any favours, but my son – then around ten – came back from staying with a friend and begged for one, even to the extent of being particular about the make and model. Of course, it's my fault for giving in so easily, but I'll take any sort of enthusiasm in the kitchen. However, I can honestly say this had no more than three airings, despite a year in the kitchen before being dispatched to the Great Bakery in the Sky. [The Irish Oaten Rolls](#) – made without yeast, kneading or machinery – provide me with enduring justification for the finality of my decision, but if you're nervous about bread-making and like the notion of the machine baking away overnight, you may want to ignore my prejudices here.

Electric jam maker

I have no excuses for this and no one to blame, either. I'm sorry but I am stumped as to why I even considered this, given that, while I don't mind kitchen gadgets that help me, I positively don't want machinery to do it *for* me – and what's more, I actually like a light spot of easy jam-making (and I cite the [Jumbleberry Jam](#) as evidence). But fellow addicts might have some sympathy for my weakness in the face of convincing cookery catalogue copy. The genius of certain companies to make one feel, against the dictates of reason or even common sense, that one cannot live for one more moment without the nonsense they are selling is to be

applauded rather than excoriated. The ability to invent an urgent feeling or need is the nearest thing to rhetoric that we get these days. Let's gloss over the fact that this machine didn't even make it out of its packing box before being turned into a charitable offering.

Electric cheese graters

Another embarrassment, and actually quite an expensive one. I should have guessed by the price that this was intended for professional use. I imagined a device that would make endless teatime grating of Red Leicester less laborious and time-consuming, and got instead something that turns wheels of Parmesan into powdery dust for a deli. The next version was more domestic in scale, but not as beautiful and entirely ineffective. Serves me right for my laziness, I suppose; and I am happy to pay the penalty for stupidity. I will never be disloyal to the rotary grater again.

Electric slow cooker

I had one of these when I was young and enthusiastic and had to spend long days in the office. I remember startling some poor man who came to read the meter at 7.30 in the morning only to find me browning onions and stewing steak at the stove before leaving them to cook in their crockpot till late into the night, or whenever I was allowed home. Even then, when there was a reason why I needed to rely on this as a cooking method, I didn't really like the way the top of what was cooking turned dark and dried out – but what induced me to buy one recently, given that (1) I work at home and so can leave an actual oven on low for as long as I need without worrying about it, and (2) there is no necessity for leaving anything to cook for 12 hours when 3 would do nicely? Another one of my purchases to be sent box-fresh to a more deserving cause than me.

Electric sauce maker

In my defence this was obtained in the line of a duty; I was testing out machines for a piece in *Vogue* some time in the last century. Still, this ludicrous piece of kit somehow stayed

clogging up a kitchen shelf long after it was evident that it had no place in my life nor I in its. For all I know, it's still hogging space in whatever charity shop I shamefacedly donated it to.

Electric waffle maker

Now, I do know what lies behind the purchase of this: namely, the all-too-familiar combination of optimism and self-delusion that always turns the shopper into such easy prey. I can make pancakes for fifteen children at the weekend without it being any kind of big deal (although now they're teenagers, it has to be said, it's never early in the morning – or indeed morning at all) but just attempting waffles for my three was more stressful than you can believe possible. I know it's my failure – that it's my incompetence with the machine that's to blame – but who wants to pay to have that pointed out? And just to highlight my foolishness, I haven't yet implemented its move from cupboard to charity shop; I still delude myself that I am going to be that person who rustles up waffles for breakfast, one day.

Soup-making super-blender

I saw this once at a trade fair in San Francisco, and yearned for it for years. The fact that you couldn't actually buy one in the UK at that time, of course made it all the more alluring. Cut to many years later, just recently in fact, and I blew the huge amount this cost in a frenzy of enthusiasm. But ever since its arrival, I have been laid low with post-consumption *tristesse* (what the ad-men call post-purchase dissonance) and feel strangely alienated from it. And if truth be told, I am actually too frightened of it to use it or even understand the many instructions. But I like to pretend that one day I'll triumph, and what's more that the cost of the thing will be as nothing to the culinary rewards it showers upon me. So, it can be guaranteed long-term occupancy under the stairs.

Electric super-juicer

This purchase pre-dates the above, and I have long since given it to a friend who felt that a life and diet of non-stop juicing beckoned. I don't know why I got it in the first place (though it was very long ago, too long ago to recollect my state of

mind, but I can infer it wasn't good) since I don't now see how it can make sense to have all the sugar of fruit without the fibre. (I think that's what led me later to the super-blender – all the fibre stays in.) Plus the mess the super-juicer makes is exhausting: there is a huge amount of skin and pulp that needs to be cleaned out between each use. And on top of that, it is not a machine that ends up paying for itself, so to speak: the amount you have to spend on fruit to keep this hungry beast fed is alarming.

Yogurt maker

I think this owes its shortlived presence in my kitchen to a combination of nostalgia (my grandmother had one) and internet-induced new-age fervour for the miracles of the bacteria to be found in real, home-made yogurt. It didn't stand a chance.

Electric carving knife

I didn't know that, if you were a bad carver, you became a dangerously bad carver when equipped with an electric knife. Or maybe I should rephrase this: I became a dangerously bad carver. Plus, the horrendous rasping buzz (I start off as a slightly noise-phobic person in the first place) is guaranteed to make every meal a headache. Still, I'm told such a tool is excellent for slicing frozen bread ...





KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL

BOILING WATER

BAKING

SILICONE LINING

BAKING POWDER/BICARBONATE OF SODA

PASTRY BRUSH

BUTTERMILK

BREAD & BACON

SCISSOR-SNIPPING

VERMOUTH

COLD-PRESSED RAPESEED OIL

LEMON & LIME

CSI GLOVES

TEA STAINS

STARCH

STOCK

FLOWERS

DRESSING

SUSHI RICE

CUP & SPOON MEASURES

LONG PASTA

CAKE TESTING

FOIL TRAYS

PLASTIC TUBS

SEA SALT

FRYING

GRIDDLING

COOKING FOR PEOPLE

SOUVENIR

This is a compendium of my own shortcuts and practices, many of them inherited from my mother and, for the rest, innovations of my own, according to twin characteristics which in most of life could be considered flaws, but in cooking are a positive inspiration: greed and impatience. These characteristics, too, are inherited.

♥ When I have friends coming for supper, or even when there is just a big pan of pasta to be cooked for everyday tea, I put the **water** on to boil before I need to start cooking, and then leave it at the back of the hob, with the heat turned off but with a lid on, so that when I have to get food on the table, I don't then have to wait for half an hour for the water to come to the boil; this way it should be no more than a matter of minutes. It is also worth bearing this in mind for any type of cooking that needs – as pasta does – abundant water.

♥ If I'm cooking just a small amount of pasta – supper for a couple of people, say – or a quick boiled egg with toast for a midnight snack, I pour water from the tap into a saucepan, just to about 1 cm depth, and put it on the stove over a high heat, keeping an eye on it. While that's coming to the boil, I fill an electric kettle and let it do ditto. (It's important not to leave the kitchen while all this boiling is going on.) Thus, the pan and its contents are hot when you pour in the boiling water from the kettle (beware spluttering – you may prefer to do this off the heat) and you won't have to wait for it to come back to the boil.

♥ I know I bang on and on about the fact that, when **baking**, all ingredients must be at room temperature, but I should add that it is important, too, that the bowl isn't icy cold. To take the chill off it, fill the bowl you're going to be mixing in with

warm water from the tap and let it stand for 10 minutes, before emptying it out, drying it off and proceeding with the recipe.

♥ If you can't find baking spray to grease a cake tin, or whatever, simply dab some flavourless oil such as groundnut onto a piece of kitchen roll and wipe that around the insides of the tin, re-dabbing and re-wiping until you feel you have safe coverage. Should you think you've overdone it and your pan is not merely greased but drippingly greasy, then put an old newspaper on the kitchen surface, sit a wire cooling rack on top of it and upturn the overgreased tin on to the cooling rack so that excess oil can drip onto the newspaper.

♥ If you are a habitual baker – and I'm not trying to make it sound like a crime – then you would be well advised to buy a roll of re-usable non-stick “parchment” (in fact, it's made of a **silicone** material). Cut out circles to the diameter of your various cake tins and let the lining just live inside them, so you're ready to go – bar a little greasing around the sides – when you feel the baking impulse come upon you. I have also cut out a couple of oblong shapes to fit over cookie baking sheets. After each use, I just wash the lining, put it in the turned-off oven to dry, and then back it goes to its tin of origin, ready for the next outing.

♥ I don't bother to keep both plain and self-raising flour in the house; if you don't use the self-raising flour regularly it'll probably lose its raising power before you finish the packet, anyway. And it's also worth keeping an eye on the use-by dates on the tubs of raising agents. If a cake doesn't rise, the usual culprit is an out-of-date tub of **baking powder or bicarbonate of soda**. My recipes tend to stipulate plain flour (which is the flour you'll need for a white sauce, say, as well) plus whatever is the necessary amount of raising agent; but a helpful rule of thumb to turn plain flour into self-raising flour (though because it's not all-in-one, it isn't strictly *self-raising*) is to add 2 teaspoons baking powder for each 150g of plain flour. This can never be, however, more than a rule of thumb; the chemical process is affected by the other ingredients in the recipe. If whatever I'm baking contains cocoa, yogurt or

buttermilk, I add ¼ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda per 150g plain flour along with the baking powder (which does itself contain bicarb in its mix, but in this case will need extra boosting power).

♥ Not only is bicarb the best fridge and general all-purpose cleaner (just dissolve some in a little water and dab or scrub as the situation or stain demands or leave a ramekin one-third full of bicarb in the fridge to banish smells), it is also the first thing you should take if you feel a bout of cystitis might be coming on. Dissolve 1½ teaspoons in a glass of warm water and knock back, wincing. This might just help until you can consult your doctor.

♥ Even if you are not a baker, do get a **pastry brush**. You can brush soft or melted butter in place of oil, to grease a tin, but it's also a good tool to oil steaks, help a chicken crisp up as it roasts by dipping the brush into the pan juices and daubing the top of the chicken with it. I advise a silicone brush rather than a bristle one: it can be cleaned in the dishwasher, and it won't moult onto whatever you're cooking.

♥ **Buttermilk** has a long fridge life, so it's worth stocking up with a couple of tubs when you buy it, but if you can't find any, you can turn fresh milk into a buttermilk substitute: pour 250ml milk into a jug, add 1 x 15ml tablespoon lemon juice (or vinegar), and let it stand for 5 minutes before using as directed in the recipe. Or just use, to make the same amount, 200ml runny natural yogurt plus 50ml milk; I never mind much whether it's full-fat, semi- or completely skimmed here, but semi-skimmed is supposed to work best.

♥ Always freeze slices of **bread and rashers of bacon** in pairs (as well as in their packets), as you may find yourself without when you don't have time for a massive thawing session. And while we're on bread, if you have some – this time from an unsliced loaf – that's staling, then slice it, tear it into rough pieces and process it in batches to make breadcrumbs. Fill freezer bags with crumbs and clip or tie them tightly before stashing them in the deep-freeze; they do not need to be thawed before use.

♥ When cooking in a hurry, go full tilt with your **scissors**. Not only does it make life easier than getting out a chopping board and knife or mezzaluna for snipping herbs, but it's the best way to top and tail beans (and the best way, too, to teach children to do it) as well as to chop vegetables. Sometimes, though, it makes sense to scissor-chop once the vegetables have been cooked and are sitting draining in the colander. My abiding memory is of my mother standing over a steamy pile of spinach, attacking it furiously with her scissors. Very Hitchcock. (Perhaps it is that maternal frenzy which makes me so drawn to this primitive but threatening tool.) In fact, I use scissors for so much else, too: slicing bacon into strips to let them fall into a hot pan; cutting up cold chicken or ham to add to a salad; purée-ing the tomatoes in an opened can by plunging in my scissors and then snipping like mad.

♥ I don't like to open a bottle of wine when I need only a glassful for cooking, so I keep a bottle of dry white **vermouth** (for choice, Noilly Prat, which, at home when I was young, we used to call jokingly, English-style, "nolly pratt", as it remains for me to this day) by the stove and splosh into a pan in place of white wine. If I need more than, say, an espresso cup's worth, I tend to water it down a little as it has more bite than wine. Similarly, I am happy to use ruby port, diluted to make it less punchy, in place of red wine, although I more usually substitute dry marsala, a bottle of which is also kept in reach by my stove.

♥ Apropos of which, I once read an American chef in the *New York Times* who said that no serious cook would keep bottles of oil or anything else by the stove, as the heat would destroy their finer qualities. I must conclude, therefore, that I am not a serious cook. I find that it's having the ingredients to hand which makes me use them, and therefore makes what I'm cooking better. Thus, along with my regular olive oil, basil-infused oil, chilli-infused oil and garlic-infused oil, I keep bottles of soy, Worcestershire sauce, fish sauce, dry white vermouth, amontillado sherry, marsala, Chinese cooking wine, sake and mirin. If I can't cook with spontaneity, a lot of the

fun and interest goes out of it for me, so this way I do cook enough for the contents of said stove-encircling bottles to run out before they spoil.

♥ There has been much talk about the use of local rapeseed oil (well, local only if you're British) as a bio-fuel, but it's not often that being a Brit can make one feel culinarily superior. So now is the time to jump up and down about **cold-pressed rapeseed oil**, which has a gorgeously mustardy and nutty flavour and beautiful golden colour. I use it in place of extra-virgin olive oil more or less exclusively: it's much less expensive and, I'm beginning to think, even more delicious. I make dressings with it, dribble it on toast in place of butter, douse vegetables with it and take a bottle to people's houses (so evangelical is my fervour) in place of wine. My rapeseed oil bottle of choice is Farrington's Mellow Yellow, but there are a few good ones out there now. Any search engine will tell you that rapeseed oil is the equivalent of canola oil, but the cold-pressed, golden viscous oil is worlds away from the paler, runnier, tasteless cooking oil that is canola oil. I have tried a cold-pressed canola oil from North America, but as yet nothing for me comes close to that made from the yellow seeds of home.

♥ I couldn't live in a house without **lemons**, so it's easy for me to reach over and use the zest or juice as I cook without much, if any, forethought. Limes are a different matter: not only do they often start off mean and unyielding, but after even a small time in the fridge, and less time out of it, they become as hard as golf balls. I now make sure I have a stash of plastic lime juice in the house, which is to say, lime juice that comes in a violently green (often lime-shaped) **squeezy bottle**. This has been my practice for so long, I am enormously relaxed, even unapologetic, about it. Out of interest, I made some compare-and-contrast studies with side-by-side recipes using freshly squeezed lime and plastic lime: you couldn't have told the difference. Now, I may have been lucky with the brand I used, but it's worth giving it a go, to judge for yourself.

♥ When I whisk egg whites, to make sure the bowl isn't greasy at all, I halve a lemon and wipe the cut half all around the bowl. The acid will get rid of the grease, and will help the whites whisk voluminously.

♥ I like to keep a packet of disposable vinyl gloves (commonly referred to in these pages as **CSI gloves**) by my washing-up paraphernalia. You can wear these before prodding hot joints of meat or dismembering roast chicken as well as for shredding cold meat by hand. I wear them for peeling blanched tomatoes and while I chop these, too, as the gloves stop my hands getting sore from the acid. And they're a must for any beetroot preparation, unless you want a touch of the Lady Macbeths. Once you start using them, you'd be surprised how often you find them invaluable, not to say necessary.

♥ Without said gloves, if you are working with anything sticky – meatballs as much as cookies – keep your hands covered with a film of cold water: just dunk your hands at regular intervals under the cold tap. If what you're dealing with is very, very sticky (like say, the **Rice Krispie Brownies**, then work a small amount of flavourless oil into your hands as if it were expensive hand-cream, and they will become non-stick baking utensils in themselves. Similarly, if you are using honey or syrup in a recipe, measure out the oil first (if there's some called for) or dab the spoon or cup with oil so that the goo doesn't stick as you're measuring it out. I like to oil, lightly, whatever I'm moulding cookies with, too.

♥ I am a compulsive tea-drinker and the **tea** I like is proper builder's tea; to get rid of the brown that my mugs are inevitably stained with, I soak each mug in warm water to which I've added 1 tablespoon lime juice or – cheaper – vinegar.

♥ If you are a bread maker, keep the water you've used to boil potatoes in (or, indeed, pasta), as the **starch** in the water helps the yeast in your bread to rise. Though you can also just dissolve 1 teaspoon instant mashed potato granules in a mug of water for the same effect.

♥ If you've cooked a ham, and are not sure when you'll get round to using the **stock** for a soup, cool and chill the liquid quickly, then freeze it in 500ml batches (in an airtight container for up to 3 months). The same goes for any other stock you might have. It's too painful to leave any of it for too long in the fridge and then have to throw the precious liquid away.

♥ Similarly, should you have any wine left in an open bottle, or stout or cider, freeze that, too (in an airtight container for up to 3 months), to use in cooking at a later date. Alcohol does not freeze solid, but to a slush. I generally let anything fizzy go flat before I freeze it. And if you do happen to have some flat coke left by children too teenagery to remember to screw the top back on, use that (freezing it first, if you like) to cook a ham in.

♥ This is an old lesson of my mother's, but it bears repeating, I hope: never put anything on the table that interferes with people's eyeline. So, no big bunch of **flowers**, but rather think of putting a bowl of lemons or aubergines, something beautiful that will get used and costs less than the blooms into the bargain. And if you do want flowers, keep them low. Even garage-forecourt flowers look pretty cut down in an old mustard pot or two.

♥ Talking of mustard pots, I am afraid I have just counted 7 empty ones near my stove. When they're all but finished I don't wash them out before making **dressing** in them, but use the mustard that's left clinging to the base of the pot to add flavour to the dressing. It's hard to beat a dressing made by pouring cold-pressed rapeseed oil into a bit of English mustard, sprinkling in salt and spritzing in lemon juice before shaking into a rich, gold ointment to dribble over a salad. If making a dressing from the leavings in a Dijon or wholegrain mustard pot, use olive oil and squeeze a little honey into it along with the lemon and salt.

♥ I also make dressings out of the dregs in a bottle of soy sauce: add a dot of sesame oil and fish sauce and a splosh of mirin and shake before using. If your soy sauce bottle is too

narrow-necked, pour everything into an old jam jar to shake it up in.

♥ Perhaps because I've got a **rice cooker**, I cook rice an awful lot, and my newest enthusiasm (though no more prized than my every day favourite, brown basmati) is **sushi rice**. I adore its sweet stickiness, as do my children, so I always keep a sackful in the house. Now, I don't think I'd ever be able to make sushi – just don't have the patience or dexterity – though maybe one day I'll try. Until then, I am very happy to use sushi rice to mop up chicken teriyaki or **sweet and sour chicken** and just about anything else. I do use my rice cooker here, but if you're cooking manually, as it were, just follow packet instructions. And should your instructions be in Japanese, let me tell you that you need to allow (as normal, really) 75–100g rice per person. And because rice is easier to cook by volume than by weight (in the sense that it is the ratio of rice to water that counts), in practice I use an American cup measure (which takes about 175g sushi rice, and see below) for 2 people. You need to rinse the rice until the water runs clear and then put it in a pan with 1¼ cups cold water. Bring it to the boil, then clamp a lid on, turn the heat under the pan to the lowest it will go and leave it at a very gentle simmer for 20 minutes or until the water is absorbed. Fork through (rice of any kind should never be stirred with a spoon but with a fork) and serve.

I love sushi rice for supper with nothing more than some soy sauce and mixed seeds forked through it, though it is a special treat if there's some leftover chicken I can add, warmed through in a little chicken stock, too.

♥ I couldn't cope without a couple of sets of **spoon measures and US cup measures**. The spoon measures – ¼ teaspoon, ½ teaspoon, 1 teaspoon and 1 tablespoon – are needed for baking, since in baking these measurements are precise, rather than referring to the size of your tableware, and I find that the cup measures are very useful for liquids. This is slightly off-licence, so to speak, as in the States they are really used for chopped vegetables, grated cheese and dry ingredients. You

may notice that liquid measurements in my recipes tend to be along the lines of 60ml, 80ml, 125ml or 250ml: these are the capacities of a US $\frac{1}{4}$ cup, $\frac{1}{3}$ cup, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup and 1 cup, respectively.

♥ I weigh **long pasta**, such as spaghetti or linguine, by sitting a mug or tall glass, or similarly shaped receptacle, on my flat, digital kitchen scale (not as pretty as olde style ones, but better in action), pressing the button to reset to zero, and then putting the pasta in the mug as if putting flowers in a vase.

♥ I advise against using skewers to test whether cakes are cooked inside but if you don't have a **cake tester**, do as the Italians and use an uncooked piece of spaghetti.

♥ I am never without a stash of supposedly throwaway **foil trays** in my cupboard. I say supposedly only because they probably would survive a couple of uses with a wash-up in between; certainly, when I use them to set the **polenta**, I give them a bit of a wipe down and re-use. But where they come into their own is when you're baking something gungy and you're either frightened of getting it out of the tin or unenthusiastic about the washing-up you'll have to do later, or both. In fact, I have largely dispensed with real metal tins for tray bakes and pretty much whatever else I can get away with now: the sticky **cocktail sausages** are a case in point.

I used to find it hard to be sure of where I could get the foil trays, but now I have discovered that a foil barbecue drip pan measures 30 x 20cm (and can be bought online off-season) which is perfect for most of my uses, I can relax in the knowledge that I won't find myself without and left sadly lacking at my time of need. (If it helps further, anything that fits into a 30 x 20cm rectangular foil tray can also be cooked in a 25cm square roasting or baking tin.) It's also useful to have slightly larger, or certainly deeper, foil tins for roasting rather than baking. I can't tell you how comforting a tin you don't have to wash up is if you're cooking for a party or during a particularly exhausting weekend. And as for eco-concerns, I always used to take the line that if you had to make a choice between saving the environment or your sanity, you

have to go for your sanity; but since an actively Green friend of mine has told me how eco-friendly the foil is (easy to recycle *and* no harmful detergents have been used), you can smugly revel in your laziness as much as your virtue. I think that's what we'd call a result.

♥ I am a bit of a leftover queen – throwing away the scantest morsel is agony for me – but I cannot live successfully with those little Tupperware-type **tubs** with their snap-on lids that I remember our fridge being filled with when I was a child. The shortcoming is entirely mine: I have never managed to go longer than a month without losing a lid. I have now moved into commercial catering take-out tubs, which make me feel not only gloriously efficient as I stack them in fridge and freezer, but also as though I've got my own home-deli. And they can go into the microwave, which is helpful; they aren't really reusable, but I do sometimes go twice round the block with them. Because they are sold wholesale only, and I buy mine online, they are not very expensive per piece; but you do have to buy in bulk, which can be a problem. My advice to get round this is to club together with friends: you can order the minimum 500 between you and share the containers out when the huge box arrives.

♥ I overwhelmingly prefer **sea salt** flakes (Maldon for choice) when I cook or eat, and because of its volume (you can get about twice as much pouring salt in a spoon of the same capacity) it is less salty than pouring salt. If you are replacing it with pouring salt, therefore, use half as much. But I'd much rather you didn't ...

♥ If you don't want onions to brown when you fry them, sprinkle with salt; the salt makes the onion give off water, which in turn stops it **frying** too fiercely.

♥ When you're cooking in butter, add a drop of oil to stop the butter burning.

♥ If you're using a **griddle**, make sure always to oil the meat or fish or vegetables not the pan, or everything will smoke like mad.

♥ This is so much easier to say than to do, but try, when you're **cooking for people**, not to apologize nervously for what you've made, alerting them to some failure only you might be aware of, or indeed, might have invented. Besides, it only creates tension, and although I do believe food is important, atmosphere matters so much more.

♥ I always buy a tea towel wherever I am on holiday, no matter how embarrassingly touristy it is (or I feel), and the benefits are threefold: the **souvenir** is light to carry (to say the least) and will fit even if you're going hand-luggage only; every time you use it you will remember when and where you got it; and the mix of tea towels stops any kitchen from looking over-designed or styled. A kitchen should never look decorated; it just needs to feel lived in.



Part I

KITCHEN
QUANDARIES

WHAT'S FOR TEA?

HURRY UP, I'M HUNGRY!

EASY DOES IT

COOK IT BETTER

MY SWEET SOLUTION

OFF THE CUFF

WHAT'S FOR TEA?

Mortadella and mozzarella frittata

Frittata sandwich

Crustless pizza

Crisp chicken cutlets *with salad on the side*

Chicken escalope sandwich

Cheesy chilli

Barbecued beef mince

Sweet and sour chicken

Chicken teriyaki

Pasta alla genovese *with potatoes, green beans and pesto*

Turkey meatballs in tomato sauce

African drumsticks

Spaghetti with Marmite

Chicken fajitas

There are times when I, a food obsessive, a food addict even, find it difficult to think of what to cook. It doesn't happen often and I recover my greedy wits promptly enough, but I have to admit my weakest area, the one most likely to buckle under pressure, is the children's tea. If I don't get myself focused at the beginning of the week, I find that as teatime approaches, which it rapidly does and daily (and I think my energy is at its lowest point at around 4.30 pm), I begin to flag and start opening and shutting freezer and fridge doors with more frenzy than enthusiasm.

My children are now of an age when they come back from school, pick at everything in the fridge, don't eat up all their tea, and then pick again at bedtime. You understand, it

can make mealtimes fraught. Plus, children are given so much homework now, which can cast rather a pall on proceedings.

I suppose, too, I find this – I think many parents do – rather a sensitive issue. We all cherish that fantasy of the heart-warming family meal when everyone discusses their day and the table resounds with chat and loving laughter. Oh dear, please tell me it *is* a fantasy.

But it is what it is, as the contemporary wisdom has it, and from my very first book, which dedicated a whole chapter to weaning and feeding babies and toddlers, my recipes for children have taken a strictly autobiographical route. What other way is there of writing about food? My books can only ever be a record of what I cook. I remember when my daughter – sixteen at the time of writing – was little she asked me for “children’s food”. I was – and remain – quite adamant that there is no such thing as children’s food, that food is food, and that’s that. I’m not saying I don’t sometimes indulge a childish taste or cook something I might not think of making if I were eating alone, but the recipes that follow are not ones that apply only to parents with children to feed.

Yes, it might seem a bit eccentric to serve up the Crustless Pizza for grown-up company, but my friends would probably be thrilled. The Chicken Fajitas make a perfect supper, and the Pasta alla genovese certainly earns a place in my Last Meal menu. But before I go on, I should address the salt and sugar issue. I admit that as my children have grown older, I have got more relaxed. But, those who wish to limit their children’s intake can reduce amounts freely; and I myself have just discovered the joys of agave nectar, a natural, unprocessed syrup with a fashionably low GI, which you can use in place of sugar. I actually find it sweeter, so use about 25% less. But, as ever, you should go by taste.

I suppose my wish is that my children learn what a pleasure real food is, are not hedged about too much with can’ts and shouldn’ts and grow up understanding that eating is something to take pleasure in and not feel guilty about.



Mortadella and mozzarella frittata

In the great professional kitchens of old, French chefs would check a novice's ability by making him (and yes, it always was a him) cook an omelette. To ensure sufficient lightness of touch and swiftness at the stove, all the better to keep the omelette sufficiently *baveuse*, Chef would insist the pan be cooked on the back burner, while the front burner licked ferociously at the applicant's tender wrist. Yup, that's why I go for frittata not omelette. The Italian version is so much less stress-inducing: no flipping needed, either of pan or mind; you simply preheat the grill and transfer to it the fat, eggy cake, once it's cooked halfway through on the hob.

This is a particularly voluptuous example of the Italianate version, the Marilyn Monroe (in accord with the two Ms of the key ingredients) of the frittata world.



Serves 4–8, depending on age and appetite

6 eggs

125g mortadella, chopped

125g fresh mozzarella cheese ball, chopped

1 x 15ml tablespoon chopped parsley, plus extra for sprinkling

1 x 15ml tablespoon freshly grated Parmesan cheese

sea salt flakes and pepper, to taste

1 x 15ml tablespoon (15g) butter

drop garlic oil

♥ Turn on the grill so it can get hot. Beat the eggs in a bowl, then add the chopped or diced mortadella and mozzarella.

♥ Whisk in the tablespoon of parsley, along with the Parmesan, salt and pepper, remembering that both mortadella and Parmesan will provide a certain saline hit as it is.

♥ Heat the butter and oil in a frying pan (with ovenproof handle) or cast-iron skillet approx. 25cm in diameter and, once it's hot and foamy, add the omelette mixture.

♥ Cook for about 5 minutes over a gentle heat, *without stirring*, until the frittata is set underneath and golden.

♥ Transfer the pan to the hot grill (keeping the handle away from the heat) and cook the frittata until it is set on top – *don't* leave the pan unattended as this can happen quite quickly, and wear oven gloves to remove the pan.



♥ Leave it to stand for a couple of minutes, then run a knife or spatula round the edge of the frittata and ease it out of the pan, keeping it the same way up, onto a board or plate. Cut into 8 triangles like a cake, then sprinkle with the extra parsley and serve with green beans or salad.

Making leftovers right

Frittata sandwich

Leftovers should be covered and refrigerated as soon as possible and eaten within 1–2 days. As with the [Crisp Chicken Cutlets](#), think no further than sliding a wedge of this – cold – into bread or a bun, to make a [sandwich](#), as offered under glass counters in bars all over Italy.

Crustless pizza

I wouldn't want to go bandying around the name of this recipe in Naples, but this is what I call it. If it helps, think of it as a cheese toastie, only without the bread. Whatever, it makes a fast and easy supper on days when you're too tired to think about what to cook. This gets made – pretty well makes itself – before you've even realized you're in the kitchen.

Where I've suggested some sliced chorizo to adorn the top, you could as easily sprinkle in some sweetcorn or snipped ham, or just about anything you fancy and can get away with. But rest assured, there are plenty of times I've cooked this without any final addition: just egg, flour, salt, milk and cheese. This is comfort: quicktime.

Serves 2–4, depending on age and appetite

1 egg

100g plain flour

sea salt flakes or pouring salt, to taste

250ml full-fat milk

butter for greasing

100g grated Cheddar cheese

50g small chorizo or pepperoni slices, approx. 2cm diameter (optional)

1 x round ovenproof pie dish, approx. 20cm diameter

♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6. Beat the egg with the flour, salt and milk to make a smooth batter.

♥ Grease a round ovenproof pie dish, then stir half the grated cheese into the batter, before pouring it into the dish.

♥ Bake for 30 minutes. Take the dish out of the oven, sprinkle with the remaining cheese, and add the chorizo or pepperoni

(if using) – or anything else – now, too. Return to the oven and cook for another 2 or 3 minutes.

♥ Once the cheese on top is melted and looks burnished gold on the crustless pizza, take it out of the oven and serve cut into slices. A green or tomato salad on the side would not be a bad idea ...



Crisp chicken cutlets

with salad on the side

I suppose these are really grown-up chicken nuggets, although it may make you feel better if you throw yourself into Italian mode and consider them *scaloppine di pollo*. But when I'm eating food like this – crisp coating, tender meat within – I don't think I care what it's called.

I'm not trying to strong-arm you into the salad I love to eat alongside – baby spinach leaves, or sometimes rocket, with some diced tomato and Parmesan – but such is my fervour that I feel I must append the recipe (such as it is).

The fresh breadcrumbs I specify are, as ever, really staled breadcrumbs but I feel they must come from something that has been recognizably a loaf of bread rather than from a tub. My freezer is full of crumbs that I've ground and stashed there, but if yours isn't then you could use matzo meal instead, though you'll need to double the amount; it's so fine – even the coarser ground one – relative to breadcrumbs that you need to bolster quantities to ensure a sufficiently sturdy and crisp carapace. If you can't find buttermilk easily, you can use a 4/1 mixture of runny plain yogurt/full-fat milk, or mix 250ml semi-skimmed milk with 1 tablespoon lemon juice or white wine vinegar.



Serves 4

4 chicken breast fillets, skinless and boneless

1 x 284ml pot buttermilk (or see introduction above)

1 x 15ml tablespoon Worcestershire sauce

125g fresh breadcrumbs (see introduction above)

1 teaspoon celery salt, or ½ teaspoon for younger children

¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper

1 teaspoon dried thyme

50g Parmesan cheese, grated

oil for frying, such as groundnut

4 x 15ml tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

♥ Unroll a large piece of clingfilm, then open out the chicken breasts and lay them on the clingfilm. Cover the fanned-out chicken breasts with another piece of clingfilm, and bash with a rolling pin until they are thin, but still whole. (If the underside sections come away, don't worry.)

♥ Whisk the buttermilk with the Worcestershire sauce in a shallow bowl, or put it into a freezer bag and squish to mix. Then add the flattened chicken pieces to the bowl or freezer

bag and leave out for about 30 minutes – or refrigerate overnight if you've got time – to marinate.

♥ Preheat the oven to 150°C/gas mark 2, if you're using a smaller frying pan and want to keep the cutlets warm as you fry them. Mix the breadcrumbs, celery salt, cayenne, thyme and Parmesan in a wide, shallow dish. Then, once the chicken has had its steeping, lift out the buttermilky pieces and press into the breadcrumb mixture one at a time.

♥ Coat the fillets on both sides with the seasoned crumbs and then lay them on a wire rack, the sort you'd use for cooling cakes.

♥ Heat the oil in a frying pan – just enough to cover the base with about 5mm oil.

♥ Once the oil is hot, fry the bigger pieces of chicken for about 3 minutes per side, and the smaller bits from the underside of the breast for about 2 minutes per side. As you remove the cooked pieces of chicken, blot them on kitchen roll and, if you wish, keep them warm in a low oven (on a baking sheet) as indicated above, or serve them as you go. However you choose to dish up, serve these crisp chicken cutlets sprinkled with chopped parsley. You could consider a lemon wedge on the side, too, and the salad ([see here](#)).

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The chicken can be marinated 1 day ahead in the buttermilk mixture. Store in fridge until ready to breadcrumb and use. Leftovers should be refrigerated as soon as possible and eaten within 1–2 days.

FREEZE NOTE

For escalopes 2–3mm thick: the marinated and crumb-coated chicken can be put on parchment-lined baking sheets, covered with clingfilm and frozen. When solid, transfer to resealable bags and store for up to 3 months. Fry direct from frozen over medium–low heat for 4–5 minutes each side. Check the chicken is cooked through before serving.

Salad on the side



2 x 15ml tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

2 teaspoons red wine vinegar

salt and pepper, to taste

2 good-sized tomatoes, de-seeded and cut into small dice

1 x 180g bag salad spinach or rocket, or salad leaves of your choice

50g Parmesan flakes

♥ Whisk together the oil and vinegar in a bowl and season with salt and pepper, then add the tomato dice.

♥ When you are ready to eat, add the spinach and Parmesan and toss to mix.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The tomato can be cut 1 day ahead. Cover tightly and refrigerate.

Making leftovers right

Chicken escalope sandwich

*There is no better way to eat a leftover breaded **escalope** – whatever the meat, frankly – than properly all’Italiana, that’s to say, cold and stuffed together with some rocket leaves into a split ciabatta roll, which may or may not be spread with mayo: think Mediterranean sub. I salivate at the very thought. A few tomatoes alongside, as well as a glass of beer so cold it hurts and you’ve got yourself a simply heavenly snatched supper.*

Cheesy chilli

I can't count how often I find myself stirring a pan with some mince in it, day to day. Not that this is anything to apologize for: it's easy, quick and comforting. I could probably measure out my life in chilli bowls, and that's no bad thing either. This recipe draws again on a favourite time-saving practice of mine, which is to start off with some paprika-piccante chorizo sausages that give off a fiery orange oil in which to sear and season the mince.

Tex-Mex custom decrees that chilli be eaten with – among other embellishments – a handful of grated cheese thrown on top. This is merely an impatient rendering of the same, whereby you simply chop or tear some mozzarella and stir it in to the chilli in the pan, just long enough to let it melt into the meat.

If you've got the time, and have managed to think ahead, you could put some baking potatoes into the oven to provide a substantial vessel for the cheesy chilli (it will also make the chilli go further) but I don't think anyone would argue with a bowl of tortilla chips alongside, or indeed a beautiful loaf of bread, freshly sliced for dunking. All I'd add further would be a crisp green salad, sharply dressed and a small cup of chopped fresh coriander for all-round anointing. My son, however, prefers to eat this with some steam-swollen barley, in which case the whole becomes, naturally enough, Charley.



Serves 4 hungry teenage boys or 6 normal people

110g (2 sausages) chorizo, cut into fat coins and halved

500g beef mince, preferably organic

½ teaspoon cocoa powder

1 teaspoon dried oregano

1 x 15ml tablespoon sundried tomato paste or tomato purée

1 x 400g can chopped tomatoes

125ml water, swilled from empty tomato can

2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce

1 x 400g can kidney beans, drained and rinsed

2 x 125g fresh mozzarella cheese balls, chopped

sea salt flakes and pepper, to taste

handful chopped fresh coriander, to serve (optional)

♥ Put a smallish cast-iron casserole or heavy-based pan (that comes with a lid) on the heat and add the semi-circles of chunky chorizo, cooking just long enough for them to start giving off a lucent orange oil.

- ♥ Add the mince, trying to break it up a little with a wooden fork and turn it in the oil to combine with the chorizo.
- ♥ When the meat has begun to lose its all-over raw colour, sprinkle with the cocoa and oregano, dollop in the paste or purée and give a good stir before adding the canned tomatoes. Swill the empty can out with 125ml water, and empty that in turn into the pan, followed by the Worcestershire sauce and the drained, rinsed kidney beans, then let it all come to a bubble.
- ♥ Turn the heat down low, clamp on the lid and let the chilli simmer gently for 20 minutes. I often remove it to a cold dish (for efficient cooling) when it's cooked, to reheat and eat later. (I've done that here, and reheated in a frying pan, which is why you see the chilli in what might seem an inappropriate vessel.)
- ♥ If you're moving seamlessly on, remove the lid now, turn up the heat until the chilli starts to bubble with vigour again, then turn off the heat and stir in the mozzarella. Season and serve immediately, sprinkling with coriander, if so desired.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The chilli, without the cheese, can be made 2 days ahead. Cool, cover and refrigerate as quickly as possible. Reheat gently in frying pan or large saucepan until piping hot then add cheese as directed in recipe.

FREEZE NOTE

The cooled chilli, without the cheese, can be frozen in airtight container for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.

Barbecued beef mince

For us, at home, this is barbecue beef sauce cowboy-style (well, we are all entitled to our delusions; indeed, we rely on them) which is to say it's a meat sauce either sandwiched inside a soft white roll to make a Sloppy Joe, or Sloppy José, or spooned just as it is, out of individual bowls, with a tray of toasted cheesy tortilla chips alongside for dipping and all-round augmentation of pleasure. There are many working days on which this and this alone is the crucial factor in staving off maternal meltdown. I've never served it with pasta, but it's a possibility – and if you were to, I'd advise a small, chunky-ish pasta, such as chifferi rigati or ditalini.



Serves 4–8, depending on age and appetite

1 stick celery, cut into chunks

3 cloves garlic, peeled

2 onions, peeled and halved

150g rindless smoked streaky bacon
2 carrots, peeled and cut into chunks
2 x 15ml tablespoons vegetable oil
1 x 15ml tablespoon dark brown sugar
pinch ground cloves
½ teaspoon ground allspice
500g beef mince, preferably organic

to make up in a jug:

1 x 400g can chopped tomatoes, plus full can water
3 x 15ml tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
3 x 15ml tablespoons bourbon
2 x 15ml tablespoons dark brown sugar
**2 x 15ml tablespoons tomato purée or sundried tomato
paste**

to serve:

6 baps (or soft white rolls) or 400g unsalted tortilla chips
**175g Red Leicester or Cheddar cheese, freshly grated (for
chips)**

♥ To start the sauce, put the celery, garlic, onions, bacon and carrots into a food processor and process to an orangey mush.

♥ Heat the oil in a heavy-bottomed pan or cast-iron casserole (with a lid) and add the processed ingredients. Cook for 15–20 minutes, over a gentle heat, stirring every now and again, until soft.

♥ While the vegetables are cooking, mix together the liquid ingredients (and the 2 tablespoons brown sugar) in a jug.

♥ Then stir 1 tablespoon brown sugar along with the cloves and allspice into the vegetable pan. Now add the mince, breaking it up with a wooden fork as you mix it into the pan of

softened, spiced veg, stirring until the meat begins to lose its raw colour.

♥ Pour in the jug of liquid ingredients and stir gently into the meat. Put on the lid and turn down the heat to low. Simmer for 25 minutes.



♥ If you're serving as sandwiches to be messily (no other way, I'm afraid) chowed down, you need do nothing but split the soft white rolls. If you're going for the toasted tortilla option, preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6, then scatter the chips in a swiss roll tin or baking tray (foil-lined for ease of washing-up later) and over them sprinkle the grated cheese before letting chips toast and cheese begin oozyly to melt in the hot oven; 5 minutes should be enough but it may take 10. This is a hot contender for favourite home football food, which is to say watched on the telly not from the stands: the ultimate soccer succour.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The beef sauce can be made up to 2 days ahead. Transfer to non-metallic bowl, cool, cover and refrigerate as quickly as possible. Reheat gently in large saucepan until piping hot.

FREEZE NOTE

The cooled sauce can be frozen in airtight container for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.



Sweet and sour chicken

I am aware that this record of the recipes I feed my children may not chime resoundingly with the dietary wisdom of the day, but I have to say, I'm just grateful if they're not eating something smelly out of a packet. Getting teenage children to eat what approximates to a meal is, as far as I'm concerned, an achievement to be celebrated. That this is a dish they actually request ... well, I don't start worrying about a little bit of sugar and salt. Fresh food with some salt and sugar added knowingly seems better to me than processed food loaded with ingredients I don't even recognize (though if you're cooking for younger children, you could cut down the soy sauce here). And now we know that tomato ketchup can be positively good for you, I gladly dollop some in as I cook, for all that I am still fuddy-duddily opposed to universal application actually at the table. Its particular sweet vinegariness is what this dish is all about.

Serve with rice and a little pak choi to that most elusive of sounds: the appreciation of your children.

Serves 4–8, depending on age and appetite

2 x 15ml tablespoons garlic oil

1 red onion, peeled and chopped

2 red peppers, stalks removed, de-seeded and cut into rough 4cm square chunks

500g chicken thigh fillets (no skin or bones)

1 teaspoon Chinese 5 spice powder

300g beansprouts

150g sliced water chestnuts (optional)

for the sauce:

2 x 15ml tablespoons apricot jam

2 x 15ml tablespoons soy sauce

250ml pineapple juice

3 x 15ml tablespoons tomato ketchup

2 teaspoons rice wine vinegar (or enough to get the sour note right)

salt and pepper, to taste

♥ Heat the oil in a large wok or frying pan that comes with a lid, and cook the chopped onions, stirring every now and again, for about 5 minutes. Add the peppers and cook for another 5 minutes or until soft.

♥ Cut each chicken thigh fillet into 4 pieces (I find snipping with scissors easiest) and add to the onion-and-pepper pan along with the Chinese 5 spice. Cook, stirring frequently, for another 5 minutes.

♥ Whisk the sauce ingredients together in a jug (tasting to check you have the right note of sweet and sour), pour into the pan with the chicken and other ingredients, and bring to a boil. Put the lid on and cook on a low heat, simmering gently for 15 minutes, until the chicken has cooked through.

♥ Stir in the beansprouts, and water chestnuts (if using), check for seasoning, and let it come back to the boil. When you're sure it's all piping hot through, serve with rice.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The dish can be made 1 day ahead. Transfer chicken and sauce to a non-metallic bowl to cool, cover and refrigerate as soon as possible. Reheat gently in a saucepan, stirring occasionally, until chicken and sauce are piping hot.

FREEZE NOTE

The cooled chicken and sauce can be frozen in airtight container for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.



Chicken teriyaki

I know the world is full of good parents who never give their children food with salt or sugar, and this recipe (among others) proves conclusively that I am not one of them. Oh, and on top of these dietary failings, the following also contains alcohol. There's really not much to be said by me if these infractions offend. Is it to the point that this meal seems to be both universally delicious and the work of lazy moments? If the answer is yes, cook on. However, should you be making this for younger children, halve the soy sauce quantity for under tens and quarter it for under fives, if you wish.





Serves 4–6, depending on age and appetite

2 x 15ml tablespoons sake (Japanese rice wine)

4 x 15ml tablespoons mirin (sweet Japanese rice wine)

4 x 15ml tablespoons soy sauce

2 x 15ml tablespoons soft light brown sugar

2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger

splash or two sesame oil

750g chicken thigh fillets (no skin or bones), preferably organic, cut or scissored into bite-sized pieces

1 teaspoon groundnut oil

300–450g [sushi rice](#), cooked according to packet instructions

- ♥ Mix the sake, mirin, soy sauce, sugar, ginger and sesame oil in a dish that you can steep the chicken in: I use a 23cm square Pyrex, but anything similar would do.
- ♥ Add the prepared chicken pieces and leave for 15 minutes.
- ♥ Heat the groundnut oil in a large, shallow frying pan or casserole (that has a lid) and, using a slotted spoon, transfer the chicken pieces from their dark marinating liquid to the pan, and sauté until they look cooked on the outside.
- ♥ Pour the marinade over the chicken pieces in the pan and bring to a bubble, then turn down the heat to a gentle simmer, put the lid on and cook for about 5 minutes – cut into a piece of chicken to make sure it's cooked through.
- ♥ Remove the cooked pieces with a slotted spoon (you could keep them warm in a bowl covered in foil) and turn the heat up under the pan to let the liquid boil down to a thick, dark syrup.
- ♥ Return the chicken pieces to the pan, stir well so that they are all coated in the sticky, savoury syrup, then serve with a comforting pile of sushi rice and perhaps some steamed pak choi or greens of your choice.

Pasta alla genovese

with potatoes, green beans and pesto

Children – who are perhaps more honest about their tastes than the rest of us – seem to have an overweening preference for carbohydrates, and I am more than happy to exploit this. If I've been working late, am feeling lazy, have forgotten to go shopping or suddenly find out that their friends are staying over and I don't know what they will or won't eat, I reach gratefully for a packet of pasta. I can honestly say I don't know how parents managed to feed their children in the days before pasta became universal culinary currency. Oh, yes I do, actually: they didn't care whether we liked what they cooked or not; we just ate what we were given.



My children wouldn't care if all I ever gave them was pasta with some bottled sauce poured over, and I don't deny that's sometimes indeed what they are given; but to please myself, and them, this is what I make when I get it together a little. Making this is hardly effortful; the potatoes cook in the pasta water – requiring a little extra time, nothing more – and the pinenutless pesto is whizzed up easily by the processor.

And if you're going to do this recipe, then do make the pesto yourself. Using pesto out of a jar is nothing I'd ever

apologize for, but this is a dish in itself and needs to be kept distinct. For those who feel cooking potatoes with pasta is playing too much into the hands of kiddie carbomania, know that this is a Ligurian tradition. And it really works: the potatoes thicken into a sweet sludge to which the pesto adheres, to make a fantastically, elegantly comforting and fragrant strand-coating sauce. The green beans add to the verdigloriousness of the whole, making you feel good that you are getting the children to eat vegetables.

Serves 6–8, depending on age and appetite

500g large floury potatoes, peeled and cut into 1.5cm slices, each slice quartered into chunks

500g linguine pasta

200g fine green beans, trimmed and cut in half

for the pesto:

100g basil leaves (2 fat bunches from the greengrocer, or 4 supermarket packets)

100g grated Parmesan cheese

1 garlic clove, peeled

100ml regular olive oil

100ml extra-virgin olive oil

♥ Put the prepared potato chunks into a large saucepan with enough salted water to take the pasta later, and bring to the boil.

♥ Cook the potatoes until tender, about 20 minutes, then add the pasta. Check the packet cooking instructions, and at about 4 minutes before the end of the specified cooking time, add the green beans. If you are using artisanal egg linguine, which takes less time, you will need to alter your strategy.

♥ While this is bubbling away, whiz the ingredients for the pesto in a food processor. Before you drain the saucepan, remove and reserve about ½ cupful of the cooking liquid. Tip the drained potatoes, beans and pasta back into the dry pan.

♥ Add the pesto from the processor and enough cooking water to give a runny sauce that coats the strands of pasta as you work it through with a fork or pasta claw. Serve immediately.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The pesto can be made 2–3 days ahead. Make the pesto using only 50ml olive oil and transfer to jam jar or airtight container. Carefully pour the remaining oil over the top so that surface of pesto is completely covered with oil. Store in fridge. Leave to stand at room temperature about 30 minutes before stirring and using.

FREEZE NOTE

The pesto can be frozen for up to 3 months in airtight container. Make the pesto and cover with a layer of oil, as above. Defrost for 2–3 hours at room temperature and stir before using.



Turkey meatballs in tomato sauce

I have been making meatballs for as long as my children have been eating solid food. But forgive me: solid food is such a ghastly term; besides, it doesn't come anywhere near evoking the melting tenderness of these high-tea treats. For strangely luscious they are. I say strangely, because I first made them out of turkey mince, rather than my usual preferred beef mince, when I suddenly and uncharacteristically fell victim to the ethos of the age and it came upon me to pander to the low-fat brigade. Obviously, my subconscious knew better and directed me thuswards for a reason. It turns out that turkey makes for a light and succulent meatball, which my children love despite the sudden change from what they're used to (that, too, is remarkable since children tend towards conservatism and are, as a rule, averse to change), and which has also been exuberantly greeted by Italian eaters, who no less vehemently value tradition over novelty, at the table at least.

All in all, this is quite a favourite in casa Lawson these days, and I can be found making a batch – half for tea and half to be frozen for future outings – regularly and pleurably.

Serves 4–8, depending on age and appetite

for the sauce:

1 onion, peeled

1 stick celery

2 x 15ml tablespoons garlic oil

1 teaspoon dried thyme

**2 x 400g cans chopped plum tomatoes, plus approx. 800ml
(2 full cans) water**

1 teaspoon sugar

**1 teaspoon sea salt flakes or ½ teaspoon pouring salt
pepper, to taste**

for the meatballs:

500g minced turkey

1 egg

3 x 15ml tablespoons breadcrumbs

3 x 15ml tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese

**2 x 15ml tablespoons finely chopped onion and celery
(from the tomato sauce ingredients)**

1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

½ teaspoon dried thyme

♥ Put the peeled onion and the celery into a food processor and blitz to a mush. Or you can chop as finely as humanly possible by hand. Reserve 2 tablespoons for the meatball mixture.

♥ Warm the garlic oil in a large heavy-based saucepan or casserole, add the onion and celery mixture, along with the thyme, and cook at a moderate to low heat, stirring every now and again, for about 10 minutes.

♥ Add the cans of tomato, filling up each empty can with water to add to the pan. Season with the sugar, salt and pepper, stir and let it come to a bubble, then turn the heat down to simmer gently while you get on with the meatballs.

♥ Put all the ingredients for the meatballs, including the reserved chopped onion and celery, and salt according to preference, into a large bowl and mix together, gently, with your hands, wearing [CSI gloves](#) if you feel so inclined. Don't over-mix, as that will make the meatballs dense-textured and heavy.

♥ When all the meatball ingredients are not too officiously amalgamated, start rolling. The easiest way is to pinch out an amount about the size of a generously heaped teaspoon and

roll into a ball between the palms of your hands. Put the meatballs on a baking tray, lined with baking parchment or greaseproof paper, as you go. You should get about 50 little meatballs.

♥ Drop these gently into the simmering sauce; I try to let these fall in concentric circles working round the pan from the outside edge inwards, in the vaguest of fashions.



♥ Let the meatballs simmer for 30 minutes, until cooked through. Serve with rice or pasta, or however you so please. I sometimes give them an automatic upgrade by serving with the [Rocket and Lemon Couscous](#).

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The meatballs and sauce can be made up to 2 days ahead. Transfer meatballs and sauce to a nonmetallic bowl to cool, cover and refrigerate as soon as possible. Reheat gently in a saucepan, giving the occasional stir (be careful not to break up the meatballs), until meatballs and sauce are piping hot.

FREEZE NOTES

The cooled meatballs and sauce can be frozen in airtight container for up to 3 months. You may find it handy to freeze in individual portions if making a large quantity. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.

African drumsticks

I first ate this, under a slightly different guise, at a South African friend's house. The sauce was the same, but the meat marinated and cooked in it was pork. I prefer this – the pork fat made the sauce a little too oily for absolute comfort, and I am no fat-phobe, as you know – and more pointedly so do my children.

My friend, who has since given in to my drumstick dominion, says that apricot jam is an omnipresent feature of the cuisine of her native land, and I hope I do not offend by admitting that my only other alteration to her recipe is to lessen the amount of it. This way the sweetness is kept in check and there is enough warmth and spice to keep adult eaters happy without alienating the more childish palate, though for younger children, you might use less mustard powder.

Should you wish to be really authentic, I suggest you dollop your plate with a glossy teak heap of Mrs Ball's chutney – *the* condiment of the continent.

Serves 4–8, depending on age and appetite

80ml Worcestershire sauce

4 x 15ml tablespoons tomato ketchup

2 teaspoons English mustard powder, or to taste

1 teaspoon ground ginger

1 x 15ml tablespoon apricot jam

1 onion, peeled and finely chopped

8 chicken drumsticks, preferably organic

1 x 15ml tablespoon garlic oil

♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6. Mix the Worcestershire sauce, tomato ketchup, mustard powder, ground ginger, apricot jam and chopped onion in a shallow dish.

♥ Dunk the drumsticks in this marinade to coat them all over. (If it helps, you could at this stage leave them to marinate, covered, in the fridge overnight.) Put the oil into a smallish roasting tin or ovenproof dish, in which the drumsticks will fit snugly, and tip the tin about so that the oil more or less covers the base. Arrange the drumsticks in the tin and pour over them any remaining marinade.

♥ Cook for 45 minutes to 1 hour, basting once or twice: the deeper the dish, the longer the drumsticks will take to colour and cook through.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The chicken can be marinated overnight in a covered bowl in fridge.

FREEZE NOTE

The chicken can be frozen in the marinade in a resealable bag for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge (put bag in a bowl to catch drips) and cook following directions in recipe.





Spaghetti with Marmite

I came across this recipe in Anna Del Conte's memoirs, *Risotto with Nettles*. Now, there are so many recipes I could borrow from her, and many I have, but this is the one I have to show you here. She introduces it as "hardly a recipe, but I wanted to include it because I haven't as yet found a child who doesn't like it". The minute I read its title – once I'd got over my crossness that she hadn't told me about it during many years of friendship – I was charmed. Of course it helps that, being a Marmite-addict, I knew it would work. And how it does. I have recently turned traitor and shifted towards the Vegemite side of the world, and this works as well, unsurprisingly, with the antipodean ointment.

I know the combination of pasta and Marmite sounds odd to the point of unfeasibility, but wait a moment. There is a traditional day-after-the-roast pasta dish, in which spaghetti is tossed in chicken stock, and I have eaten shortcut versions of this in Italy (recreated guiltlessly in my own kitchen) which use a crumbled stock cube, along with some butter, olive oil, chopped rosemary and a little of the pasta cooking water to make a flavoursome sauce for spaghetti. If you think about it, Marmite offers saltiness and savouriness the way a stock cube might.

I'm glad this recipe is here, and I thank Anna for it. But even when it's not an Anna-recipe, I think of her whenever I cook pasta, remembering her two ordinances: one, that the water you cook pasta in should be as salty as the Mediterranean; and two, that pasta should not be too officiously drained, but rather be "*con la goccia*", that's to say with some cooking water still clinging to it, as this makes it easier to incorporate the sauce. It was she who taught me to scoop out some of the cooking water just before draining the pasta, to help the sauce amalgamate later if necessary.

Serves 4–6, depending on age and appetite

375g dried spaghetti

50g unsalted butter

1 teaspoon Marmite or more, to taste

freshly grated Parmesan cheese, to serve

♥ Cook the spaghetti in plenty of boiling salted water, according to the packet instructions.

♥ When the pasta is almost cooked, melt the butter in a small saucepan and add the Marmite and 1 tablespoon of the pasta water, mixing thoroughly to dissolve. Reserve $\frac{1}{2}$ a cup of pasta water; then drain the pasta and pour the Marmite mixture over the drained spaghetti, adding a little reserved pasta water to amalgamate if required. Serve with plenty of grated Parmesan cheese.

Chicken fajitas

I don't know if it is the male part of me or the child part (though the overlap is disconcerting, so confusion is to be expected) but I love a bit of DIY at the table. Fajitas – pronounced “faheetas” for Tex-Mex authenticity, or, to show solidarity with Kath'n'Kim, “fagytas” – offer occupation but no concentration, and this goes for cook as well as diner. These are, I guess, the Tex-Mex answer to the Chinese duck and pancakes, but more do-able at home. For one, you can buy the tortillas (and I would advise buying 2 packets rather than just the one specified, as I normally find I could do with one or two tortillas more – you could always freeze what you don't use till next time), and the chicken is the work of minutes.

I am prepared to accept that this is an inauthentic gringo version. What do I know? Well, what I do know is that this is a cheering supper – again for cook and eater alike – and it doesn't, to me, taste very different to the fajitas I've come across on my travels. Here, I've made a kind of stir-fry, a juicy tangle of onion, peppers and spiced chicken; at other times, I cook the onions and peppers together and the chicken separately. And when I've got leftover chicken, I often use this recipe as a first-stop user-upper, adding cold cooked shredded chicken to the pepper and onions and tossing altogether in the pan till piping hot all the way through.

The traditional salsa that should be part of the medley of accompaniments is not really to my taste, as it tends towards the overwhelmingly vinegary, so instead I bring out some [Jumbo Chilli Sauce](#) that I always keep in my fridge (although if you were to dispense with the onions and peppers here, I suggest you make the tomato salsa I indicate for the [Mexican Lasagne](#)). I should add that it doesn't matter if you don't have any Mexican oregano; do use regular oregano. I just happened to buy some of the former when I was last in the States and

rather love its earthy Mexican farmyard resonance. But I suspect this is all in the head.

One final note: for a quick and cross-generational supper, you could prepare the chicken pieces as below, but instead of turning them into fajitas, stir them through the [Rice and Peas](#).



Serves 4, but could be stretched to feed 8 smaller eaters

2 skinless chicken breast fillets, preferably organic

1 teaspoon dried Mexican oregano, or regular oregano

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1 teaspoon sea salt flakes or ½ teaspoon pouring salt

½ teaspoon sugar

1 x 15ml tablespoon garlic oil, plus 2 teaspoons

2 x 15ml tablespoons lime juice

2 x 15ml tablespoons groundnut oil or regular olive oil

2 onions, peeled, halved and cut into thin half-moons

1 red pepper, core and seeds removed, cut into strips

1 orange pepper, core and seeds removed, cut into strips

1 yellow pepper, core and seeds removed, cut into strips

8 soft flour tortillas (see introduction above)

optional accompaniments:

100g Cheddar or Monterey Jack cheese, grated

125ml crème fraîche or sour cream

1 x 198g can corn niblets, drained

**1 large avocado (or 2 small), finely diced and dressed with
½ teaspoon sea salt flakes and 2 teaspoons lime juice**

¼–½ head iceberg lettuce, shredded

1 ramekin chopped fresh coriander

hot chilli sauce, to serve (optional)

♥ Over a shallow bowl, cut the chicken with a pair of scissors into thin (1–2cm) strips lengthways, then halve the long strip across to give 2 shorter strips (to echo the pepper strips later). Don't get too hung up on precision, though; you're just trying to cut things into easily wrappable and munchable shapes.

♥ Once the chicken has been snipped into the dish, add the oregano, cumin, salt, sugar, 1 tablespoon garlic oil and the lime juice. Mix everything about and leave to marinate while you get on with the onions and peppers. And preheat the oven to 125°C/gas mark ½ if you wish to warm your tortillas.

♥ Warm the groundnut or olive oil in a large frying pan or wok and fry the half-moon onion slices over a medium heat, stirring occasionally, for 5 minutes.

♥ Spread the tortillas out on a baking sheet and put in the oven to warm.

♥ Add the pepper strips to the onion pan and cook for a further 10 minutes. When both onions and peppers are tender, remove to a bowl.

♥ Warm the remaining 2 teaspoons garlic oil in the pan and tip in the chicken with its marinade. Cook, stirring frequently, for 5 minutes. Check the chicken is piping hot and cooked through, add the onions and peppers from the bowl, stir together then decant to a serving dish.

♥ Take the warmed tortillas out of the oven and put on the table alongside the chicken tangled in onions and peppers and all the other accoutrements. Wrap what you fancy in the tortillas to eat straightaway.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The onion and peppers can be cut 1 day in advance. Cover tightly with clingfilm and refrigerate. The chicken can be cut 1 day in advance and tossed with the oregano, cumin and garlic oil. Cover tightly with clingfilm and refrigerate. Add the lime juice and salt just before cooking.



HURRY UP, I'M HUNGRY!

Egg and bacon salad

Mussels in cider

Lamb with rosemary and port

Tarragon chicken

Redcurrant and mint lamb cutlets

Speedy scaloppine *with rapid roastini*

Golden sole *with tarted-up tartare sauce*

Scallops with Thai-scented pea purée

Korean calamari

Korean keema

Sunshine soup

Lone linguine with white truffle oil

Vietnamese pork noodle soup

It often seems tauntingly unfair that the occasions on which we need most urgent succour from food, tend to be those when we have the least amount of time to cook it. In the middle of a working week, when chores pile up, and the demands of my own deadlines and my children's (homework has been so much more the bane of my life as a parent than it ever was as a pupil) eat through the hours, and stress levels could be measured on a Geiger counter, I need to be sure that I can get food on the table before low blood sugar turns what is already a tense time into a traumatic one. I know I sound on the edge of hysteria here – or simply exaggerating for dramatic effect – when I say that going for too long without food can make me feel both suicidal and murderous, but it is a fact I have learnt to accept in myself and to recognize in others. Accordingly, I have a pre-emptive strategy to avoid just such an unwelcome

eventuality: namely, the recipes in this chapter, as well as others dotted around the book.

Since I have already written an entire book dedicated to food that's fast to make and good to eat, this is hardly a novel approach for me, but I am no less emphatic or evangelical on the subject. I still feel that many people are put off cooking because they think there is more to it than there actually is. I was making supper recently, just for me and a girlfriend (the [Bloody Maria](#)) and we were chatting, moaning, yabbering away and generally passing the time, as one does. I was at the stove, pontificating and pottering, occasionally pushing and prodding what was in front of me with a pair of tongs; she was facing me, at the kitchen table. After about ten minutes, if that, I presented her with her plate and she looked surprised, as she was sure she hadn't seen me actually cooking. In a way, I can see her point: this wasn't Cooking-with-a-capital-C, but the lowercase way which is always my starting point, and on busy days, I wouldn't think of going beyond. You put something on the heat, you take it off the heat.

Maybe this is too much of an oversimplification – but only by a whisker. Most of the quick suppers or snatched lunches which follow are variations on that theme: hot crisp cubes of bacon are turned into the basis of a dressing; lemon juice thrown into the pan juices once the meat's been removed becomes a vibrant sauce; it's a case of going with the flavourful flow.



Egg and bacon salad

I could eat breakfast at any time of the day, and often do, but this is a worthwhile variation on a theme. I know I'm showing my vintage here – egg and bacon salad was one of the party pieces of the late Eighties – but I'm unashamed. It's not so much that it's time for a revival but that anything this scrumptious should never have been allowed to fall from grace.

Serves 4, as a light lunch or starter

4 eggs

1 head escarole or frisée or other bitter leaves of your choice

1 teaspoon garlic oil

200g smoked lardons, or smoked streaky bacon cut into chunks

1 teaspoon Dijon mustard

4 teaspoons cider vinegar dash Worcestershire sauce

dash Worcestershire sauce

small bunch flat-leaf parsley, chopped

♥ Put the eggs into a saucepan of water, bring to the boil, let boil for 1 minute, then turn off the heat and let the eggs sit in the pan for 10 minutes. I cook my eggs this way, as I love the yolks to be only just, or rather almost, hard-boiled, with the memory of oozy goldenness still evident at the centre; it also keeps the whites amazingly silky. If, however, you prefer a proper, good and bouncy, reassuringly hard-boiled egg, cooked till the yolks are powdery and compact, keep the heat on under the pan for 10 minutes (and the same applies if you're making this for anyone with a compromised immune system, such as the old and frail, the very young or pregnant women).

- ♥ Meanwhile, tear the salad leaves into generously bite-sized pieces and drop them into a bowl.
- ♥ Heat the garlic oil in a frying pan, and fry the lardons or bacon until crisp, about 5 minutes.
- ♥ Tip out the water from the egg pan and run cold water on the eggs. Once they feel cool to the touch, peel them.
- ♥ Turn the heat off under the frying pan, and transfer the lardons or bacon with a slotted spatula to some sheets of kitchen roll for a minute, while you make the dressing.
- ♥ Add the Dijon mustard to the bacony juices in the pan and whisk to mix, then add the vinegar and a dash of Worcestershire sauce, whisk again and pour this over the salad leaves, tossing to mix.





♥ Now add the lardons and toss again, then quarter the eggs and add them along with the chopped parsley, before giving the whole salad a gentle mix to combine but not disturb.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The hard-boiled eggs can be made up to 4 days ahead. Cool, leave shells on, then store in airtight container in fridge. Remove shells just before serving.



Mussels in cider

The title explains simply what the key ingredients are, but doesn't begin to convey the luxe-for-less-time gloriousness of the feast. If you feel like it, you could tumble a handful of pancetta cubes in with the onion to crisp out and imbue the whole with its salty juices, but I rather love the naked sweetness of the mussels against the rasp of the cider.

Serves 2, as main course or 4 as starter

2kg mussels

2–3 x 15ml tablespoons regular olive oil

1 onion, peeled and very finely chopped, or 3 spring onions, sliced

2 cloves garlic, peeled and finely sliced

3–4 x 15ml tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

500ml dry cider

♥ Soak the mussels in a sink or bowl filled with cold water. Clean the mussels by going at them with a knife to scrape off any barnacles, and pull off any beards. This may not be necessary, if you've bought them pre-packed, but it's better to be prepared. Discard any cracked mussels, and tap any that are open on the side of the sink and, if they stay open, throw these away, too.

♥ Put the olive oil in a pan that has a lid and is big enough to take all the mussels later, put on a medium heat and add the finely chopped onion (or sliced spring onions), the sliced garlic and about 1 tablespoon parsley. Stir about, cooking, for a minute or two, until just softening.

♥ Add the cider, then turn the heat up, throw in the cleaned mussels and clamp the lid on. Cook for a couple of minutes, giving the pan a shake occasionally.

♥ Peek in to see that the mussels have opened. If they haven't, cook for another minute; if they have, take the pan off the heat, and let it stand for a moment, so that the juices settle and any grit that might have been in the mussels goes to the bottom.

♥ Divide the mussels between your bowls and then spoon the juice over them, avoiding the gritty sediment. Sprinkle with the remaining parsley and serve with an extra bowl to put empty shells in, and a loaf of bread to dip into the ecstasy-inducing liquid. Don't force open or eat any mussels that have not opened during cooking or that have damaged shells – these should be discarded.



Lamb with rosemary and port

I love the sort of dinner that you cook without any special effort but without sacrificing gratification. That's the thing really: cooking is simple; you can choose to complicate it, but there's no need to. Even when you're at a low ebb, this is a manageable supper and just what's needed to pull you out of a slump. It's comfortingly retro, too: I think it's the generous amount of – well – gravy that the juices and the de-glazing-action make. A steamed baby potato or two to help mop it up would be good, but I'm happy with canned, drained cannellini or flageolet beans, warmed with some garlic oil and a little water and salt on the stove, or a pile of orzo, that rice-shaped pasta (though barley is what they should resemble) most often used in soups and, Stateside, in salads. But a good hunk of poised-to-dunk bread and some quick-to-cook green beans would provide a well-pitched accompaniment, too.

Serves 2

1 x 15ml tablespoon olive oil

2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce

2 boneless lamb leg steaks

for the sauce:

1 x 15ml tablespoon (15g) butter

1 sprig rosemary

1 fat clove garlic

4 x 15ml tablespoons ruby port

♥ Mix together the oil and Worcestershire sauce in a bowl, then smear this over the steaks, either with a pastry brush or by dipping the steaks directly into the bowl.

♥ Heat a heavy-based frying pan, and cook the steaks for about 3 minutes a side, depending on the thickness of the steak and

how you like it done. If you prefer to use lamb fillets or noisettes, I'd advise 2 per person, and less time for their cooking.

♥ Wrap them in foil to rest on a warm plate or in a warm place, while you make the sauce. With the pan still on the heat, but turned down low, add the butter and let it melt, then finely chop the needles from the rosemary sprig and add them to the pan.

♥ Peel and crush or finely chop the garlic clove into the pan, then pour in the port, letting it sizzle and reduce slightly. Unwrap the steaks and add any juices from the foil parcel to the sauce. Then put the steaks onto plates and pour the sauce over them.



Tarragon chicken

This is a quick-time version of the classic French *poulet à l'estragon* (though you could speed it up further by bashing out the chicken breast or by using a turkey escalope in its place, which would make this dish pleasingly alliterative) and is an instant reminder of the comforts of old-school cooking. Tender chicken (it's the poaching early on that sees to this), aromatically fresh and insistently herbal tarragon, a generous splash of vermouth, all rounded off by rich, pale cream: this has the nostalgic, yet robust, charm of that French bistro of fond memory or happy imaginings. If you can't get fresh tarragon, do not despair: just double the freeze-dried tarragon at the start and add some freshly chopped parsley at the end. And I can assure you it would be worth your while considering a teaspoon of tarragon mustard, too, along with the cream. About which, please don't wimp out on me: this is old-fashioned cooking which cannot be proscribed by new-age dietary concerns. But, if you insist, halve the cream, and add another 30ml (or 2 x 15ml tablespoons) of vermouth when you're pouring the rest in after the chicken's had its first 5 minutes' cooking.

Eat with a tumbled mixture of fine beans and asparagus tips along with steamed baby new potatoes or, hard to beat for me, some white basmati rice forked through with a *soupçon* of butter and freshly ground white pepper.

Serves 2

2 teaspoons garlic oil

2 fat spring onions or 4 skinny ones, finely sliced

½ teaspoon freeze-dried tarragon

2 chicken breast fillets, skinless and boneless

80ml vermouth or white wine

½ teaspoon sea salt flakes or ¼ teaspoon pouring salt

60ml double cream

fresh white pepper, to grind over

2 teaspoons chopped fresh tarragon, plus a pinch more for sprinkling

♥ Heat the garlic oil in a frying pan or casserole that has a lid and in which the chicken breasts will fit pretty snugly. Add the spring onions, stir, then sprinkle in the freeze-dried tarragon, stir again and cook them in the garlic oil for a minute, stirring some more as they cook.

♥ Put the chicken fillets into the pan, curved side down, and cook for 5 minutes. If the spring onions start to burn, scrape them from the pan and let them sit on the chicken pieces.

♥ Turn over the breasts, and add the vermouth (or white wine). Let the vermouth bubble up, then add the salt. Put the lid on, turn the heat down low and leave it to simmer gently for 10 minutes. Check the chicken is cooked through by making a small cut into the thickest part and ensuring the juices run clear – if not, simmer for a few minutes longer and check again.

♥ Remove the chicken breasts to warmed plates. Bring the remaining liquid to a boil, add the cream and stir well, then sprinkle in the fresh tarragon, stir again and give a good grind of white pepper.

♥ Pour the sauce over the chicken breasts, and give a final scattering of tarragon to serve.





Redcurrant and mint lamb cutlets

My mother often used to make a kind of faux Cumberland sauce to go with lamb chops: she'd dollop some redcurrant jelly into a bowl, grate in a little orange zest and squeeze in a little juice, then stir in some freshly chopped mint, or dried mint if there were no fresh. Somehow, it worked, and this, which follows, is simply a development along the same lines. Impatience, I have learnt from her and from the food I eat, can be an inspirational prompt to the cook. Laziness is accounted for, greed rewarded: that's a result.

I love these with some of my [Rapid Roastini](#) and a tangle of peppery leaves.

Serves 2

1 x 15ml tablespoon garlic oil

6 lamb cutlets

juice 1 clementine/satsuma (approx. 75ml)

1 x 15ml tablespoon redcurrant jelly

dash Worcestershire sauce

dash red wine vinegar or sherry vinegar

salt and pepper, to taste

small bunch or packet fresh mint, finely chopped

♥ Heat the oil in a frying pan and cook the lamb for about 2–4 minutes a side, depending on how you like them and on the thickness of the cutlets.

♥ Remove the cutlets to a large piece of foil and make a baggy package, though sealing it tightly, and keep on a warm plate.

♥ Turn the heat down to low, then whisk in the clementine (or satsuma) juice, redcurrant jelly, Worcestershire sauce, vinegar, salt and pepper. Take the pan off the heat.

♥ Unwrap the foil parcel, divide the cutlets between 2 warmed plates, and pour into the pan any juices that have collected under the waiting cutlets. Whisk well, then pour this over the cutlets.

♥ Sprinkle with about 2 tablespoons chopped mint, and offer more on the table to eat with the supper.

Speedy scaloppine *with rapid roastini*

Well, I know it's true that an escalope can never take that long to cook, but when I make this for supper I can never quite get over the near-instant gratification it provides. The scaloppine are cooked as the Italians do them so well, just kissed with some spiced flour and sauced with the pan juices de-glazed with a lemon. In Italy, you'd expect the meat to be veal; here I use either pork or – perhaps more frequently – turkey.

Serves 2

2 x 15ml tablespoons plain flour

shake mixed spice

shake cayenne pepper

4 small turkey or pork escalopes, about 350g total

2 x 15ml tablespoons garlic oil

zest and juice 1 lemon

salt, to taste

♥ Put the flour and spices into a freezer bag, then add the escalopes, shaking to coat them.

♥ Heat the oil in a heavy-based frying pan and add the floured meat, cooking for 2 minutes a side or until the escalopes are just cooked through.

♥ Remove the escalopes to warm plates and take the pan off the heat.

♥ Grate the lemon zest into the (still warm) pan and squeeze in the lemon juice. Stir until the juices are golden and slightly syrupy. Season to taste, pour the sauce over the escalopes and serve with the rapid roastini below.

Rapid roastini

I am an enormous believer in instinct: whenever I allow myself to be deflected from what I think is right, I regret it; whether in the kitchen, or out of it. But here, in the kitchen, it went like this: I had, in the small hours, one of my bathetic revelations that if I fried some gnocchi, they might turn out like my *Express* sautéed potatoes. I mentioned the idea around and was met with, at best polite, grimaces. I insisted, tried it out, and luxuriated in how right I was. These are crisp on the outside, fluffy inside and totally scrumptious. And, in fact, rather than being like sautéed potatoes they are really more like miniature roasties, hence the title. If you want, you actually can roast them, and they'll need 10 minutes a side in an oven preheated to 200°C/gas mark 6. I find more than 250g is difficult to fry, so the oven's a good option (if a little slower) when you want to feed lots of people. I've allowed 250g, that's half a packet (the other half will keep, sealed, in the fridge for up to 3 days and in the deep-freeze for up to 1 month) of gnocchi for 2 people, but I have a sliding scale: 100g per head for children, 125g for normal people and 150g per head for men and teenage boys. And I have to tell you how good they are as a quick kitchen canapé, when they're piping hot, gorgeously golden and sprinkled with sea salt flakes along with a cold, cold beer.

Serves 2

2 x 15ml tablespoons regular olive oil

250g gnocchi

- ♥ Heat the oil in a large frying pan.
- ♥ Put the gnocchi in, making sure you separate them, and fry for 4 minutes. Then turn them around and give them another 4 minutes.
- ♥ Or if you'd prefer to bake them, tumble the gnocchi into a roasting pan, add the oil, and put into a preheated 200°C/gas mark 6 oven for 20 minutes, giving them a stir after 10 minutes.



Golden sole

with tarted-up tartare sauce

Yes, this is made with lemon sole, but the golden colour comes – jubilantly – from the gold grains of polenta which coat the fish, in place of breadcrumbs, before a brief blitz in the pan. Although I've specified 2 fillets, I have found that if you get the fish from the supermarket, 1 packet contains 3 fillets. These are no hardship to eat, so either be greedy at supper or leave a fillet to eat cold – yes – in a sandwich spread with leftover tartare sauce.

If there's time to steam some baby new potatoes, then go for it, otherwise know that these crunchy coated fillets make for a gorgeous dinner just with the slightly fiery tartare sauce, a green salad and maybe a pickled quail's egg or two. Well, I found a jar of them, and it did seem a match made in heaven ...

Serves 2

1 egg

dash garlic oil

sprinkling salt and good grinding pepper

125g instant polenta

2 sole fillets, or other white fish

groundnut or corn oil, for frying

for the tarted-up tartare sauce:

zest and juice ½ lemon

½ teaspoon sea salt flakes or ¼ teaspoon pouring salt

100g crème fraîche

2 teaspoons baby (nonpareil) capers, drained

**1 sweet and sour pickled cucumber/gherkin or 50g
cornichons**

3 rings (chopped) jalapeño chilli peppers (from a jar)

**1 x 15ml tablespoon chopped fresh tarragon, plus more for
sprinkling**

**2 x 15ml tablespoons chopped fresh parsley, plus more for
sprinkling**

♥ Beat the egg, along with the garlic oil, salt and pepper, in a shallow dish that will take 1 fish fillet, and leave it for a moment.

♥ Put the polenta in another, similar, dish.

♥ Dip the fish fillets, 1 side at a time, in the egg mixture and then put them into the polenta dish, press down, dredge and turn to cover fully before leaving them on a wire rack to dry a little while you get on with the sauce.

♥ To make the sauce, zest the lemon into a bowl and squeeze in the juice. Stir the salt into the juice to help it dissolve.

♥ Add the crème fraîche, capers, chopped gherkin (or cornichons), jalapeños, tarragon and parsley and stir to combine with a fork. Transfer to a ramekin or a small bowl and cover with a scattering of herbs.

♥ Heat enough oil in a frying pan to cover the bottom to approx. 2–3mm, and cook the grain-covered fillets for 1–2 minutes a side, until the outside is crisp and the fish is cooked through. Then transfer the fish to a board or tray lined with some sheets of kitchen roll before plating up. Serve with the tartare sauce, some pickled eggs and a lemony salad.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The coated fish can be made ahead but best frozen immediately, as below, and cooked from frozen.

FREEZE NOTE

Do not freeze if previously frozen. Coat the fish in polenta and sit on a clingfilm-lined baking sheet. Cover with a layer of

clingfilm and freeze until solid. Transfer to a resealable bag and freeze for up to 3 months. Fry the fillets direct from frozen, as directed in the recipe, adding 1–2 minutes to cooking time and check fish is cooked through before serving.



Scallops with Thai-scented pea purée

I love the bouncy sweetness of scallops and, although you might think the equal sweetness of the peas would be too much alongside, the deep flavour of coriander and chilli and the sharpness of lemongrass miraculously provided by the Thai green curry paste, make it a zingy and yet still comforting accompaniment. This is a real treat of a supper, both for the eater and the cook.

Serves 2

500g frozen petits pois

1–2 x 15ml tablespoons Thai green curry paste

75g crème fraîche

sea salt flakes or pouring salt, to taste

2 teaspoons groundnut or other flavourless oil

2 teaspoons butter

6 big scallops (such as sold in shell by fishmongers) or 10–12 small ones (such as sold in packets in the supermarket), preferably diver-caught

juice 1 lime

1–2 x 15ml tablespoons chopped fresh coriander or Thai basil

♥ Cook the peas in boiling, slightly salted water until tender, then drain and tip into a blender, adding 1 tablespoon curry paste and the crème fraîche. Season to taste with salt and perhaps add more curry paste, depending how strong it is.

♥ Heat the oil and butter in a frying pan until foamy, then fry the scallops for about 2 minutes a side. If you are using big scallops, then it is sometimes easier to cut them in half across. When they are cooked, they will have just lost their raw look

in the middle and be lusciously tender, while golden and almost caramelized on the outside.

♥ Lift the scallops onto 2 warmed plates and then de-glaze the hot pan by squeezing in the lime juice. Stir to mix well and pick up every scrap of flavour, then pour this over the scallops on each plate.

♥ Dish up the pea purée alongside the scallops, and sprinkle with the chopped coriander or Thai basil. Serve with another wedge of lime, if you feel like it.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The pea purée can be made 2–3 hours ahead. Drain peas and immediately rinse with plenty of cold water. Purée when cold with 1 tablespoon of the curry paste and the crème fraîche. Put in a bowl, cover and leave in a cool place or fridge. Reheat gently in a saucepan, taste and adjust seasoning before serving.



Korean calamari

Never has a quick meal tasted so spectacular. Yes, you do need to hunt down this fabulous flavoured paste – think chilli with a sweet and smoky hit of almost liquorice intensity – but once you have it, the culinary kingdom is yours. In lieu of it, I suppose you could use any chilli paste you like, to taste, but I could never allow myself to run out of my exuberantly coloured gochujang – also stamped “Hot Pepper Paste (Chal)” – and so can’t report from experience.

In fact, I am always ready to slide down the pole and have this at a moment’s notice: the spring onions are in the fridge; the squid is in the deep-freeze; everything else is to hand; and if I don’t have any baby corn, I am more than happy to add whatever vegetable I do have.

Serves 2

150g sushi rice

150–175g (6 baby) squid

2 x 15ml tablespoons rice wine

2 x 15ml tablespoons Korean gochujang paste

2 x 15ml tablespoons soy sauce

2 teaspoons sugar

few dashes sesame oil

2 teaspoons groundnut or other flavourless oil

75g baby corn, cut into 1cm chunks

6 thin or 3 fat spring onions, sliced



- ♥ Put the sushi rice on to cook according to packet instructions or in a rice cooker following its instructions.
- ♥ Squeeze any tentacles out of the squid bodies, then slice the calamari into rings and put in a bowl with the tentacles and the 2 tablespoons rice wine. Leave for 15 minutes, then strain, reserving the liquid in a bowl.
- ♥ To this bowl add the Korean pepper paste, soy sauce, sugar and few dashes of sesame oil, and stir to combine.
- ♥ Put a wok or large, heavy-based frying pan on to heat and, when it's hot, add the 2 teaspoons groundnut or other flavourless oil.
- ♥ Add the sliced corn and spring onions and stir-fry for 2 minutes.
- ♥ Add the drained squid and stir-fry for another minute or two, until the squid turns opaque.
- ♥ Tip your sauce into the hot pan, stir-fry for 30 seconds or so, until piping hot, and then divide between 2 bowls of the sushi rice.

FREEZE NOTE

Fresh squid can be cut into rings and frozen with the tentacles for up to 3 months, in a resealable bag with as much air as possible squeezed out. But first check with fishmonger or supermarket that the squid has not been previously frozen. Defrost overnight in the fridge, on a plate to catch drips.



Korean keema

Keema is a fantastically hangover-salving dish of spicy (usually lamb) mince; this version uses minced turkey and, more significantly, its heat is provided by the gochujang, the Korean chilli paste that I keep on hand (see [Korean Calamari](#)) to pep up a jaded palate or a pallid-flavoured ingredient. Being minced does not generally do turkey many favours, but the aromatic richness of the paste makes it sing. Supper's on the table in a matter of minutes; if you wanted to make it speedier, you would have to buy rice that's already been steamed and needs no more than a few turns in the microwave to heat it.

Serves 2, generously

150g basmati or sushi rice

250g turkey mince

6 thin or 3 fat spring onions, chopped

125g frozen petits pois

1 teaspoon vegetable or groundnut oil

2 x 15ml tablespoons rice wine

1–2 x 15ml tablespoons chopped fresh coriander

for the sauce:

2 x 15ml tablespoons gochujang

1 x 15ml tablespoon honey

1 x 15ml tablespoon rice wine

2 x 15ml tablespoons soy sauce

♥ Cook the rice according to packet instructions, or in a rice cooker according to manufacturer's instructions. And put a kettle on to boil for the peas later.

♥ Whisk together the sauce ingredients, and stir in the minced turkey. Leave to steep for about 5 minutes, or while you are getting on with your next tasks, such as chopping the spring onions and blanching the peas.

♥ Heat a wok or heavy-based frying pan on the hob. While this is heating up, pour boiling water from the kettle over the frozen peas in a sieve or colander, letting the hot water drain away, thereby defrosting the peas. When the wok is hot, add the oil, then the defrosted peas and chopped spring onions. Stir-fry for 3–4 minutes.

♥ Add the turkey and its sauce, and stir-fry for 4–5 minutes until cooked.

♥ Add the 2 tablespoons rice wine with 4 tablespoons water to swill out the residue of the sauce from the meat-steeping bowl (so that nothing is wasted) and scrape and pour this into the pan, and stir-fry for about 30 seconds until it's all piping hot.

♥ Serve over rice, and with a good scattering of chopped coriander.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The peas can be defrosted in advance and the onions chopped. The turkey can be tossed in the sauce about 1 hour ahead (no more because of salt in the soy and acid in the vinegar). Leftovers can be covered and refrigerated as quickly as possible, then reheated in a saucepan or microwave until piping hot – but peas and spring onions will be more olive in colour than vibrant green.



Sunshine soup

There was a British singing outfit in the Seventies called Instant Sunshine and this is it in soup form. The silkiness comes from the peppers which are quickly blitzed in a hot oven, then blended with the sweetcorn which is cooked in stock. There's nothing more to it, and it is health-giving and mood-boosting – providing sunshine on a rainy day.

I like this smooth and velvety with nuggets of the sweetcorn running through it, though you can make it as liquidized or as rough as you please. As for the peppers: it wouldn't matter if you used 2 yellow or 2 orange.

Serves 4 as a starter, or 2 as supper in its entirety

1 yellow pepper

1 orange pepper

2 teaspoons garlic oil

1 litre vegetable or chicken stock (good-quality powder, cube or concentrate), preferably organic

500g frozen sweetcorn niblets

salt and pepper, to taste

♥ Preheat the oven to 250°C/gas mark 9 and cover a smallish baking sheet with foil.

♥ Remove the core, seeds and white membrane from the peppers then cut the peppers into strips and place on the prepared baking sheet shiny-side down. Sprinkle with the oil and smooch them about so that all sides are a little covered by oil, then leave them, shiny-skin-side up this time. Roast them in the oven for 25 minutes.

♥ Pour 1 litre freshly boiled water into a pan, adding the vegetable bouillon powder or chicken stock cube or concentrate to make up to the required strength. Add the

frozen corn niblets, bring back to the boil, reduce the heat, cover and let bubble for about 20 minutes.

♥ Using a slotted spoon, remove about a breakfast cupful of corn, and set to one side while you blend the rest of the corn along with all its cooking liquid and the blistered peppers, then toss the set-aside corn niblets back into the blended, but not too smooth, soup, and season to taste.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The soup can be made up to 3 days ahead: transfer to non-metallic bowl, cool, cover and refrigerate as quickly as possible. Reheat gently in a saucepan, stirring occasionally, until piping hot.

FREEZE NOTE

The cooled soup can be frozen in airtight container for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.





Lone linguine with white truffle oil

When the nights are cold, and the season tempts me, I can find myself buying a precious white truffle: stored embedded in rice, it infuses everything before the rice is made into a risotto, with shavings of white truffle on top. What remains, I keep among some eggs and then turn them into ridiculously flamboyant but heavenly scented scrambled eggs or a quick tagliolini bound with soft egg, melted butter and the remnants of my white truffle. These are all most properly enjoyed when shared – and I’m not suggesting you go out and splurge on a white truffle for this recipe – but when I’m eating alone and want to feel gorgeously spoiled and almost criminally indulgent, I make this, my lone linguine, doused in melted butter and egg whisked with grated Parmesan and a few heady drops of white truffle oil.

Serves 1, *happily*

125g linguine pasta

salt, to taste

1 egg

3 x 15ml tablespoons double cream

3 x 15ml tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese

few drops white truffle oil, or to taste

freshly ground white pepper

1 x 15ml tablespoon (15g) butter

♥ Put on some water to boil for the pasta and, when it comes to the boil, salt it generously before adding the linguine and cooking for 2 minutes less than directed by the instructions on the packet.

♥ In a bowl, whisk the egg with the cream and Parmesan, a few drops of white truffle oil and a good grinding of white

pepper.

♥ When the pasta's had the time you've allocated, check to see if it's al dente. Just before draining it, remove an espresso cupful of cooking liquid.

♥ Return the drained pasta to the cooking pan and, on the stove but off the heat, add the butter and about 1 tablespoon of the cooking water and stir to mix.

♥ Now, stir in the eggy mixture and keep stirring so that the pasta becomes smoothly, softly and lightly coated. Taste to see if it needs any salt or any more truffle oil and act accordingly.

♥ Decant into a warm bowl and eat alone, and thrillingly.

Vietnamese pork noodle soup

I couldn't contemplate a section of speedy suppers without a noodle soup. Nothing can give succour as fast as a bowl of noodles in flavoursome broth. This is good for chowing down and for slurping and for keeping body and soul together when your stomach's empty and your day's been full.

In extremis, I am more than happy to use frozen chopped ginger and chilli, which are kept in my deep-freeze for just such an eventuality (not so infrequent).

Serves 2–4, depending how hungry you are

275g pork fillet, cut into thin discs and then fine strips

2 x 15ml tablespoons lime juice

2 x 15ml tablespoons soy sauce

½ teaspoon paprika

2 x 15ml tablespoons fish sauce

250g ramen noodles

1 x 15ml tablespoon garlic oil

6 thin or 3 fat spring onions, finely sliced

1 x 15ml tablespoon chopped fresh (or frozen) ginger

1 litre chicken stock (good-quality cube or concentrate is fine), preferably organic

300g beansprouts

175g baby pak choi, torn into pieces

2 teaspoons chopped red chilli

♥ Put the strips of pork fillet into a bowl and add the lime juice, soy sauce, paprika and fish sauce, but don't let this stand for more than 15 minutes.

- ♥ Cook the noodles according to packet instructions and then refresh in cold water.
- ♥ Heat a wok or a deep, heavy-based frying pan, then add the garlic oil and fry the spring onions and ginger for a minute or so. Add the pork and its liquid to the wok, stirring as you go.
- ♥ Cook the meat in the pan for another 2 minutes, then make up the chicken stock with boiling water, add the hot stock to the pan and bring to the boil.
- ♥ Check the pork is cooked through, then add the beansprouts and baby pak choi. Add water if the soupy base has evaporated too much – about 125ml of freshly boiled water should do the trick, but you may not need it.
- ♥ Arrange the drained noodles equally in 2 large or 4 small warmed bowls, ladle over them the pork and vegetables, and finally the soupy stock. Scatter the chopped chilli on top and serve.



EASY DOES IT

Irish oaten rolls

Rocket and lemon couscous

Indian-rubbed lamb chops *with butternut, rocket and pine nut salad*

Spring chicken

Pasta sauce

Spanish chicken with chorizo and potatoes

Chicken tortillas

Chicken with Greek herb sauce

Mexican lasagne *with avocado salsa*

Tomato curry *with coconut rice*

Quick calamari pasta

Clams with chorizo

Salmon and sushi rice *with hot, sweet and sour asian sauce*

Lemony salmon with cherry tomato couscous

Salmoriglio sauce

Jumbo chilli sauce

Parsley pesto

Blue cheese dressing

There is nothing anyone could ever say that is more effectively guaranteed to make me snap than “Relax!”. The more soothingly it’s uttered, the more I tense up. So, I need to be cautious now, as I know just how irritating it can be to have someone tell you to calm down and stop your worrying. I’m not – not quite – about to do that. First, I promise you, there’s not a person alive who doesn’t feel the odd twinge of pressure

when guests are coming over for supper. And, secondly, I think that recognizing the pressure points, so to speak, allows you to plot a path to avoid them.

I know, now, what to do so that having people over midweek feels like a pleasant change rather than a menacing threat. Of course, I have my slip-ups and my off-days, when I long for my bed and wonder why I ever issued the invitation, or I start marching around the place hissing officiously and taking plates down from shelves with almost teenage levels of aggressive stropiness. But at least I can relax (yes, relax) in the knowledge that it's not the food or the cooking that will be giving me grief.

I'm not talking about dinner parties, here. But then, I'm never talking about dinner parties, anywhere. Still, I need to know that I can have a gaggle of friends over for supper, even when mired in the usual weekday farrago, in a way which makes me feel that life is something to ease into and enjoy. This isn't about cooking, but about living.

Of course, it helps if the cooking is easy, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Or, more accurately, *couldn't* have it any other way. Not possessing the skills of a chef, I don't expect you to have them, either. Besides, it really is important to remember you are not taking part in some sort of reality cooking show: there is no call for complicated recipes, swanky techniques or bravely novel ingredients; your friends are not coming to pass judgement on your food, but to eat it.

And at home, in my kitchen, I choose to cook what suits me. Yes, I want to please others, but I can't do that if I'm making my own life hell. Some days that means I'll defrost some home-made Turkey Meatballs I had planned for the kids' tea and partner them with lemony couscous and rocket. On others, it could mean a Spanish Chicken, Greek Herb Sauce, Mexican Lasagne, Indian-rubbed Lamb, Irish Oaten Rolls: for me, the kitchen is a great place to travel in.

But above all, it must be a safe place to travel in. There's enough turbulence out of the kitchen, without inviting

it inside. The recipes that follow in this chapter, for all that I give many of them far-flung exotic tags, are exactly what I want to cook when I need supper to be special but not stressful.



Irish oaten rolls

This started off as an oatly soda bread, and may return to that again ([see here](#)), but I find that when I haven't much time to cook, yet want to make a dinner feel cosy and special, these rolls are just the thing. You can have no more than 20 minutes and get these whipped up and baked, spreading their sweet and welcoming scent throughout the house. They certainly imbue my frenetic urban hub of a kitchen with all the reassuring warmth of the farmstead hearth of my yearning imagination.

If you can find good organic flour and oats, so much the better: it does make a difference. You can let standards slip with the stout: I keep any opened Guinness by for this, since I am so impatient I don't much like waiting for the froth at the top to die down when I'm measuring it out.

The only drawback (and it may not necessarily be one) with the quick-summoned rolls is that they aren't in the oven for long enough to bake up much of a crust; if you have the time to spare, though, you can turn this into a loaf by forming it into one large round, and baking it for 10 minutes at 220°C/gas mark 7 before turning the oven down to 190°C/gas mark 5 and giving it another 25 minutes; when cooked, it'll give a faintly hollow sound if you knock with your knuckles against the underside.

This bread, whether made to form 1 big loaf or 12 rolls, is perfect with everything, but most of all still warm with some good butter slowly melting on top. But you have to hope that some is left over, as it's hard to beat, too, when cold and smeared thickly with butter and jam.



Makes 12 rolls

400g wholemeal flour, preferably organic stoneground

**100g oats (not instant), preferably organic, plus 2
teaspoons**

2 teaspoons sea salt flakes or 1 teaspoon pouring salt

2 teaspoons bicarbonate of soda

300ml stout (or flat beer)

150ml buttermilk or runny plain yogurt

4 x 15ml tablespoons groundnut oil or other vegetable oil

4 x 15ml tablespoons runny honey

♥ Preheat the oven to 220°C/gas mark 7.

♥ Line a baking sheet with baking parchment or a piece of Bake-O-Glide.

♥ In a bowl, mix the flour, oats, salt and bicarb.

♥ In a jug, mix the stout, buttermilk (or runny plain yogurt), oil and honey. For ease, measure out the oil in an American quarter cup (60ml) or espresso cup, and then do ditto with the honey, as the oil lining will stop the honey from sticking. Stir the liquids together with a wooden spoon.

♥ Add the liquids to the dry ingredients and stir with the wooden spoon to combine – you will get a sandy porridge,

rather than a dough: at first, it will seem too runny but then, as the bicarb goes to work, it will become first moussy and then heavy like damp sand.

♥ Pat into small handfuls to form 12 mounds on the lined tray; don't bother to shape them until all 12 are laid out and you can see which rolls need to have dough pinched off and which need to be bulked up, so that they are more or less of even size. When you've finished, pat each into a rough round roll shape about 7cm diameter by 2–3cm high.

♥ Sprinkle the remaining 2 teaspoons oats over the rolls (a fat pinch each) and pop them in the oven for 15 minutes then transfer, 1 by 1, to a wire rack to cool just a little. Eat warm, or leave to reach room temperature. Soda bread is always best eaten on the day of baking, though reheating or toasting can revive a roll or slice of bread a day or two later.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Best eaten on the day they are made but the rolls will keep for 1–2 days, wrapped in a clean tea towel in bread bin or airtight container in a cool place. Reheat in oven preheated to 180°C/gas mark 4 for 5–10 minutes (best for the day after making). The rolls can also be split in half and toasted (best for 2 days after baking).

FREEZE NOTE

The rolls can be frozen for up to 1 month in tightly sealed freezer bag. Defrost for 2–3 hours at room temperature and reheat as above. The rolls may be slightly crumbly after defrosting.





Rocket and lemon couscous

This is what I add to turn a batch of teatime [meatballs](#) or, indeed, anything from lamb chops to a chicken stew into a spring-like, simple and chic supper. And, as elsewhere ([see here](#)), I take the quick couscous route, rather than any slow soaking and steaming.

Serves 4–6

800ml chicken or vegetable stock (made from concentrate, cube or granules), preferably organic

3 x 15ml tablespoons garlic oil

500g couscous

zest and juice 1 lemon

4 spring onions, finely sliced

100g rocket leaves

salt and pepper, to taste

♥ Make up the stock with boiling water.

♥ Heat the oil in a medium saucepan that comes with a lid, then add the couscous and fry, stirring all the time, for about 2–3 minutes.

♥ Pour in the hot stock, still stirring, and keep stirring over a very gentle heat until the stock is absorbed into the couscous, about 5 minutes.

♥ Turn off the heat, leaving the pan where it is, with a tight-fitting lid, for another 10 minutes. (If you cook on gas, you could leave it on the lowest setting with a heat diffuser under the pan, if you have one.)

♥ Fork through the couscous, turning it out into a big bowl. Keep working the couscous with the fork to make it lump free. Sprinkle in the lemon zest and juice, sliced spring onions and

salt and pepper, to taste, before adding the rocket leaves, and tossing together carefully to mix.



Indian-rubbed lamb chops

with butternut, rocket and pine nut salad

There is something about the scented heat of the spices here that intensifies the tender sweetness of the lamb, and since you do no more than make a rapid rub, and the chops themselves need only scant cooking, this is as undemanding to cook as it is rewarding to eat. On top of that, the earthy fragrance, as you cook, gives you all the effects of a high-end spa's scented candle without the added expense. There's all upside here. With one proviso, that is: make sure you don't let my impatience rub off on you. Cook these choplets at too high a heat, and the air will be acrid and smoky rather than aromatic.

The butternut squash salad is not an obligatory accompaniment, but it is a fitting one, not least for its radiant Bollywood colouring. If it makes life easier, by all means cook the butternut cubes ahead, though make sure they're at room temperature before you assemble your salad. Between you, me and the gatepost, I wouldn't actually refrigerate them in the first place, but I am all too aware that Health & Safety strictures would command me not to advise you to follow suit. Your call.

But if you're in a mad dash, then a salad made with colourful mixed leaves of any sort would be delicious; and be advised that you could make an even more rapid rub for the chops by simply mixing the salt specified below with 3 teaspoons of Madras curry powder.

Serves 4, with the salad in the next recipe.

1 teaspoon ground coriander

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1 teaspoon ground ginger

¼ teaspoon ground cloves

½ teaspoon cayenne pepper

½ teaspoon ground cinnamon

3 teaspoons sea salt flakes or 1½ teaspoons pouring salt

12 small French-trimmed lamb chops or 8 larger lamb chops

2 x 15ml tablespoons garlic oil

♥ Measure out the spices into a wide, shallow dish along with the salt, and mix to combine.

♥ Dip the lamb chops into the spice mixture, dusting them well on all sides.

♥ Warm the oil in a frying pan, then fry the chops for about 2–3 minutes a side, depending on thickness, over a medium heat. They should look darkly burnished – but still juicily pink within – when cooked.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The spice rub can be mixed together up to 1 month ahead. Store in airtight container or jam jar in a cool, dark place.

FURTHER NOTE

Leftover lamb can be stored in fridge, tightly wrapped in foil, for up to 3 days, and can be frozen in airtight container for up to 2 months.



Butternut, rocket and pine nut salad

I know the whole bowl thing below sounds as though I am trying to save myself as much washing-up as possible. While this is partly true, it is also the case that I can't bear to waste any of these glorious ingredients as I proceed.

Although I am happy to do the rubbing-cum-dusting for the chops with naked fingers, I feel [CSI gloves](#) are necessary for the salad. Too much unprotected handling of a butternut and I end up looking like I've got a 60-a-day habit, untipped at that.

1 butternut squash, approx. 1kg
1 teaspoon sea salt flakes or ½ teaspoon pouring salt
1 teaspoon ground turmeric
1 teaspoon ground ginger
2 x 15ml tablespoons cold-pressed rapeseed oil (see [Kitchen Confidential](#)) or olive oil, plus 2 tablespoons for dressing
50g golden sultanas
60ml water, from a freshly boiled kettle
1 teaspoon sherry vinegar
100g rocket and other salad leaves
50g pine nuts, toasted

♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6. Don't bother to peel, but halve and de-seed the butternut squash, cut into 1.5cm slices, then cut each slice into four.

♥ Put the butternut pieces into a bowl with the salt, spices and 2 tablespoons oil and smooch them about, then tip into a baking tray (lined with Bake-O-Glide or foil). Don't clean the bowl yet.

♥ Cook the squash for 30–40 minutes. Check to see if it is cooked through by the time the ½ hour's up by piercing with a fork; some squashes cook faster than others.

♥ Add the sultanas to the spice-smear bowl and cover with the freshly boiled water; once cooled, whisk in the vinegar and the 2 tablespoons oil that remain.

♥ Put half the salad leaves over a large plate or bowl and arrange the butternut pieces on top. Sprinkle with the remaining salad leaves and the toasted pine nuts. Scrape the sultana-studded dressing out of the bowl to dribble over it all, and toss gently before serving.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The butternut squash cubes can be roasted 1 day ahead. Cool completely, then cover and refrigerate until needed. Remove from fridge about 1 hour before serving, to allow to come to room temperature.





Making leftovers right

It may well be that you end up with a wee bit of salad over. Frankly, you can eat this just as is (perhaps with a little lime juice spritzed over to freshen it up) or else cook some rice and stir this through just in time to warm through properly at the end of the cooking.



Spring chicken

This is really a tweaking of a fairly traditional rabbit recipe, and if you consider yourself something of a bunny boiler, then feel free to substitute rabbit pieces for the chicken thighs itemized here. The chicken is easier to come by in a supermarket, though, and more likely to please generally. You can leave the skin on or off the thighs, as you wish, but I think it's important that the bone be left in. This is just my preference (I think it boosts flavour) but bear in mind that this is a pretty easy-going recipe, and you could use thigh fillets if that's easier, or indeed – at the other end of the spectrum – a whole chicken, portioned.

If there is a proper pudding planned for afterwards I think 2 thighs each, while a modest portion, would not be a mean one; if you're planning a one-course supper, I'd consider the 12 pieces a safer bet for 4 rather than for 6 people. And as for what you serve it with: I veer between rice and new potatoes (plain steamed in either case) and every now and again go for some other grain: spelt or barley or some such are all delicious for offering carbo-comfort and soaking up the flavoursome juices.

Serves 4–6

1 teaspoon vegetable oil

140g pancetta cubes (1 tub Italian *cubetti di pancetta*) or lardons or chopped bacon

12 chicken thighs (bone in, with or without skin), preferably organic

1 leek, cleaned, quartered lengthwise then finely sliced

1 stick celery, quartered lengthwise then finely sliced

3 cloves garlic, peeled and chopped

2 teaspoons freeze-dried tarragon

1 teaspoon sea salt flakes or ½ teaspoon pouring salt

good grinding white pepper

1 x 500ml bottle dry cider

300g frozen petit pois

1 x 15ml tablespoon Dijon mustard

2 Little Gem lettuces, cut into strips or roughly shredded

2 x 15ml tablespoons chopped fresh tarragon

♥ Heat the oil in a large, wide casserole that comes with a lid (and can be taken to the table) and add the pancetta cubes (or lardons or bacon), cooking them until they begin to give off their juices and start to colour.

♥ Add the chicken thighs (skin-side down if yours have skin), tossing the pancetta cubes on top of the meat (to stop the pancetta burning and to make space) as you put the poultry in the pan, and cook for about 5 minutes over a medium heat.

♥ Turn the thighs over and tip in the prepared leek, celery and garlic. Season with the dried tarragon, salt and pepper, then stir everything around a bit, letting it cook for another 5 minutes.

♥ Pour in the cider, then sprinkle in the frozen peas. Bring the pan to a boil then cover, turn down to a very gentle heat and cook for 40 minutes. Do check after 30, though, to see if the chicken is cooked through, and if you are disobeying me and going boneless, then 20 minutes should do it.

♥ Remove the lid, stir in the mustard, and then toss the shredded lettuce over the chicken, letting it wilt in the hot sauce for a couple of minutes.

♥ Scatter the chopped tarragon over the casserole and take the steamily fragrant pot to the table with quiet pride.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The chicken, without lettuce, can be cooked 1 day ahead. Transfer to non-metallic bowl, then cool, cover and refrigerate as quickly as possible. To reheat, return to casserole dish,

cover and reheat gently, for around 20 minutes, until chicken is piping hot all way through. Add a little water or chicken stock if pan becomes too dry. Add the lettuce and continue as directed in recipe.

FREEZE NOTE

Cook and cool the chicken as above, then freeze in airtight container for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.

Making leftovers right

Pasta sauce

*If there are any leftovers, remove the bones from the chicken, shred the meat and refrigerate as soon as possible. Reheat in a saucepan until piping hot and turn into a **sauce for pasta**, adding a little chicken stock, water or some cream as you reheat. Even if you have only a ladleful of cidery, bacony peas, it's worth keeping to reheat likewise. But do use up any leftovers within 2 days.*



Spanish chicken with chorizo and potatoes

Much as I love to have a pan bubbling away on the stove, I often feel that the most stress-free way to feed people is by taking the oven route. When I'm frazzled, I firmly believe that the tray-bake is the safest way to go. Enjoy the easefulness of the oven: you just bung everything in, and you're done. I think I'd go to the supreme effort of laying on a green salad as well but, other than that, you may kick up your flamenco heels and enjoy the fiesta.

Serves 6

2 x 15ml tablespoons regular olive oil

12 chicken thighs (bone in, with skin)

750g chorizo sausages, whole if baby ones, or cut into 4cm chunks if regular-sized

1kg new potatoes, halved

2 red onions, peeled and roughly chopped

2 teaspoons dried oregano grated zest 1 orange

♥ Preheat the oven to 220°C/gas mark 7. Put the oil in the bottom of 2 shallow roasting tins, 1 tablespoon in each. Rub the skin of the chicken in the oil, then turn skin-side up, 6 pieces in each tin.

♥ Divide the chorizo sausages and the new potatoes between the 2 tins. Sprinkle the onion and the oregano over, then grate the orange zest over the contents of the 2 tins.

♥ Cook for 1 hour, but after 30 minutes, swap the top tray with the bottom tray in the oven and baste the contents with the orange-coloured juices.

Making leftovers right

Chicken tortillas

*You can reheat what remains (removing the bones from the chicken first) within 2 days, maybe with some canned chopped tomatoes, sherry and orange juice, but my absolute favourite final destination for this dish is a quesadilla. When I was last in Kansas, that shining city of lights, I breakfasted on a chicken, pepperjack and potato quesadilla (as one does) and it inspired me. So, just get as many soft flour **tortillas** as your leftovers command, take the bones out of the chicken, dice the meat along with the chorizo and potatoes, and stir in some diced, shredded or grated cheese (Cheddar, mozzarella, Monterey Jack, all are possible), dollop some of the mixture into each tortilla, fold, then griddle or fry. Make sure the chicken is piping hot. This makes for a splendid hangover-banishing breakfast or near-instant supper, the sort you chow down on while watching something compellingly bad on TV.*



Chicken with Greek herb sauce

This is, many years down the line, a variant of a recipe spawned in my first book and cooked regularly ever since. Cooking, too, follows the law of natural selection and this version has evolved to become a fallback of choice. It is not widely different from the *Ur*-recipe but there are, chiefly, two things in its favour: one, it uses chicken thighs rather than breast, which cost, as I can't stop myself reiterating, about half the price but have twice the flavour; and they are cooked in the oven rather than on the stove.

And if there's time, light the oven earlier and give some baking potatoes 45 minutes to 1 hour before the chicken goes in. Yes, it's easy, but that's not all: I can't tell you how divine a baked potato is when heaped with this herb-flecked yogurt.

Serves 4–6

**12 chicken thighs (bone in, with or without skin),
preferably organic**

juice 1 lemon

4 x 15ml tablespoons regular olive oil

salt and pepper

for the Greek herb sauce:

1 x 500ml pot natural Greek yogurt

4 fat or 6 thin spring onions

1 green chilli, de-seeded

1 clove garlic, peeled

½ cucumber, peeled and finely diced

**3 x 15ml tablespoons each chopped fresh coriander and
mint, or 2 tablespoons each plus 2 tablespoons dill**

salt and pepper, to taste

- ♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6. Place the chicken thighs (skin-side up if yours have skin) in a shallow roasting tin or ovenproof dish, then pour the lemon juice and olive oil over them and season with a little salt and pepper.
- ♥ When the oven's up to heat, pop the chicken in and roast for 45 minutes.
- ♥ Meanwhile, get on with the sauce. Tip the yogurt into a large mixing bowl and scissor in the spring onions and the de-seeded chilli, cutting both as finely as you can.
- ♥ Now mince the garlic into the yogurt and add the diced cucumber and most of the chopped herbs, reserving a little to sprinkle on top later. Mix all these ingredients together.
- ♥ Remove the chicken pieces from the oven, and transfer to a serving dish. Season the sauce to taste, then scrape it into a smaller bowl to serve, sprinkling the remaining herbs over the top, and put a spoon in the bowl for dolloping at the table.





Mexican lasagne

with avocado salsa

I feel I am careering about like some giddy traveller with Air Miles to spare here. The thing is, I cook instead of travelling – a kitchen rather than armchair tourist – and it’s less tiring, so it stands to reason that I can cover more ground.

Still, the notion of a Mexican lasagne might seem a fantastic voyage too far; let me just say that here this is a shorthand for Mexican-inspired ingredients piled up in lasagne-like fashion. In place of pasta layers, there are soft tortillas and in between them a riotous assembly of tomato, red pepper, onion, chilli, corn and cheese.

I like to make a last-minute [avocado salsa](#), which is no more than a kind of unmashed guacamole, but it’s an embellishment rather than a necessity.

You can see from the picture ([see here](#)) how snug the “lasagne” is in its dish. If you can totter towards the oven without spilling it, you’re halfway there; but I advise you to put a baking sheet or swiss roll tin in the oven as you preheat to catch any drips that might fall later.

And talking of later, one of the joys of this is that it reheats, by the slice, so wonderfully on the days that follow. So do think about cooking this even when you don’t have so many to feed first time around.

Serves 8

for the Sauce:

1 x 15ml tablespoon garlic oil

1 onion, peeled and chopped

1 red pepper, de-seeded and chopped

2 green bird’s-eye chillies, chopped with seeds

1 teaspoon sea salt flakes or ½ teaspoon pouring salt
2 x 15ml tablespoons coriander stalks, finely chopped
2 x 400g cans chopped tomatoes, plus 400ml water swilled from empty cans
1 x 15ml tablespoon tomato ketchup

for the filling:

2 x 400g cans black beans, drained and rinsed
2 x 250g cans (225g drained weight each) sweetcorn
250g mature goat's Cheddar, grated, or cheese of your choice
1 packet (8) soft tortillas
1 x round ovenproof dish, approx. 26cm diameter x 6cm deep

♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6, slipping in a baking tray at the same time. **To make the sauce**, heat the oil in a pan on the stove and fry the onion, pepper and chilli. Add the salt and cook gently for 15 minutes and, once soft, add the chopped coriander stalks.

♥ Add the canned tomatoes, then swill the cans out with water and add this too. Spoon in the ketchup and let things come to a simmer, leaving the sauce (or salsa, in keeping with the Mexican mojo) to cook while you get on with preparing the filling – about 10 minutes.

♥ **To make the filling**, mix the drained beans and sweetcorn in a bowl. Add most of the grated cheese, reserving some to sprinkle on the top at the end, and mix together.

♥ Start to assemble the lasagne by spooning about a third of the salsa into the bottom of your ovenproof dish and smearing it about, then layer on 2 tortillas so that they cover the sauce overlapping slightly, like a Venn diagram.

♥ Add a third of the beans and cheese mixture, covering the tortillas, and then about a quarter of the remaining salsa and

another 2 tortillas.

♥ Repeat with another third of beans and cheese, and some more salsa before layering on another 2 tortillas.

♥ Finally, add the last layer of beans and cheese, nearly all of the remaining salsa and cover with the last 2 tortillas. Spread the very last bit of salsa over the tortillas and sprinkle with the remaining cheese.

♥ Bake in the oven for 30 minutes, and let it rest for a good 10–15 minutes before slicing like a pizza, and eat with the [avocado salsa](#).

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The lasagne can be assembled 1 day ahead. Cool the tomato salsa before assembling. Cover dish tightly with clingfilm and refrigerate until needed. Bake as directed in recipe, allowing an extra 5–10 minutes' baking time and checking the lasagne is piping hot in centre before removing from oven.

FREEZE NOTE

The assembled but uncooked lasagne can be frozen for up to 3 months. Wrap dish tightly in double layer of clingfilm and a layer of foil. Defrost overnight in fridge and cook as above.

FURTHER NOTE

Leftovers should be covered and refrigerated as soon as possible. To reheat, put individual slices in ovenproof dish, cover with foil and reheat in oven preheated to 180°C/gas mark 4 for 15–20 minutes. Check the lasagne is piping hot before serving. Wedges of leftover lasagne can be frozen for up to 2 months, tightly wrapped in clingfilm and then either in foil or in resealable bag. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.



Avocado salsa

Now I've started salsa-ing, it seems I can't stop, but what I mean here is not so much a sauce as a pile of spice-puckering cubes. The vinegary heat from the pickled jalapeño peppers is perfect alongside the soft, smooth flesh of the avocado, and the combination sings with the melody of a mariachi band alongside the bean-pebbled, cheese-rich tortilla bake.

Serves 8, as a condiment to eat with the Mexican lasagne

2 avocados

1 spring onion, finely sliced

3 x 15ml tablespoons chopped green jalapeños from a jar

salt, to taste

1 x 15ml tablespoon lime juice

4 x 15ml tablespoons roughly chopped fresh coriander

♥ Halve the avocados, remove the stones and then, using the tip of a sharp knife, cut lines down the flesh of each half, about 1cm apart, and then the same across.

♥ Turn the avocado halves inside out, or otherwise release the pale green cubes into a bowl, then tumble in the sliced spring onion, chopped jalapeños, salt to taste, lime juice and most of the coriander and toss, with the tenderest gentleness, to mix.

♥ Taste to see if more salt is needed before scattering with the remaining coriander and taking to the table.



Tomato curry *with coconut rice*

Not being a vegetarian, I have a rather indelicate lack of faith in meatless main courses; I worry all too readily about whether it's going to be filling enough. I suppose this is habit, which in turn is largely cultural conditioning but, beyond that even, my fear is to do with balance: I need to feel sure that everything on the table provides a true marriage of tastes and textures; I can't abide the one-note meal. Here I'm happy: the acid brightness of the tomatoes is met with the sweetness of peas and the rich creaminess of the coconut rice, which is itself pricked with the sharpness of lime, while its Carrara-whiteness is punctuated by the gritty blackness of the seeds (not there just to satisfy culinary egomania).

Serves 4, *as a main course with the coconut rice that follows*

2 x 15ml tablespoons cold-pressed rapeseed oil (see [Kitchen Confidential](#)) or regular olive oil

2 large onions (approx. 350g total), peeled and chopped

1 teaspoon sea salt flakes or $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon pouring salt

4 cloves garlic, peeled and chopped

1kg cherry tomatoes, halved

2 teaspoons turmeric

1 teaspoon English mustard powder

1 teaspoon hot chilli powder

1 teaspoon garam masala

200g frozen peas

♥ Heat the oil in a wide casserole or pan that comes with a lid, and add the chopped onions, sprinkling with salt, and stirring

frequently as you cook them over a low to medium heat for about 7 minutes.

♥ Stir in the chopped garlic, then add the halved tomatoes, before stirring in the spices, and cook for 20 minutes with the lid on over a low heat.

♥ Cook the peas in another pan (in boiling salted water as usual), drain and add to the tomato curry for the last 5 minutes' cooking time. By all means cook the peas directly in the tomato curry, but be prepared then to sacrifice both the vivid red of the tomatoes and the bright green of the peas.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The tomato base (not the peas) can be cooked 1 day ahead. Transfer to non-metallic bowl, then cool, cover and refrigerate as quickly as possible. To reheat, return to saucepan and heat gently until piping hot. Cook and add peas as directed above.

FREEZE NOTE

Cook and cool the tomatoes as above, then freeze in airtight container for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat, adding the peas, as above.



Coconut rice

Serves 4, *with the tomato curry above*

1 x 15ml tablespoon garlic oil

4 spring onions, finely sliced

2 teaspoons nigella seeds or black mustard seeds

300g Thai or basmati rice

1 x 400ml can coconut milk

600ml freshly boiled water

1 teaspoon sea salt flakes or ½ teaspoon pouring salt

juice 1 lime, or to taste

- ♥ Warm the oil in a heavy-based pan that has a lid, add the spring onions and nigella seeds (or black mustard seeds) and cook for a minute or so, pushing this way and that with a wooden spoon.
- ♥ Stir in the rice, letting it get slicked with oil and thoroughly mixed with the black-dotted green shreds.
- ♥ Pour the coconut milk into a measuring jug and top up to the 1 litre mark with freshly boiled water, then add this to the rice, stirring it in with the salt.
- ♥ Bring to a boil, then turn the heat down to low and put on the lid. Cook for 15 minutes, by which time the rice should be cooked and the liquid absorbed.
- ♥ Fluff up with a fork as you pour in the lime juice, and taste to see if you need either more salt or more lime.





Quick calamari pasta

In one of my favourite parts of Tuscany, not the cypress-studded hills of Chiantishire, but by the coast, up a steep and squiggly lane behind Porto Santo Stefano, is a restaurant called La Fontanina. And there, I ate this, or rather its inspiration: a flat bowl of calamari-shaped pasta, almost indistinguishable – until that first tender bite – from the actual squid rings which, glistening with garlic-infused wine, comprised the sauce. I thought about this when I came back, but it wasn't until, in a favourite deli (some years on from that first sampling), I stumbled across a packet of pasta called “i calamari” – in a powder-blue paper packet, made by Voiello, shape no. 142 – that I determined to make it myself. It's silly really, as the heavenly taste doesn't rely on the culinary pun, but the delight we get from food is complex. I have since found an online source for the calamariform pasta but the more universally stocked De Cecco range does have a mezzì rigatoni shape that would stand in respectably; and, of course, you are free to use any pasta shape – I sometimes feel a counter-intuitive pull towards fusilli.

Serves 4–6, as a main meal

500g pasta, as close to calamari-ring shape as possible

salt, to taste

500g baby squid (cleaned weight), sliced, tentacles left whole

2 x 15ml tablespoons regular olive oil

4 spring onions, finely sliced

1 clove garlic, peeled

1 fresh chilli, de-seeded and diced

125ml dry white vermouth or white wine

60ml pasta cooking water

1 x 15ml tablespoon (15g) unsalted butter

handful chopped parsley

♥ Put a large pan of water on to boil for the pasta. Once it is boiling, salt the water and add the pasta to cook according to packet instructions. Then get on with your squid sauce.

♥ Cut the squid into approx. 1cm rings. Heat the oil in a pan and fry the spring onion for 1 minute, then grate in the garlic and add the chopped chilli, stirring well.

♥ Add the squid rings and cook, stirring, for about 2 minutes. Pour in the vermouth (or white wine) and cook for another 2–3 minutes or until the squid is tender and the wine boiled down quite a bit. Lower in a cup to retrieve some water from the pasta pan and stir about 60ml into the squid pan along with the butter; it will look liquidy but do not panic.

♥ Drain the pasta and add to the squid, tossing everything together well. Sprinkle with the parsley and work that through, then serve.





Clams with chorizo

Seafood, pork and sherry: three ingredients, one fantastic but simple Spanish-inspired meal. I adore the plain sweetness of some steamed baby new potatoes alongside – each small, pebbly potato to be pronged by a fork and dipped into the headily aromatic liquid – but am happy, too, with nothing more than some bread to tear off and dunk into the rich juices.

Serves 2–4, depending whether it's part of or a whole meal

1kg clams

500g chorizo sausage, cut into fat coins

125ml amontillado sherry

3 x 15ml tablespoons snipped chives

- ♥ Put the clams to soak in a big bowl of cold water, or directly in the sink.
- ♥ Fry the sliced chorizo in a dry, large, cast-iron or heavy-based pan or wok that comes with a lid.
- ♥ Once the chorizo is coloured a little and has given up some madly orange oil, remove the crisp coins to a piece of foil and wrap them up to keep them warm.
- ♥ Drain the clams – throwing away any that remain open or whose shells are broken – then add the closed clams to the layer of chorizo oil oozed in the pan. Turn the heat up high, splosh in the sherry and clamp on the lid.
- ♥ Cook for 2–3 minutes, by which time the clams should have opened. Discard any that have not. Take the pan off the heat.
- ♥ Return the coins of chorizo to the pan, with the chopped chives and stir through.

Salmon and sushi rice

with hot, sweet and sour Asian sauce

This started off as Japanese-inspired, what with the sushi rice, the sake and the mirin. But then it moved a little south-westerly, as I encompassed the notion of the Vietnamese dipping sauce, using – for fire – a Thai chilli. I think we are altogether safer, then, to embrace this as pan-Asian, thanks to an impetus that is in part fridge-foray, in part fusion.

Perhaps because I've got a [rice cooker](#) for full apologia for its existence in my kitchen) I am always readily inclined to base supper around a bowl or three of [sushi rice](#). I adore its comforting stickiness and the way it offers itself up so sweetly to sharpness and heat and even – when the simplest of sauces feels like too much – just the deep saltiness of soy sauce. But for me, the true joy of this is that it is both filling and chilling (in the contemporary sense) at the same time.

Serves 4–6

425g sushi rice

1 x 500g slab skinless salmon fillet (in one piece)

2 cloves garlic, peeled and minced

2 Thai red chillies, finely chopped

2 x 15ml tablespoons minced ginger

4 x 15ml tablespoons fish sauce

2 x 15ml tablespoons sake (Japanese rice wine)

2 x 15ml tablespoons mirin (sweet Japanese rice wine)

2 x 15ml tablespoons lime juice

2 x 15ml tablespoons water

♥ Cook the rice according to packet instructions, or to suit a rice cooker, if you're lucky enough to have one. The quantities

may be reduced if you are 4 rather than 6.

♥ Sear the salmon on a flat griddle or frying pan for 4–5 minutes on one side over a medium heat, then turn it over and cook for 1 minute on the other side. The salmon should be just opaque and cooked in the centre. Remove it to a large piece of foil and make a baggy package with tightly sealed edges to keep it warm.

♥ Mix all the other ingredients together, and put in a bowl to serve alongside the salmon and the cooked rice; then unwrap the fish and put it on a plate.

♥ I like to use small bowls, and let people flake the fish themselves onto their rice, before dribbling over it the chilli-flecked sake sauce

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The sauce ingredients can be mixed together 1 day in advance. Store in jam jar in fridge and shake well before using.





Lemony salmon with cherry tomato couscous

This is one of those recipes that is easier to follow than to write: that's to say, there are many bowls involved, which might make this look troublesome and fiddly, but the actual process involved is almost insultingly simple.

Now, I know that it is not strictly right to indicate that you cook couscous by pouring boiling water over it. In an ideal world, I accept, one should soak the grains in cold water before steaming them over hot, but I take the shortcut, and repeatedly, and I apologize to those whom I thereby offend.

Serves 4

200g couscous

3 teaspoons sea salt flakes or 1½ teaspoons pouring salt

½ teaspoon paprika

1 x 15ml tablespoon grated fresh ginger

250ml freshly boiled water

**½ small red onion, finely chopped (about 4 x 15ml
tablespoons)**

zest and juice 1 lemon

1 x 15ml tablespoon garlic oil, plus 1 teaspoon

300g cherry tomatoes

4 salmon fillets

4 x 15ml tablespoons chopped fresh coriander

♥ Put the couscous into a Pyrex or similar heatproof bowl, with 2 teaspoons sea salt flakes (or 1 teaspoon pouring salt), ¼ teaspoon of the paprika and all the grated ginger. Give everything a bit of a mix before pouring over it the freshly

boiled water. Cover the bowl, either with clingfilm or a plate, and leave to one side.

♥ Into another bowl, put the finely chopped onion.

♥ Now get out a wide, shallow dish, big enough to take the salmon fillets later, and zest the lemon into it.

♥ Now, back to your onion bowl, and squeeze in the lemon juice.

♥ Over to the “zest” dish, and add the remaining salt and the paprika and stir in the 1 tablespoon garlic oil.

♥ Halve the cherry tomatoes and put them into yet another bowl; pour the extra teaspoon garlic oil over them, mix about a bit, then leave to one side.

♥ Heat a large frying pan for the salmon fillets. While the pan’s getting hot, turn them, both sides, in the “zest” dish to coat them with the zest, paprika and oily salt.

♥ Place the fillets in the hot pan and cook for 2–3 minutes a side – depending on thickness: you want these still juicy and a vivid coral colour in the middle, so do check as you cook.

♥ Meanwhile, uncover and fluff up the couscous, which should have absorbed all the water, then tip the tomatoes with lemony onion, juice and all, into the couscous, mixing with a fork.

♥ Add nearly all the coriander to the couscous, and stir it through, then taste for seasoning, adding more salt if you need to.

♥ Spoon some couscous onto each plate and place a salmon fillet alongside, sprinkling with a little more coriander as you hand out each plate.



The salmoriglio solution, and other short sauces

It's always worth having up your sleeve some quickly got-together sauce or dressing that can turn a plain cooked chicken, chop or fish into something special. Here are a trio of my favourites:

SALMORIGLIO SAUCE

This is a fantastically punchy herb-fragrant sauce that can be dribbled over plain grilled lamb cutlets, a breast of poached chicken or used to enliven a fillet of sole or salmon. And when you've got to the end of the bowl (I stash it in the fridge between servings), whisk in some more oil and make a glorious dressing for some steamed or tender boiled cauliflower.

Makes 200ml

2 garlic cloves, peeled

1 teaspoon sea salt flakes or ½ teaspoon pouring salt

15g bunch oregano

20g bunch flat-leaf parsley

4 x 15ml tablespoons lemon juice

125ml extra-virgin olive oil

♥ Put the peeled garlic cloves into a bowl with the salt, leaves stripped from the bunch of oregano, the leaves from the parsley and then the lemon juice.

♥ Process these ingredients to a paste, with a stick blender or in a processor, and then pour in the oil, blending until it emulsifies into a richly green, slightly runny pesto-like sauce.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The sauce will keep in fridge in covered container for up to 1 week. Stir before use.

JUMBO CHILLI SAUCE

This chilli sauce is big – big flavour, big kick, big reward. The name, however, derives from the fact that the recipe was given to me by my brother-in-law, Jim, Jimbo to me, but often known as Jumbo due to his compact size.

My son is a complete addict of this sauce, and I cannot have enough of it, either. I love it with prawns, with cold chicken, with chips, with everything.

Makes 450ml

1 x 290g jar roasted peppers (190g drained weight)

3 red chillies

1 small clove garlic, peeled

zest 1 lime and 1 x 15ml tablespoon juice

80g bunch coriander

2–3 teaspoons sea salt flakes or 1–1½ teaspoons pouring salt, to taste

125ml groundnut or other flavourless oil

- ♥ Drain the jar of roasted peppers and put them into a food processor or into a bowl.
- ♥ Take the stalks off the chillies, and deseed them if you don't like it really hot. Add to the processor or bowl.
- ♥ Tip in the garlic clove, and lime zest and juice. Cut the stalks off the coriander and add these, too. Process or whiz with a stick blender until paste-like.
- ♥ Add the coriander leaves and salt and process or blend again, then pour the oil down the funnel of the processor as the motor is running, or pour the oil into your bowl and whiz again with a stick blender. It will make a sauce that is more liquid than a salsa, but soft and spoonable rather than a pouring sauce.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The sauce will keep in fridge in covered container for up to 1 week. Stir or shake well before use.





PARSLEY PESTO

There are two main ways I eat this: one is dribbled over a quickly and simply fried fillet of turkey or chicken breast or to add edge to a roast sweet potato; the other is, as you might expect, as a sauce for pasta. And to eke it out at the end, I add a bit more oil and some lemon juice and use it to dress a Little Gem or cos-heart salad. It's also exquisite with grilled sardines, but I don't cook those often due to in-house complaints about the smell. If you have a garden and a barbecue, you're laughing.

For all that I use Italian flat-leaf parsley, I think of this rather as an English pesto: it smells to me like the country on a windy, sunny afternoon.



Makes 325ml

40g grated Parmesan cheese

25g parsley leaves

1 clove garlic, peeled

50g walnut pieces

250ml extra-virgin olive oil

**½ teaspoon sea salt flakes or ¼ teaspoon pouring salt
(optional)**

♥ Put the Parmesan, parsley leaves, garlic and walnuts into a processor and, with the motor running, slowly pour the oil down the funnel until the fragrant mixture has emulsified, or put the ingredients in a bowl and whiz with a stick blender, adding the oil as you go.

♥ Taste to see how much, if any, salt you want and duly add it, giving the sauce a quick final blitz.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The pesto will keep in fridge in covered container for up to 1 week. Cover surface of pesto with a thin layer of oil to prevent pesto from turning too dark.

FREEZE NOTE

The pesto can be frozen for up to 3 months, preferably with a thin layer of oil covering surface. Defrost overnight in fridge before using.



And one more for luck

UNIVERSALLY USEFUL BLUE CHEESE DRESSING

I promised a trio of sauces, but I just had to get this in under the wire. If you like blue cheese – as I, swooningly, do – then know that this, dribbled over sliced, sweet tomatoes along with a torn-off log of baguette is a perfect enough supper just as it is. And you can make a fabulously retro US-steakhouse-style starter, by cutting a head of iceberg lettuce into wedges and dribbling each crunchy wedge with this plus, perhaps, a scattering of crisp-fried bacon crumbles. And it makes a fabulous dressing to dribble over leftover rare roast beef.

Makes 250ml

150g blue cheese, crumbled

1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

1 teaspoon brown sauce (such as A1 or HP)

75ml buttermilk or runny plain yogurt

45ml full-fat milk

**1 teaspoon cider vinegar or good white wine vinegar or
white balsamic vinegar**

♥ Put the crumbled cheese into a bowl, add the Worcestershire sauce, brown sauce, buttermilk, milk and the vinegar and mix gently until well combined. Thin if necessary with a little iced water. Chill until needed.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The dressing will keep for 3–4 days in covered container in fridge – store in cold part of fridge rather than in the door.



COOK IT BETTER

Apple and cinnamon muffins

Strawberry and almond crumble

Banoffee cheesecake

Coconut and cherry banana bread

Chocolate banana muffins

Cinnamon plums with French toast

Chocolate chip bread pudding

Pear pandowdy

Panzanella

Minestrone

South Indian vegetable curry

Sauce for lemon sole

There are some things I say repeatedly to my children, indeed have done so over the years, and cannot seem to stop myself, even though I can see them rolling their eyes as I open my mouth to let out the first few well-worn words. “When I was a child, we only got presents at birthdays and Christmas” is one of the most-used phrases to roll off the mother-tongue; another is “You weren’t allowed to talk back to your mother like that in my day”. And as I write, I am rather embarrassed by the petulance I’m somehow unable to hear in my voice when I say these words out loud.

You may have some sympathy for my children, I realize, as it occurs to me that I probably have never written a book in which I don’t at some stage, confess that “although I am extravagant, I am never wasteful”. Reader, roll your eyes as you will, here comes that moment again. I don’t wish to be a repetitive bore (and fear, perhaps with reason, turning into my

paternal grandmother who seemed to have stories and anecdotes on a perpetual loop) but this mantra, if you like, is at the core of my cooking practice.

Of course it's a debatable point. There are people who would say that throwing away a stale loaf is less wasteful than adding milk, cream, chocolate chips and so luxuriously on, before burning fuel to bake it into a pudding in the oven. While there is a case to be made – if a puritanical one – for cutting your losses in the kitchen, I am just not genetically programmed to throw food away. Have tried. Can't do it. But, anyway, this form of recycling, which is to say, turning the remnants of last week's shopping into this week's treat, seems to me to be at the very heart of what being a cook – as opposed to a chef – is all about.

Of course, I'm not saying that I'd expect to find time to make a banoffee cheesecake rise out of the sad ashes of a blackening bunch of bananas all that often, but when I do, the sense of glorious satisfaction that comes with it, the glow of simple, straightforward pleasure at just using something up, is quite as delicious as the cheesecake itself. This isn't smugness, though I admit it could be confused with it. It's an innocent joy, and one that brings calm and content, qualities not notably present in much of our daily lives.

And all this is by the by compared with the purely practical benefits. Why go shopping and spend money unnecessarily when a quick forage in the fridge can conjure up a comforting minestrone or supper-party-suitable South Indian Vegetable Curry? Banish the wartime rationing legacy that lingers dourly around the notion of kitchen husbandry. This is modern make-do-and-mend cooking, which means Strawberry and Almond Crumble, Pear Pandowdy and the exuberant flavours of Panzanella, that tomato-and-basil-kissed bread salad from Tuscany. I mean, really: it would be a waste not to...



Apple and cinnamon muffins

I know this sounds unnecessarily contentious, or just plain muddle-headed, but I feel that the enormous popularity of the muffin has done it a great disfavour. It's simply this: many people's notion of a muffin is the shop- or café-bought kind. Now, I would rather eat compacted sawdust than most of the muffins I see bulging menacingly from coffee-shop shelves. But I see muffins being bought and eaten, and presume they are passable: that's not quite my beef – to mix my foodstuff metaphors for a moment. The muffins that come from muffin-making factories are not the same as muffins that emanate from domestic ovens: the former are too tender-crumbed and too cartoonishly aerated. Thus, everyone who bakes muffins at home feels a failure for presenting something with a modestly domed (or even flatter) top.

That's not failure – that's a muffin, man. Nor should a muffin be merely an un-iced cupcake. I know sugar sells, but for food to be worthy of my consideration at breakfast, its sweetness must be tempered. This apple and cinnamon baby is a case in point. It's filling and fruity and feels like something that ought to be a contradiction in terms: a wholesome treat. Spelt flour here provides a certain rough-hewn nuttiness – rather than the hessian weave of wholemeal – but if you can't find spelt flour or can't be bothered to look for it, know that regular plain flour can be used in its stead. You'll simply end up with a lighter-crumbed creation.

You could make these any time you wish, but for me the prompt comes when I see a pair of apples wilting in my fruit bowl. A withered-skinned apple is distasteful on so many counts, least of which is that the only apples I like to eat are those so sharp and crunchy they almost hurt when you bite into them; the worst is that the vision of the fruit, with its sad, wrinkled skin, if not quite a memento mori, is certainly a pitiless reminder of time's ravages. Some people see eternity

in a grain of sand; I see the fragility of a finite life in a fruit bowl – it's not good. But pah! What do I care, when there's food to be eaten? And apples long past their prime make for magnificent muffins. What's more, unlike your usual muffin, these taste good cold and old (well a day or two) as well.



Makes 12

2 eating apples

250g spelt flour (or use plain flour)

2 teaspoons baking powder

2 teaspoons ground cinnamon

125g light brown sugar, plus 4 teaspoons for sprinkling

125ml honey

60ml runny natural yogurt

125ml flavourless vegetable oil

2 eggs

75g natural (unblanched) almonds

1 x 12-bun muffin tin

♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6 and line your muffin tin with papers.

♥ Peel and core the apples, then chop into small dice (about 1cm, but please don't measure) and put them to one side.

♥ Measure the flour, baking powder and 1 teaspoon of the ground cinnamon into a bowl.

♥ Whisk together the 125g brown sugar, the honey, yogurt, vegetable oil and eggs in another bowl or jug.

♥ Chop the almonds roughly and add half of them to the flour mixture, and put the other half into a small bowl with the second teaspoon of ground cinnamon and the 4 extra teaspoons brown sugar. This will make the topping for the muffins.

♥ Now fold the wet ingredients into the dry. Add the chopped apple, and stir to combine but don't over mix. To remind you: a lumpy batter makes for a lighter muffin.

♥ Spoon this bumpy batter into the muffin papers, then sprinkle the rubbly topping mixture over them.

♥ Pop the tin into the preheated oven, and bake for about 20 minutes, by which time they will have risen and become golden.

♥ Take the tin out of the oven and let it stand for about 5 minutes before gingerly taking out the muffins and placing them on a wire cooling rack.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The night before, you can measure out dry ingredients into a bowl, and mix liquid ingredients and leave them covered in fridge overnight. In the morning, prepare and dice apples, chop almonds and proceed with fifth step and recipe as above. Best eaten on day of making but muffins can be baked up to 1 day ahead and stored in airtight container, layered with baking parchment. Reheat in warm oven for 5–8 minutes before serving. Will keep for 2–3 days.

FREEZE NOTE

The muffins can be frozen in airtight container, layered with baking parchment, for up to 2 months. Defrost for 3–4 hours on wire rack at room temperature and reheat as above.

Strawberry and almond crumble

If I'd had to choose one thing that cooking could not make better, I'd have put good money on its being a bad (as in unripe and tasteless) strawberry. I'd be embarrassed even to own up to trying to improve it, were it not for the fact that I read an article by Saint Simon of Hopkinson in which he advised using said strawbuggers in a pie. So I did. Well, that's not quite true: I am lazier than he is, so I made a crumble. I don't know what, how or why it happened, but this is a crumble of dreams. The oven doesn't, as you'd think, turn the berries into a red-tinted mush of slime, but into berry-intense bursts of tender juiciness. This is nothing short of alchemy: you take the vilest, crunchiest supermarket strawberries, top them with an almondy, buttery rubble, bake and turn them on a cold day into the taste of English summer. Naturally, serve with lashings of cream: I regard this as obligatory not optional.

Serves 6

500g strawberries, hulled

50g caster sugar

25g ground almonds

4 teaspoons vanilla extract

for the topping:

110g plain flour

1 teaspoon baking powder

75g cold butter, diced

100g flaked almonds

75g demerara sugar

double cream, to serve

**1 x ovenproof pie dish approx. 21cm diameter x 4cm deep
(approx. 1.25 litre capacity)**

♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6. Put the hulled strawberries into your pie dish (I use a round one) and sprinkle over them the sugar, almonds and vanilla extract. Give the dish a good shake or two to mix the ingredients.

♥ Now for the crumble topping: put the flour and baking powder in a mixing bowl and rub in the cold, diced butter between thumb and fingers (or in a freestanding mixer). When you've finished, it should resemble rough, pale oatmeal. Stir in the flaked almonds and sugar with a fork.

♥ Tip this over the strawberry mixture, covering the strawberries in an even layer and giving a bit of a press in at the edges of the dish. Set the dish on a baking sheet and bake in the oven for 30 minutes, by which time the crumble topping will have darkened to a pale gold and some pink-red juices will be seeping and bubbling out at the edges.

♥ Leave to stand for 10 minutes before serving, and be sure to put a jug of chilled double cream on the table alongside.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The crumble can be assembled 1 day ahead. Cover with clingfilm and store in fridge until needed. Bake as directed in recipe, but allowing extra 5–10 minutes' cooking time and check crumble is piping hot in the centre.

FREEZE NOTE

Crumble topping can be made and frozen in resealable plastic bags, for up to 3 months. Sprinkle topping direct from freezer over fruit, breaking up large lumps with your hands. The assembled but unbaked crumble can be frozen, wrapped in a double layer of clingfilm and a layer of foil, for up to 3 months. Defrost for 24 hours in fridge and bake as above.



Banoffee cheesecake

I could write a whole book of banana recipes, so often do I end up with a black claw of softening fruit beckoning from the corner of the kitchen. Toss them away? Never. I can't cope with the waste, even if what I tend to do is throw expensive ingredients at them to come up with ever more lavish ways not to discard them. Some of those recipes are dotted throughout my other books, but I have managed to restrain myself here, and I like that challenge: using up food isn't dreary and merely thrifty; it can feel like the most liberating, inspiring way of cooking. And I love the way a handful of mournfully overripe, positively unprepossessing bananas have given rise to this vulgarly triumphant cha-cha-cha of a cheesecake. Well, it is a cheesecake, but the texture is not the usual smooth – sometimes cloying or even palate-cleaving – cream; rather, it is aerated and moussy and as light as its perfume is, contrariwise, compellingly heady.

You can make the toffee sauce while the cheesecake is cooking or cooling. Either way, you want the sauce completely cold, but it shouldn't go into the fridge; it will come to no harm sitting out, covered, overnight, or for a couple of days in a cool place. The cheesecake is a different matter: it needs the overnight stay in the fridge and longer won't hurt it.

When you make this, do ensure that the cream cheese is at room temperature before you start whisking or processing it. If it starts off cold, it will never – whisk it or blitz it as wildly as you will – cook to the requisite lusciousness.

Serves 10

for the base:

250g digestive biscuits

75g soft unsalted butter

for the cheesecake:

4 overripe medium-sized bananas

60ml lemon juice

700g cream cheese, at room temperature

6 eggs

150g soft light brown sugar

for the toffee sauce:

100g soft unsalted butter

125ml golden syrup

75g soft light brown sugar

1 x 23cm springform cake tin

1 x roasting tin, for water-bath

♥ Preheat the oven to 170°C/gas mark 3 and put a full kettle on to boil. Wrap the outside (underneath and sides), of your springform tin with a double layer of clingfilm, then cover that thoroughly with a double layer of foil. The idea is to give a good waterproof casing to protect the cheesecake as it bakes in its water-bath later.

♥ Process the digestive biscuits with the butter until you have a sandy rubble that is beginning to clump, and press into the bottom of the prepared tin. Sit this in the fridge and clean out the processor, making sure you have no crumbage left whatsoever.

♥ Mash the bananas well with a fork, add the lemon juice, and set aside for a moment.

♥ Process the cream cheese until smooth, then add the eggs and sugar. Last of all, add the mashed banana and lemon juice, processing until you have a smooth mixture.

♥ Take out of the fridge the well-wrapped, biscuit-lined springform tin, sit it in the centre of a roasting tin and pour the cheesecake filling into your springform.

♥ Now put the roasting tin and springform into the oven and pour the recently boiled water into the roasting tin so that it

comes halfway up the springform. Cook for 1 hour and 10 minutes, checking after 1 hour. The very centre of the cheesecake should still have a hint of a wobble, but should seem set on top.

♥ Remove from the oven and, still wearing your oven gloves, take the springform out of the water-bath and place on a cooling rack. Gently and carefully peel away the outside layers of clingfilm and foil, and let the cheesecake continue cooling on the rack.

♥ Put the cheesecake into the fridge but don't cover it till it's fully chilled, then leave overnight – and remember to remove it from the fridge about ½ hour before you want to eat it.

♥ To make the sauce, melt the butter with the golden syrup and sugar in a saucepan over a gentle heat until everything comes to a bubble, then let it bubble, keeping an eye on it, for 1–2 minutes. It will be a foamy, amber mixture like liquid honeycomb. Then let it cool slightly before pouring into a small jug and leaving to cool further; it will thicken as it cools.

♥ To help unmould the cheesecake, work a spatula around the top edge, before unspringing from the tin, then put it on a serving plate, preferably one with a lip. Whisk the toffee sauce in the jug and drizzle some over the cheesecake, leaving the rest for people to add greedily as they eat.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Make the cheesecake up to 2 days ahead and cool as directed. Cover when completely cold, with a plate or clingfilm, making sure that covering does not touch surface of cheesecake. Unmould and serve as directed in recipe. The sauce can be made 2–3 days ahead and kept in an airtight container in cool place. It can also be covered and kept in the fridge for up to 1 month.



Coconut and cherry banana bread

The title of this cake conjures up something much gaudier than is actually the case. The cherries – which could indeed have been glacé – are dried, and the banana bakes to make for a slightly drab, manilla-tinted sponge. To look at, I'll grant you, this is not a joyous creation, but its damp and luscious taste is all the more heightened for being unforeseen. I like that. Those who look at life rather than taking a bite out of it are not deserving of the pleasures they deny themselves.



Cuts into 10–12 slices

125g soft unsalted butter, plus some for greasing

4 small–medium bananas (approx. 500g with skin on)

150g caster sugar

2 eggs

175g plain flour

2 teaspoons baking powder

½ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

100g dried cherries

100g desiccated coconut

1 x 900g (2lb) loaf tin

♥ Preheat the oven to 170°C/gas mark 3. Put a loaf liner into your tin, or line the bottom of the tin with baking parchment and grease the sides.

♥ Melt the butter in a saucepan, and take it off the heat. Peel and mash the bananas in another bowl.

♥ Beat the sugar into the cooled, melted butter, then beat in the mashed bananas and the eggs. Fold in the flour, baking powder and bicarb. Finally, add the dried cherries and coconut.

♥ Fold well so that everything is incorporated, then pour and scrape into the lined loaf tin and smooth the top.

♥ Bake for about 50 minutes, but start checking after 45. When ready, the bread will be coming away from the sides of the tin and feel quite heartily bouncy on top.

♥ Once out of the oven, leave it in the tin for 10 minutes. Then carefully slip the cake out of the tin (still in the liner) onto a wire rack to cool.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The loaf can be made 2 days ahead. Wrap in baking parchment and store in airtight container. Will keep for 3–4 days in cool place.

FREEZE NOTE

The loaf can be frozen, tightly wrapped in double layer of clingfilm and a layer of foil, for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight at room temperature.



Chocolate banana muffins

I think of muffins as a treaty weekend breakfast, but these look so darkly elegant, especially in their matching dark-brown, tulip-skirted party frocks, that they positively beg to be brought out with coffee after dinner.

Certainly, while most muffins are at their best pretty well straight out of the oven, the bananas in the mixture make sure these beauties keep their moist, eat-me texture long after those less favoured have staled and lost their allure.

Makes 12

3 very ripe or overripe bananas

125ml vegetable oil

2 eggs

100g soft light brown sugar

225g plain flour

3 x 15ml tablespoons best-quality cocoa powder, sifted

1 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

1 x 12-bun muffin tin

♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6 and line a muffin tin with papers. Don't worry about getting special papers: regular muffin cases will do the job. Mash the bananas by hand or with a freestanding mixer.

♥ Still beating and mashing, add the oil followed by the eggs and sugar.

♥ Mix the flour, cocoa powder and bicarb together and add this mixture, beating gently, to the banana mixture, then spoon it into the prepared papers.

♥ Bake in the preheated oven for 15–20 minutes, by which time the muffins should be dark, rounded and peeking proudly

out of their cases. Allow to cool slightly in their tin before removing to a wire rack.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Make the muffins up to 1 day ahead. Store in airtight container, layered with baking parchment. Reheat in warm oven for 5–8 minutes. Will keep for 2–3 days in airtight container in cool place.

FREEZE NOTE

The muffins can be frozen in airtight container, layered with baking parchment, for up to 2 months. Defrost for 3–4 hours on wire rack at room temperature and reheat as above.





Cinnamon plums with French toast

This is a doubly gratifying recipe for the waste-averse: the French toast (a slightly fancier take on the eggy-bread of my childhood) is made with the remains of a loaf otherwise too stale to eat and the cranberry-sharp, cinnamon-scented compote uses up plums that were bought more in the spirit of optimism than good sense. If the weight of plums seems a lot for what is a using-up recipe, it is because the plums I first used for this were as big and shiny as billiard balls, and about as hard (if this is the kind of animal you're dealing with, too, then quarter rather than halve the fruits to poach them); and if you're lucky enough to have a plum tree, this would gratifyingly use up a glut.

While I love the scarlet-fleshed plums, which the cranberry juice glowingly enhances, any plum will do, and you could go for apple juice were you wanting a less sherbety-sharp edge to the poached fruit's juices.

Similarly, do not think you should consider this compote only to go with the French toast: eat with Greek yogurt or granola at breakfast, with custard for a weekend-lunch pud, with the [Guinness Gingerbread](#) or, frankly, any time.

Serves 4, with compote to spare

for the plums:

250ml cranberry juice

100g caster sugar

1 cinnamon stick

500g plums

♥ Put the cranberry juice and sugar into a wide saucepan and stir to help start dissolving the sugar. Then put the saucepan over a low heat until the sugar dissolves entirely.

- ♥ Halve the plums and remove the stones, then halve them again if they are big brutes.
- ♥ Once the sugar's dissolved into the red liquid, add the cinnamon stick, then turn the heat up, bring to the boil and let the pan bubble away for a couple of minutes until the mixture is on the way to becoming syrupy.
- ♥ Now turn the syrup down to a simmer and add the plum halves or quarters and cook them gently for about 10 minutes, although note that this is based on starting off with viciously unripe fruits so you might need less time.
- ♥ Once the plums are tender but not disintegrating, remove the pan from the heat, cover and leave to keep warm. You can make the plums in advance and either serve them at room temperature with the French toast or warm them up again.

for the French toast:

2 eggs

60ml full-fat milk

½ teaspoon ground cinnamon

1 x 15ml tablespoon sugar

4 large slices stale white bread

2 x 15ml tablespoons (30g) soft unsalted butter

- ♥ Whisk together the eggs, milk, ground cinnamon and sugar in a pie dish.
- ♥ Sit 2 pieces of bread in the eggy mixture, turning after each side has soaked up enough to colour the bread yellow, so that it absorbs the liquid but doesn't fall to pieces.
- ♥ Melt half the butter in a frying pan and cook the 2 soaked pieces of bread for a couple of minutes each side. Transfer the yellow eggy bread, scorched golden in parts, to warm waiting plates. Meanwhile, soak the next 2 slices.
- ♥ Melt the remaining butter to cook the last 2 slices in the same way.

♥ Serve alongside the beautiful scarlet plum compote.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The compote can be made 1 day ahead. Transfer to bowl to cool, then cover and refrigerate. Warm the compote gently in saucepan before serving.

FREEZE NOTE

Cooled compote can be frozen in airtight container for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.



Chocolate chip bread pudding

There are no versions of bread pudding I don't like, though the British variants – the one that uses stale bread as a bolstering filler in a squidgy fruit loaf and the other, a milky-custard baked pile-up of buttery sandwiches – have obvious nostalgic appeal. This is the US take on it, one in which the staled bread is simply cubed before being drenched in an egg custard then softly baked. Well, that's the basic American variant: this is fancier but not fussily so – still, the addition of chocolate chips, rum and double cream do make quite a triumph of turning stale bread into a dinner party treat. Think of it as the food equivalent of wearing a party dress that is actually comfortable: a rare but precious pleasure.

Note: I tend to freeze stale bread in bags of crumbs or cubes and save them to use as needed.

Serves 4–6

250g stale bread, cut into 3cm cubes

100g chocolate chips or morsels

3 eggs

40g soft light brown sugar

2 x 15ml tablespoons dark rum

125ml double cream

500ml full-fat milk

4 teaspoons demerara sugar

**1 x ovenproof dish approx. 23cm diameter x 6cm deep
(approx. 1.5 litre capacity)**

♥ Preheat the oven to 170°C/gas mark 3. Grease a round pie dish lightly with butter. Tip in the stale bread cubes; if your

bread isn't stale, then leave slices to dry first, for a while, on a wire rack before cubing and using.

♥ Toss in the chocolate chips to spread evenly among the bread cubes.

♥ Whisk together the eggs, light soft brown sugar, rum, double cream and milk. Pour this mixture over the bread and press the cubes down to coat them in the liquid.

♥ Leave all this to soak for 20 minutes, then sprinkle with the demerara sugar and put straight into the oven for 40–50 minutes. If your oven browns unevenly, turn the dish around halfway through cooking.

♥ Let the dish stand for a while before serving – if you can. The smell as it bakes is almost overwhelming and it can be hard to wait once it is out of the oven.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Assemble bread pudding 1 day ahead but don't sprinkle with the demerara sugar. Cover and keep in fridge. Remove from fridge and leave at room temperature for 15 minutes, then sprinkle with the demerara sugar and bake as directed in recipe.



Pear pandowdy

A pandowdy is one of those wonderful American downhome terms for a kind of pie that is ramshackle and homespun, and this is something I am always happy to live down to. It is, I'm afraid, all too easy to find that one's bought pears are never at the right point to be pleurably eaten, and this made-in-the-pan pie, with its loose draping of unfancy dough, is better than they deserve. I bolster these fortune-favoured pears with a couple of apples – cooking is the only good use for a Golden Delicious in the grown-up world, anyway – but a plain apple pandowdy, which dispenses with the pears and doubles the apples is a fine thing, too. Indeed, many a fruit can profitably be considered here, though keep to the appley base if you're thinking of including any berries or fruit that could get too mushy or watery when heat hits them.

Serves 6

4 Williams pears

2 Golden Delicious apples

50g soft unsalted butter

50g caster sugar, plus ½ teaspoon for sprinkling

finely grated zest 1 lemon

for the pastry:

225g plain flour, plus extra for dusting

pinch salt

75g very cold butter, cut into 1cm cubes

35g cold vegetable shortening

125ml cold full-fat milk

double cream, to serve (optional)

1 x cast iron skillet or ovenproof frying pan approx. 25cm diameter

- ♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6.
- ♥ Peel the pears and apples, then quarter them, slice out the cores, and cut the pears into 2cm pieces and the apples into 1cm pieces, dropping them into a bowl as you go.
- ♥ Using a skillet or frying pan that can go into the oven later, melt the 50g soft butter over a medium heat, then add the diced fruit, sugar and lemon zest, and cook over a lowish heat, stirring occasionally, for 10 minutes, by which time some of the fruit will have begun to caramelize gently. Take off the heat while you get on with the pastry.
- ♥ Put the flour and salt into the bowl of a **freestanding mixer** fitted with the flat paddle, add the very cold cubed butter and, using a teaspoon, drop in little lumps of cold shortening then slowly mix to cut the fat into the flour; or just do this **by hand**.
- ♥ Still with the motor running, and the paddle turning slowly, add the milk a little at a time, just so that the dough binds, then remove from the bowl, squidge it together with your hands and drop it onto a lightly-floured surface ready to roll out.
- ♥ Bring the pan of cooked fruit nearby (but not so near as to warm the dough), and roll out the dough until you have a rough circle about the diameter of the skillet. Drop the dough circle on top of the fruit, tucking in the edges a bit, and remember that the ramshackle look of this is the whole point. Make 3 slashes with the tip of a sharp knife, sprinkle with ½ teaspoon of sugar, and put in the oven for 25 minutes, by which time the white dough will have turned into a pale golden pastry.
- ♥ Remember that the handle will be searingly hot, so transfer carefully to the table, and preferably cover the handle with the frying pan-handle equivalent of a tea-cosy. Serve with double cream.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The pie can be assembled up to 2 days in advance. Make sure fruit and skillet have fully cooled before adding pastry topping. Cover with clingfilm and refrigerate. Bake as directed in recipe, allowing an extra 10–15 minutes' cooking time. Check filling is piping hot before removing from oven (stick a metal skewer or tip of small knife into the pie through one of the steam vents – it should feel hot to touch).

FREEZE NOTE

The filling and pastry can be made 1 month ahead. Freeze filling in an airtight container, and wrap pastry in a double layer of clingfilm and then in a resealable bag. Defrost overnight in fridge. Take pastry out of fridge about 30 minutes before rolling. Assemble pie and bake as in recipe, allowing extra 10 minutes' cooking time.







Panzanella

Panzanella, which sounds as though it should be the name of the beautiful heroine in a ballet or a fairy tale, is the word for a damp and tomatoey bread salad from Italy, which I first came across when I lived in Tuscany; and very useful it was too for finding a happy end to the brief life of that strangely unsalted, blink-and-it's-staled bread. But then, as anyone who has ever made their own bread (even once) knows, the fact that bought bread doesn't stale quickly is just plain spooky.

I have come across versions of this in which we, the hapless cooks, are instructed to cut off the crusts of the bread before using. I ignore such affectations (or imbecility, however you like to construe the request) as the whole point of the recipe is to use up bread – why would you throw half of it away before even starting? Still, I know that, as with many peasant dishes, this has become an upmarket restaurant favourite, so I do understand where the fiddliness might come in. And I don't want to sound too lofty: it's not so much that I find it intrinsically wrong to remove the crusts from the bread, I am just far, far too lazy.

My son Bruno loves this so much I have been known to buy bread especially to make it at the beginning of a weekend. This is not quite as pathetic as it sounds (I hope) as even a mega-bowlful, made with an entire new Pugliese loaf (cut and made to stale perversely on purpose) doesn't last long in a house with teenage boys. But, truly, it is most satisfying to make when using up bread actually to hand. To be sure, you still have to go out and get a kingdom of fresh basil, but I feel better about the fact that the recipe is not just a good way of using bread past its bouncy best, but also a jubilant end for a handful of tomatoes so old they're moving beyond ripeness and towards skin-splitting, fuzzy-fleshed maturity.



Serves about 4, *as an accompaniment*

250g staled Italian-style bread, cut into 2cm cubes or torn and crumbled into pieces

1 small red onion, cut into thin half-moons or finely chopped

60ml red wine vinegar

500g good ripe tomatoes

½ clove garlic

2 teaspoons sea salt flakes or 1 teaspoon pouring salt

pinch caster sugar

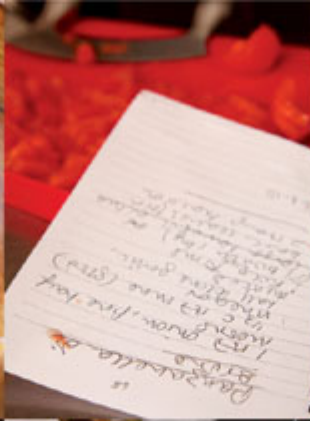
125ml extra-virgin olive oil

large bunch basil

- ♥ Sit the cubed bread on a wire cooling rack to keep dry.
- ♥ Put the half-mooned or chopped onion into a large bowl, big enough to take all the remaining ingredients later, pour the red wine vinegar over it and leave to steep for at least 10 minutes.
- ♥ While the onion's steeping, put the tomatoes in a large bowl and pour boiling water over from a kettle to cover them, leaving for 5 minutes.
- ♥ Grate or mince some garlic over the vinegar and onions. I tend to use 1 clove but stop when I'm about halfway through.
- ♥ Drain the tomatoes, then peel, remove the seeds and chop up the flesh, scraping it into the vinegar and onion bowl as you go. (There are times I don't bother with blanching and peeling the tomatoes, but I always get rid of the seeds.)
- ♥ Add the salt and a pinch of sugar, then tear or crumb the bread into the bowl. Pour the oil over it and add half the basil leaves. Using your hands (wearing a pair of CSI disposable vinyl gloves if your skin is sensitive) toss and mix everything to combine.
- ♥ Ideally, you should leave this overnight to steep and mellow. If so, leave the remaining basil leaves and stalks on top, then cover with clingfilm; if serving straightaway, add the remaining basil leaves and check for seasoning.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Make the salad up to 1 day ahead, cover and refrigerate. Remove from fridge about an hour before serving, to allow to come to room temperature. Toss in reserved basil leaves just before serving.



Minestrone

This is a wonderful Monday night supper, easily made after some foraging in the fridge. Any vegetable soup is a great way of transforming the odd leek or courgette a little past its prime along with any other bits and pieces that are not plentiful enough to be of use alone, but this Italianate version is my favourite. It is worth noting here, too, that should you have a random collection of pasta, each sort not quite enough to yield a serving, then you can bung them all in a freezer bag and beat them briefly but brutally with a rolling pin, so that you have a home-made *pastina mista* to throw in soup when you need it. And whenever you come to the end of a piece of Parmesan, put the rind in a freezer bag, freeze it and leave it (up to 3 months) until you're making soup, in which case you can add it, unthawed, to the pot to imbue the minestrone as it cooks with its savoury intensity too.

I find that the fresh vegetable and pasta are filling enough, but if you need to bulk the soup up, do add a drained can of pulses or some frozen vegetables, as you need or have. Obviously, I don't expect you to have exactly the same vegetables left over at the end of the weekend, or whenever, so please use the amounts and varieties below as guidance only.

Serves 4

2 x 15ml tablespoons basil oil or regular olive oil

1 leek, cleaned, halved lengthwise then finely sliced

1 courgette, peeled, quartered lengthwise then chopped

approx. 225g white, spring or savoy cabbage, shredded

50–75g fine green beans, trimmed and halved

1 litre vegetable stock (from powder or cubed), preferably organic

100g soup pasta, such as ditalini

**1 x 15ml tablespoon dry white vermouth or white wine
(optional)**

salt and pepper, to taste

grated Parmesan cheese, to serve

- ♥ Warm the oil in a heavy-based pan, then add the small pieces of leek and courgette and cook on a medium heat for about 5 minutes, stirring and pushing bits about with your wooden spoon every now and again.
- ♥ Add the shredded cabbage and small lengths of green beans and let cook for another 5 minutes, stirring occasionally.
- ♥ Make up the stock with boiling water, then pour the hot stock into the pan (and add any rinds of Parmesan you may have), bring to a bubble, turn down to low, clamp on a lid and let simmer covered for 20 minutes, then fish out the rinds, if you feel so inclined.
- ♥ Uncover, bring to a bubble again and throw in the pasta, letting it cook for about 10 minutes, or according to packet instructions. Unlike regular pasta, though, soup pasta should never, in my book, be al dente.
- ♥ Once the pasta is cooked, add the vermouth or white wine (Federico Fellini used to splash up his minestrone with whisky), let it bubble into the soup for a few seconds, then take the pan off the heat, season to taste and leave to cool for at least 10 minutes and up to 40, so that when you eat the minestrone, topped with some grated Parmesan, it is comfortingly warm rather than searingly hot. I rather love it left for maximum time, when it is a solid pasta pottage at almost room temperature. Heaven. Or *paradiso*.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The soup can be made 1–2 days ahead. Transfer the soup to non-metallic bowl to cool, then cover and refrigerate. Reheat gently in a saucepan, stirring occasionally, until piping hot, then cool slightly before serving.

FREEZE NOTE

The cooled soup can be frozen in airtight container for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.



South Indian vegetable curry

This is another way of making sure the odd handful of beans or other vegetable fragments can be eaten up when none of them individually can offer a meal in themselves. You can vary the vegetables according to what you have.



Serves 4

2 x 15ml tablespoons garlic oil

1 onion, peeled, halved and cut into half-moons

pinch sea salt flakes

1 green chilli, de-seeded and finely chopped

2cm chunk fresh ginger, peeled and cut into fine strips

¼ teaspoon crushed chilli flakes

1 teaspoon turmeric

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1 teaspoon ground coriander

1 teaspoon ground ginger

1 x 400ml can coconut milk

600ml vegetable stock

1 teaspoon sugar

1 x 15ml tablespoon tamarind paste

350g cauliflower, broken into florets

350g broccoli, broken into florets

100g fine beans, trimmed and halved

125g baby corn, halved

150g sugar snap peas

2 x 15ml tablespoons chopped dill or coriander, or mixture

♥ Heat the oil in a thick-bottomed casserole or large saucepan and fry the sliced onion sprinkled with some salt until it begins to soften, then add the chopped fresh chilli and ginger strips and stir every now and again while cooking for a minute.

♥ Now add the crushed chilli flakes, the turmeric, and ground cumin, coriander and ginger. Stir well and cook for another minute or so before pouring in the coconut milk, stock, sugar and tamarind paste. Stir to combine.

♥ Bring to the boil, add the cauliflower florets first, then the broccoli. Cook for 10 minutes, then add the fine beans and baby corn. Check the vegetables after about 5 minutes or so to

see if they are almost done, letting them cook for longer if they need it.

♥ Once the vegetables are tender, add the sugar snaps and season to taste, then when the sugar snaps are hot, serve, generously sprinkled with the herbs of your choice, in a bowl on top of some plain rice or with some warmed Indian flatbread on the side for dunking.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The curry sauce can be made 1 day ahead. Transfer to non-metallic bowl to cool, then cover and refrigerate. Transfer to casserole or large saucepan and reheat gently until boiling, then add vegetables as recipe instructions.

FREEZE NOTE

The cooled sauce can be frozen in an airtight container for up to 1 month. Defrost overnight in fridge and use as above.

Making leftovers right

Curry sauce for lemon sole

*Although it may sound odd to suggest further uses for a recipe in itself made up of last-chance-saloon bits and pieces, if you do have a smallish amount of this curry left over, you should know it makes for a wonderful sauce – just heat it up in a saucepan until piping hot over a fillet or two of **lemon sole**, briefly steamed in a mixture of water and sake.*

MY SWEET SOLUTION

Chocolate key lime pie

Chocolate brownie bowls

Frangelico tiramisu

Lemon meringue fool

Orange and blackberry trifle

Old-fashioned cheesecake

Chocolate peanut butter cheesecake

No-fuss fruit tart

No-churn Piña Colada ice cream

Grasshopper pie

No one needs to make a pudding. Let me make that quite clear. I suppose you could say that no one needs to eat one, either. But – to misquote the familiar lovers’ phrase – the stomach wants what the stomach wants. Different organ, same urgency. Anyway, by saying it’s not necessary to make a pudding (the French and Italians, both peoples pre-eminently bound up in their respective country’s cooking traditions, routinely buy in from the patisserie or gelateria) doesn’t mean it isn’t desirable. And I’m not talking from the point of view of the eater, either.

You know that I’m not of the cook-to-impress school. Anxiously producing food with an eye on the clapometer is surely the most direct route to joylessness in the kitchen I can possibly think of. The picture of the attention-seeking, craven cook is not an attractive one. (I hope my discomfort here is not evidence of repressed recognition.) And yet it would be disingenuous to claim that the pleasure of our guests is immaterial. Nor should it be. When we invite friends over for a meal, that invitation, that meal, means something. Of course, I’m happy to sit around my kitchen table with a loaf of bread,

a wedge of cheese and some friends. I wouldn't consider them friends if I felt otherwise. And I'm not above phoning for a pizza, either. But there are times when grand plans for something more approaching a serious soiree have been made, but life has intervened, and there's scarcely time to cook; or maybe the evening being orchestrated is what management consultants call a Distant Elephant. It's a simple analogy: an elephant in the distant horizon looks teeny-tiny, inconsequential, unthreatening. When you get close up, you realize, all too late, your mistake: forget teeny-tiny, this is a great big, elephant and it's ready to trample you underfoot. Now apply this concept to the dates you blithely marked – like dots in the distance – far ahead in your diary.

Even if you're looking forward to your guests with unstinting enthusiasm, you may suddenly find that you're unable to rustle up a dinner in time. You may have thought a chapter devoted to dessert was only going to complicate your life; but no, it's here precisely to make it easier. I mean, you don't even have to cook and you've magicked into being a Chocolate Key Lime Pie, a Frangelico Tiramisu, a fruit tart that looks as if it came from a French cake shop, No-churn Piña Colada Ice Cream and other lusciously rewarding puds. With the exception of the Brownie Bowls, which take around 20 minutes from start to finish, everything is made in advance, your work done and panic over. And, frankly, you could serve bread and water beforehand and by the end of dinner everyone at the table would be marvelling, thrilled by the effort you'd made.



Chocolate key lime pie

It's extraordinary how potent cheap confectionery is. Proust may have had his madeleines, but my taste memories are shamelessly low-rent; I am forever, it seems, trying to recreate the so-long-ago-savoured delights of the sweetie jar. This is yet another evocation of the chocolate limes of my childhood. Luckily, it tastes how I impossibly remember them, not as they would really be, were I to eat one now.

My version of this classic American pie doesn't have the traditional meringue topping, nor, of course, does it require Florida key limes – limey limes do it for me.





Serves 6–8

300g digestive biscuits

1 x 15ml tablespoon cocoa powder

50g soft unsalted butter

50g dark chocolate chips

1 x 397g can sweetened condensed milk, preferably chilled

**4 limes, to give approx. 2 x 15ml tablespoons finely grated
zest and 175ml juice**

300ml double cream

1 square best-quality dark chocolate

1 x 23cm x 5cm deep fluted tart tin with loose base

♥ Put the biscuits, cocoa powder, butter and chocolate chips into a food processor and process to a dark, damp, sandy consistency. Tip into a fluted tart tin, and press onto the base and up the sides. Place in the fridge to chill while you make the filling.

♥ Pour the condensed milk into a bowl. Zest the limes into another bowl and reserve for decoration later. Add the juice of the limes to the condensed milk, whisking to mix.

♥ Pour in the double cream and whisk together – in a freestanding electric mixer or with a hand-held one – until thick, then spoon the mixture into the chilled biscuit crust and use the back of the spoon to finish off the top in a swirly fashion, leaving the soft filling encircled by dark crust.

♥ Chill the pie in the fridge for 4 hours (if the condensed milk was chilled), until firm, or, ideally, covered overnight. When you are ready to serve, unmould the pie from the tart tin, but leave it on the base.

♥ Grate the chocolate to give a light dusting to the top of the pie and then sprinkle with the lime zest. This is important because without food colouring the pie will seem too pallid to conjure up the limes that flavour it. Serve immediately, as it will become soft if kept out of the fridge for too long.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The pie can be made 1 day in advance. When chilled and firm, tent with foil (try not to touch surface of pie with foil as it will leave marks) and store in fridge. Store the zest in a bowl, tightly covered with clingfilm. Decorate with zest just before serving. The pie will keep for a total of 2–3 days in fridge.

FREEZE NOTE

The pie *can* be frozen for up to 3 months, but be warned it may “weep” on defrosting so is not ideal for freezing. Open-freeze the undecorated pie just until solid, then wrap the pie (still in its tart tin) in double layer of clingfilm and layer of

foil. To defrost, unwrap the pie and tent with foil (try not to touch surface of pie with foil as it will leave marks), then defrost overnight in fridge. Decorate with fresh zest.

Chocolate brownie bowls

While I appreciate that making something which requires a specific mould may not seem very public-spirited, I promise that you will find the 6-cavity dessert shell tin, as it is properly named, quite as useful as the loaf tin you are regularly called on in these pages to use. What this particular tin gives you is beautiful little cakes which, when turned out, have an indentation in them; thus they become edible bowls for ice cream, whipped cream or whatever topping you choose. If you can't get this tin, make up the brownie mixture using only 80ml boiling water and bake for 8 minutes in 2 x 4-hole Yorkshire pudding tins; when they're cooling, press down with a teacup to make a slight indentation, thus making brownie saucers rather than bowls.



And there's no reason why you couldn't make an edible bowl out of whichever cake you wanted: but for me, the best bowl is a brownie bowl. The brownie mixture here isn't designed to make quite the gooey ones I usually go for, as I want to be able to turn them out of the tins without fear of

sticking, and they need to be slightly more cake-like to hold up to the filling.

These are a dream ending to any dinner, but knowing that they are easy-peasy to make (a one-pan job) and that they take just over 10 minutes to bake is even dreamier. You could do these in advance, store and then serve them reheated and warm, or just as they are; but whenever possible I like to make them, bake them, and leave them to cool a little, while we're eating our main course, then add scoops of ice cream after. I love the way the ice cream begins to drip into the warmth of the malted chocolate brownie bowls beneath.

You can fill or top them however you so please. In the meantime, let me suggest:

*Squirty cream, strawberries
and strawberry sauce*

*Chocolate mint ice cream and
chocolate sauce*

*Vanilla ice cream and
chocolate sauce*

*Strawberry ice cream and pink
sprinkles*

*Coffee ice cream, maple syrup
and pecans*

*Butterscotch ice cream and
toffee sauce*

Serves 6

125g soft unsalted butter, plus some for greasing

125g caster sugar

15g malted milk powder (such as Horlicks)

15g best-quality cocoa powder

125ml boiling water, from a kettle

125ml buttermilk or runny plain yogurt

1 egg

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

150g plain flour

½ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

to serve:

whipped cream, sprinkles, fruit, ice cream, sauces, nuts, all to choice

1 x 6-cavity dessert shell tin

♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6 and lightly butter the indentations in the tin.

♥ Melt the butter in a thick-bottomed saucepan over a low heat and add the sugar, stirring with a wooden spoon to help it dissolve into the butter. Turn off the heat.

♥ Put the malted milk powder and cocoa into a mug or measuring jug and whisk in the boiling water until smooth. Add this liquid to the warm pan of butter and sugar, stirring to combine with a wooden spoon.

♥ To the emptied-out mug or jug (no need to wash out) add the buttermilk (or yogurt), egg and vanilla and whisk together before stirring this mixture into the pan, too.

♥ Finally, whisk in the flour, bicarb and – using a 100ml capacity ladle for ease – fill the 6 bowl indentations. You will have enough mixture to fill them three-quarters of the way up, which is what you want.

♥ Place in the preheated oven for about 12 minutes. When they're cooked – they will feel gently bouncy if you press on the surface – sit the tin on a wire rack for 5 minutes before turning out the little brownie bowls. Fill while still just warm or when cooled, as desired.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The bowls can be baked up to 1 day ahead and stored in airtight container, layered with baking parchment. Reheat in warm oven for 5–8 minutes before serving.

FREEZE NOTE

The bowls can be frozen in airtight container, layered with baking parchment, for up to 2 months. Defrost for 3–4 hours on wire rack at room temperature and reheat as above.



top left: Butterscotch ice cream and toffee sauce; *top right:* Vanilla ice cream and chocolate sauce; *centre left:* Coffee ice cream, maple syrup and pecans; *centre right:* Chocolate mint ice cream and chocolate sauce; *bottom left:* Strawberry ice cream and pink sprinkles; *bottom right:* Squirty cream, strawberries and strawberry sauce.

Frangelico tiramisu

It makes me blush now when I remember my once snooty disdain for tiramisu. Still, I feel my slight against the dish has been repaid in full, and then some. This version had been hovering at the back of my mind for quite some time before I first made it. Now try and stop me. Frangelico is one of my favourite sticky liqueurs: I love the bottle, which comes looking as though it's dressed in a cassock; I love the taste and smell, the nuttiest of all hazelnuts. There's almost a buttery richness, but – and this is what heads off the sweetness – a dark smokiness beyond, much darker than its appropriately hazelnut hue would lead you to expect.

In bars in Italy, especially in the north west, you can get a *caffè corretto* with Frangelico, in other words a shot of espresso fortified (literally “corrected”) with a hit of this. Of course, you can have your coffee “corrected” with a choice of many liqueurs, but this is my favourite (I'm also very keen on a snifter of espresso liqueur to which a drop or two of Frangelico has been added) and that exact co-mingling of flavours is what I'm aiming for here.

The recipe that follows is for an amply proportioned tiramisu, enough to fill a 24cm square dish and feed a good 12 people. I went completely over the top during the photo shoot, and doubled quantities to make enough to fill the huge heart you see [here](#). Before then, I never really believed you could have too much of a good thing. Mind you, it didn't put me off for long: I'm always up for a bowl of this boozy, creamy lusciousness, and I'll think you find others are, too.

Note: As this dish contains raw egg, it is not suitable for people with compromised or weak immune systems, such as younger children, the elderly, or pregnant women.

Serves 12, though doesn't have to

250ml espresso coffee, or 8 teaspoons (15g) espresso powder dissolved in 250ml boiling water

250ml Frangelico hazelnut liqueur, plus more for the filling (below)

for the filling:

2 eggs, separated

75g caster sugar

60ml Frangelico hazelnut liqueur

500g mascarpone

30 savoiardi biscuits (fine sponge fingers), approx. 375g

100g chopped roasted hazelnuts

3 teaspoons cocoa powder

1 x 24cm square dish



- ♥ Combine the coffee and 250ml Frangelico in a jug, and allow to cool if the coffee is hot.
- ♥ Beat the egg whites till frothy. In a separate bowl beat the yolks and sugar with the 60ml Frangelico for the filling.
- ♥ Add the mascarpone to the yolks and sugar mixture, beating it in well to mix. Gently fold in the foamy egg whites, and mix again.
- ♥ Pour half of the coffee and Frangelico mixture into a wide shallow bowl and dunk enough biscuit fingers for a layer, about 4 at a time, into the liquid, coating both sides.

♥ Line your tiramisu dish with a layer of soaked biscuits: they should be damp but not falling to pieces (though it wouldn't matter if they did). Pour any leftover liquid from the dipping process over the layer you have made.

♥ Put half the mascarpone mixture on top of the soaked biscuits and spread to make an even layer.

♥ Pour the remaining coffee and Frangelico mixture from the jug into the shallow bowl and make another, final layer of biscuits, dipping as before and layering on top of the mascarpone in the dish.

♥ Pour any leftover liquid over the biscuit layer, and cover with the final layer of mascarpone. Cover the dish with clingfilm and leave overnight, or for at least 6 hours, in the fridge.

♥ When you are ready to serve, take the tiramisu out of the fridge and remove the clingfilm. Mix the chopped roasted hazelnuts with 2 teaspoons of the cocoa powder and sprinkle this over the top layer of mascarpone. Then dust with the final teaspoon of cocoa powder, pushing it through a sieve for lighter coverage, over the nut-rubbly tiramisu.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The tiramisu can be made 1–2 days ahead and stored in fridge: it will keep for up to 4 days in total and leftovers should be refrigerated immediately.

FREEZE NOTE

The tiramisu can be frozen for up to 3 months. Wrap the tiramisu (without hazelnut and cocoa topping) in double layer of clingfilm and layer of foil. Defrost overnight in fridge and top with nuts and cocoa, as directed in recipe.



Lemon meringue fool

I'm a fool for a fool: it's that softness of cream against the sharpness of fruit. This version is not merely a speedy simple one, but rather a lemon meringue pie without the chewing. It slips down with celestial lightness and a rush of lemon. Think of it as Eton Mess, Amalfi style.

Makes enough to fill 4 small martini glasses or 2 goblets for greedy people

150g good-quality shop-bought lemon curd, plus a little to decorate

1–2 teaspoons limoncello (lemon liqueur) or lemon juice

250ml double cream

1 meringue nest (shop-bought is fine)

lemon zest, to serve

♥ Put the lemon curd into a bowl and stir in the limoncello (or lemon juice), adding more if it seems too thick to fold into some whipped cream in a moment.

♥ Pour the double cream into another bowl and whisk until just thick. It should be holding its shape but not so thickly whipped that it looks dry: it will thicken more as you fold in the lemon curd.

♥ Drizzle half the lemon curd mixture over the cream and fold in with a rubber spatula, then do the same with the remaining half. You don't want it all folded in completely: whipped cream rippled with lemon is what you're aiming for.

♥ Crumble the meringue nest with your fingers into the fool, and gently fold most of this in to mix. Spoon it into 4 small martini glasses (or fill 2 larger goblets) and decorate with some lemon zest curls and a drizzle of lemon curd, scraped out of the bottom of the bowl it was mixed in, or spooned out of a

jar. If you have any fine biscuits – think along the lines of langues de chat (cat’s tongue biscuits) – for eating alongside, put them on the table on serving.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The fool can be made 2–3 hours ahead. Spoon into glasses then cover and refrigerate. Decorate as directed in recipe.

FREEZE NOTE

The fool can be frozen for up to 3 months, though the meringue will go soft. Spoon into freezer-proof glasses and wrap each in a double layer of clingfilm. Defrost overnight in fridge and decorate as directed in recipe.





Orange and blackberry trifle

I know that I could simply have put this in the *Making Leftovers Right* entry for the [Marmalade Pudding Cake](#), but having made it once with that, I saw – as experience happily now testifies – that the trifle (and it *is* a mere trifle to make) in all its gorgeous 1920s flapper colours of jet and coral, is easily made from new. I'd say from scratch, but I mean you can start with a shop-bought marmalade loaf or orange loaf cake – in other words, you don't need to be using leftovers – and proceed as below. Or you can take any plain sponge, then sandwich slices of it with marmalade and use these as the trifle base. A bit of extra marmalade wouldn't go amiss on any shop-bought replacement, as the home-made version is heavy with its fragrantly bitter scent.

I love this just as it is, lying grandly on a stand or platter, but it also would look beautiful piled in, and peeking through, glasses or goblets. The latter would give this more of a conventional trifle appearance, but ever since I made my first, then-called plate trifle in my second book, I have been drawn to this casual but indulgent pile-up approach. In any event, this is a very freestyle kind of a pudding: do with it what you will.

Serves 4–6

350g marmalade pudding cake

80ml Cointreau or other orange liqueur

zest and juice 1 orange or 2 clementines (approx. 100ml)

250ml double cream

300g blackberries (or blueberries if blackberries can't be found)

♥ Cut the cake into slices and arrange on a plate or wide, shallow dish. Drizzle with the orange liqueur.

♥ Zest the orange or clementines into a bowl and leave the zest to one side. Then squeeze the juice from the orange or clementines, pouring this over the liqueur-soaked cake.

♥ Whip the cream until thick but softly so, and spoon unfancily over the top of the saturated, not to say gloriously sodden, cake.

♥ Arrange the blackberries over the top of the whipped cream, then scatter with the reserved zest.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The base can be prepared a couple of hours ahead, then finish with whipped cream, fruit and zest as directed in recipe.



Old-fashioned cheesecake

I've made many a cheesecake, and as I go I seem to get further and further away from its – and my – Eastern European origins. But you know, the play is part of the pleasure. There's no less joy to be had, though, from returning to the start of it all, and this is really what cheesecake was – a great solid block of it – when it first came over here. You can still find this, occasionally, in delis, but it's rare. I love its denseness and lemoniness, and the way it reminds me of tea with my granny, with her austere china and indulgent love.

Makes 16 rectangular slabs

Ingredients should be at room temperature before you start for the base:

225g plain flour

1 teaspoon baking powder

50g caster sugar

25g soft unsalted butter

1 egg

45ml full-fat milk

for the filling:

725g curd cheese

150g caster sugar

4 eggs, separated

50g cornflour (or potato flour)

3 x 15ml tablespoons lemon juice

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

½ teaspoon salt

250ml double cream, softly whipped

2 x foil trays or 1 foil-lined baking tin approx. 30 x 20 x 5cm

♥ Preheat the oven to 170°C/gas mark 3, and if you're using the disposable foil trays, put one inside the other – to help with any wibbly-wobbling as you transfer your uncooked cheesecake to the oven later – and put a baking tray in the oven for them to sit on.

♥ For the base, put the flour and baking powder in the bowl of a **food processor** along with the 50g caster sugar, 25g soft butter and 1 egg. Process and then, with the motor running, add the milk and when the mixture begins to clump together, stop. **Or, if doing this by hand**, rub the butter into the flour in a bowl and then beat in the other ingredients with a wooden spoon.

♥ Tip the mixture out into a foil tray or foil-lined baking tin. Using your hands or the back of a spoon, press this in to make as even a layer as possible. Bake in the oven for 10 minutes. Let it cool a little before pouring in the cheese mixture.

♥ Put the curd cheese in a bowl and beat in the sugar followed by the egg yolks. Beat in the cornflour (or potato flour, which is the more old-fashioned and authentic choice, but there's nothing in it really, tastewise) followed by the lemon juice, vanilla extract and salt, and then fold in the softly whipped cream.

♥ In another bowl, beat the egg whites until soft peaks form and then add a ladleful to the cheese mixture and stir in vigorously. Fold the rest of the whites in more gently in 3–4 batches.

♥ Pour and scrape the filling into the dough-lined foil tray or tin, then carefully transfer to the oven and leave to bake for 1 hour, by which time it will be set on top and, although it won't feel cooked completely underneath, the surface should be slightly scorched in places. I love that.

♥ Remove to a wire rack to cool, still in its tin, and be prepared for the fact that it will probably crack a bit as it cools. Regard this as the stamp of authenticity. Chill the cheesecake, covered, overnight in the fridge, before serving.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Make the cheesecake up to 2 days ahead and cool and chill as directed. Do not cover until completely cold, then cover with clingfilm, making sure that the covering does not touch surface. The cheesecake will keep in fridge for up to 4 days total.

FREEZE NOTE

The cheesecake can be frozen for up to 1 month. Make sure it is thoroughly chilled then wrap it, still in its tin, in double layer of clingfilm and 1 layer of foil, ensuring that wrapping doesn't touch the top surface. Defrost overnight in fridge and eat within 2 days.

Chocolate peanut butter cheesecake

Since I've established my bona fides with the previous recipe, I feel a bit less apologetic for the overindulgent vulgarity that is this cheesecake here. But, really, why should I be sorry? You won't be once you've eaten it; though perhaps I should warn that it's not for the faint-hearted. Unashamed indulgence, wallowingly so, is what this recipe is all about: think Reese's Peanut Butter Cup in cheesecake form. For that reason, I don't bake this in a water-bath as I do the [Banoffee Cheesecake](#). The water-bath is excellent if you want a silky texture, but for me, the peanut butter constituent demands a certain amount of pleasurable, palate-cleaving claggyiness. And baked like this, too, the top gets a slight crust when it's cooked, making it all the easier to spread the chocolate topping.

Serves 10–12

Ingredients should be at room temperature before you start for the base:

200g digestive biscuits

50g salted peanuts

100g dark chocolate chips

50g soft unsalted butter

for the filling:

500g cream cheese

3 eggs

3 egg yolks (freeze the whites to make the [meringues](#))

200g caster sugar

125ml sour cream

250g smooth peanut butter

for the topping:

250ml sour cream

100g milk chocolate chips

30g soft brown sugar

1 x 23cm springform tin

♥ Preheat the oven to 170°C/gas mark 3, then process the biscuits, peanuts, dark chocolate chips and butter for the base in a food processor. Once it comes together in a clump, turn it out into a springform tin and press into the bottom and up the sides to make the crunchy crust. Put in the fridge while you make the filling.

♥ Process the filling in the cleaned or wiped-out processor bowl, putting in the cream cheese, eggs and egg yolks, sugar, sour cream and peanut butter and whizzing to a smooth mixture.

♥ Pour and scrape the filling into the base in the chilled springform tin and cook for 1 hour, though check after 50 minutes. The top – only – should feel set and dry.

♥ Take the cheesecake out of the oven while you make the topping. Warm the sour cream and chocolate with the brown sugar gently in a small saucepan over a low heat, whisking to blend in the chocolate as it melts, and then take off the heat.

♥ Spoon and spread the topping very gently over the top of the cheesecake, being as careful as you can in case you break the surface of the cheesecake. (Not that anything bad will happen; you'll just have chocolate marbling the cake a bit.) Put it back in the oven for a final 10 minutes.

♥ Once out of the oven, let the cheesecake cool in its tin and then cover and put into the fridge overnight. When you are ready to eat the cheesecake, take it out of the fridge, just to take the chill off: this will make it easier to spring from the tin. Don't let it get too warm, though, as it will become a bit gooey and be hard to slice.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Make the cheesecake up to 2 days ahead. Cool and chill as directed. Do not cover until completely cold, then cover with plate or clingfilm, making sure that covering does not touch surface. Unmould and serve as directed in recipe. This will keep in fridge for up to 4 days total.

FREEZE NOTE

The cheesecake can be frozen for 1 month. Chill thoroughly, then wrap, still in tin, in double layer of clingfilm and 1 layer of foil. Defrost overnight in fridge and eat within 2 days. Some condensation may appear on surface on defrosting but it is fine to eat.



No-fuss fruit tart

This is perhaps one of the most useful puddings you can have in your repertoire. Not that it is the job of a pudding to be useful: a pudding exists merely to delight. Still, dinner does need to be made, even when there's precious little time for it and that should be a delight, too. So here's the deal: there is pitifully little work to be done to make this berry-dazzler of a tart, and enormous pleasure to be derived from its consumption.

All you do is bash a few biscuits a day or so in advance and make the base – getting one course out the way early is my way of managing – then stir lemon curd and cream cheese together, and use this cream to line the crumb-covered tart tin. I use shop-bought lemon curd here, but even if it comes out of the jar, it must be of good quality. And when it is whipped into the cream cheese, that cream cheese must be at room temperature, as should the lemon curd in its jar. The combination produces a layer of what tastes like cheesecake cream: light, lemony, luscious.

I used to put the berries on top of the cream pretty much last-minute, but then I found that a leftover wedge, after the party, looked inviting after being in the fridge overnight, and so I now finish assembling the tart ahead of time. But if you prefer to add the fruit nearer to serving, I completely understand.

Don't feel you must obey the fruit orders too literally: any mixture of berries (or indeed other fruit) would do, and you could well use a smaller amount and top the tart less extravagantly.



Serves 8–10

375g digestive biscuits

75g soft unsalted butter

2 x 200g packets cream cheese, at room temperature

1 x 240g jar lemon curd, at room temperature

125g blueberries

125g blackberries

125g raspberries

125g redcurrants or pomegranate seeds

125g small strawberries

**1 x fluted tart tin approx. 25cm diameter x 4–5cm deep
with loose base**

♥ Process the biscuits and the butter to a sandy rubble and press into the sides and bottom of a deep-sided fluted tart tin. Place in the freezer (or fridge if that is not possible) for about 10–15 minutes.

♥ In a clean **processor bowl**, process the cream cheese and lemon curd (or just mix **by hand**) and spread into the bottom of the chilled tart tin, covering the base evenly.

♥ Arrange the fruit gently (so it doesn't sink in too much) on top of the lemony cream cheese in a decorative manner ([see here](#)), leaving some of the strawberries unhulled, with their picturesque stalks attached.

♥ Place the tart in the fridge, preferably overnight, though for at least 4 hours. It does need to get properly cold in order to set enough for the tart to be unsprung and sliced easily.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The tart can be made 1 day ahead. Cover loosely with clingfilm or foil, being careful not to press on the filling, and refrigerate. Will keep for around 4 days.

FREEZE NOTE

The tart, without fruit topping, can be frozen for up to 3 months if made with full-fat cream cheese, but be warned it may “weep” on defrosting so is not ideal for freezing. Open-freeze tart until firm, then wrap (still in its tin) in double layer of clingfilm and layer of foil. To defrost, unwrap and cover loosely with clingfilm then defrost overnight in fridge. Decorate and serve as directed in recipe.



No-churn Piña Colada ice cream

Flushed with the success of an earlier creation, the no-churn margarita ice cream, I bring you the no-churn Piña Polada ice cream. Rich coconut, sharp pineapple, smooth cream: we are in business! You don't have to share my weakness for a kitsch tippie to enjoy this. Certainly, it helps – but the benefit is psychological not gastronomical.

I assure you the toasted shredded coconut for scattering over is not mere garnish: you need it to bring the sharpness into focus. Eaten plain, the sweet coconuttiness of the ice cream is overwhelming. It doesn't entirely make sense, but it is the case. If you can't get the sweetened shredded coconut, I suggest that, rather than substitute desiccated, you search out some of the fresh coconut that is already out of its hairy shell and chunked up for you at the supermarket. You should be able to push this through a coarse grater or slicer onto the ice cream.

Note: I am afraid desiccated coconut just isn't the same as the moist, sweetened American-style shredded coconut I, and you, need here. At time of going to print, it is not available in the UK in shops, but you can get it online.

Serves 8–10

125ml pineapple juice, from a carton

80ml Malibu (white coconut rum)

generous few drops coconut flavouring

2 teaspoons lime juice

100g icing sugar

500ml double cream

75g sweetened shredded coconut, to serve

- ♥ Pour the pineapple juice and Malibu into a large bowl, and add the coconut flavouring and lime juice.
- ♥ Add the icing sugar and whisk to dissolve.
- ♥ Whisk in the cream and keep whisking until soft peaks form.
- ♥ Taste to see if you need more coconut flavouring or a squeeze more lime juice (and remember it won't be as strong when frozen), then spoon and smooth the ice cream into an airtight container and freeze.
- ♥ On serving – and, oh, how this cries out for hollowed-out coconut shells as serving vessels – toast the shredded coconut in a hot, dry pan until just turning golden and remove to a bowl. Sprinkle a little over each person's portion and leave the rest for people to add as they eat.

FREEZE NOTE

The ice cream *can* keep for up to 3 months in freezer, but will become icy, so it's better up to 1 month only and at its best within 1 week of making.



Grasshopper pie

I was watching an episode of *Glee* on TV and one of the characters ate her way through about 4 slices of Grasshopper Pie. Any food scenes on film and television make me miss important plot lines, so involved am I in what's being cooked or eaten, but I entirely overreacted to this one. I knew I had to cook such a pie, even before I had any idea what was in it. And – let's be frank – if you still carry on with the proceedings once you *do* know, there is no excuse. Not that I am trying to put you off. Far from it: I consider this (for all that I always call it Ghostbuster Pie by mistake) an instance of miraculous luck. If I'd read about it, I'd have made a horrified little twist of the mouth and flicked quickly on – and I never would have found out how inexplicably heavenly this is, and maybe nor would you. I am grateful – indeed gleeful – for my good fortune and bad habits: if I hadn't been prone in front of the TV, I would remain unilluminated.

I have used marshmallows in cooking before, and see no real reason to prepare an apologia for them. But I will tell you that what they bring to the creation is a particular consistency, which is aerated and unbelievably light; on the tongue this feels like ice cream that isn't frozen but is still set.

As improbable as all the ingredients are separately, let alone in conjunction, I must tell you that I keep them all to hand for the many occasions I need to burst out a Ghostbuster. I think this is one of my most popular puds – and, for my part, it is wonderfully versatile. It's almost as if it seems to go with nothing, so goes with everything. Having said that, it is especially good and sweetly refreshing after anything spicy.

A final note: for the full effect, you must make sure your crème de menthe is green and your crème de cacao white.





Serves 8–10

for the base:

300g bourbon biscuits

50g good-quality dark chocolate, chopped

50g soft unsalted butter

for the filling:

150g mini-marshmallows

125ml full-fat milk

4 x 15ml tablespoons crème de menthe

4 x 15ml tablespoons crème de cacao blanc

375ml double cream

few spots or drops green food colouring (optional)

1 x deep 25cm fluted tart tin with loose base

♥ Take out and set aside 1 biscuit. Process the rest of the biscuits and the chocolate in a food processor until they form a crumb mixture, then add the butter and carry on processing until it all starts to clump together.

♥ Press into a high-sided tart tin, making a smooth base and sides with your hands or the back of a spoon. Put into the fridge to chill and harden.

♥ Melt the marshmallows in a saucepan with the milk over a gentle heat and, once the milk starts to foam (not boil), take off the heat and keep stirring until the marshmallows blend into the milk to make a smooth mixture.

♥ Pour the mixture out of the saucepan into a heatproof bowl, then whisk in the crème de menthe and crème de cacao. Leave until cooled.

♥ Whisk the cream until it starts to hold soft peaks then, still whisking, add the cooled marshmallow mix. This filling should be thick but still soft, not stiff or dry, so that it will eventually drop easily out of the bowl into the chilled pie crust.

♥ When the marshmallow mixture and cream are combined, add a few drops of food colouring (unless you prefer not to) and whisk it in.

♥ Spread the filling into the chilled base, swirling it about with a palette knife or a spatula to fill evenly, then put the pie back in the fridge, covered, to chill overnight or for a minimum of 4 hours until firm.

♥ Crush the remaining biscuit and sprinkle over the top of the pie before serving.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The pie can be made 1–2 days ahead. When chilled and firm, tent with foil (try not to touch surface with foil as it will leave marks) and store in fridge. Decorate just before serving. The pie will keep 3–4 days total.

FREEZE NOTE

The pie can be frozen for up to 3 months. Open-freeze undecorated pie just until solid, then wrap pie (still in its tart tin) in double layer of clingfilm and layer of foil. To defrost, unwrap pie and tent with foil (try not to touch surface with foil as it will leave marks), then defrost overnight in fridge. Decorate before serving.

OFF THE CUFF

Slut's spaghetti

Japanese prawns

Speedy seafood supper

Pasta with pancetta, parsley and peppers

Pantry paella

Mixed meat pilaff

Small pasta with salami

Chorizo and chickpea stew

Tabbouleh

Indian roast potatoes

Curly pasta with feta, spinach and pine nuts

Pasta salad

Standby starch

Halloumi with beetroot and lime

Pepper, anchovy and egg salad

Everyday brownies

Whether you really want to be listening to me on the subject of what to keep in your cupboards, fridge and freezer is a moot point. While not exactly a hoarder, I come as near as dammit. When shopping, I cannot bear to put any item into my basket without chucking in an extra one for luck. Perhaps it is to do with some atavistic refugee mentality (I have forbears who rowed their way from Holland to the UK) but no kitchen I could ever own would come near to being understocked.

Don't worry: I shan't send you on some compulsive shopping spree or make you, like me, end up with a deep-freeze so tightly packed, you risk frostbite unloading

everything just to unearth a packet of frozen peas. Wisdom, we're told, lies in learning from other people's mistakes, and you would certainly be wise to heed mine. And since even the greediest of stockpiling doesn't mean you have all eventualities covered – and I should know – it does make sense to put a system into play whereby you can feel confident that what you're stocking up on will actually provide a meal some day.

I'm not saying you should count on these ingredients necessarily providing a meal in its entirety (though there are recipes here which do just that) but you can make your cooking life very much simpler by ensuring you keep a stash of less everyday ingredients, so that when you're doing a quick dash round the local shops to acquire supper, you're not searching in vain for some recondite paste or flavouring. But on top of that, you really can prepare yourself comfortably for those days when impromptu guests show up or you are simply in no position to shop.

I need to know that not only do I have some pasta on hand (and what used to be the pasta cupboard has now morphed into a huge basket known as The Harvest Festival) but also the wherewithal to make some sauces for it. And while my Slut's Spaghetti is chief among those, there are other contenders, too. A read-through of any of the following recipes will give you an indication of the various ingredients needed.

As for the deep-freeze, frozen prawns and squid (the latter I buy in 1 kilo packets from the fishmonger) can be real life-savers, and I've recently come across various seafood mixtures in the freezer cabinet of the supermarket that have added a little flourish to my repertoire. In the fridge, I make sure I have chorizo (the Spanish sausages for cooking), packets of feta and halloumi, as well as pancetta cubes or lardons. These are all foodstuffs with a long fridge life that lend themselves to meals at a moment's notice, and I relish the luxury of being able to rely on them.

I'm not sure it would be helpful to list everything I keep in the kitchen (not least because it would be too shaming an exercise for me) but I did want to outline just a few, above – if only to show that the ability to throw together supper with little or no notice isn't a skill or a talent, but a question of canny shopping. Go to it!



Slut's spaghetti

Well, how could I resist this translation of *pasta alla puttanesca*, whore's pasta as it usually is described in English? The general consensus seems to be that this is the sort of dish cooked by slatterns who don't go to market to get their ingredients fresh, but are happy to use stuff out of jars and tins. I hold my hands up to that. Or maybe one should just attribute the name gamely to the fiery tang and robust saltiness of the dish? But, anyhow, what better recipe to start off this section devoted to the fruits of the larder.

Please fire up the sauce if you want, but do know that even though the first mouthful might seem not quite hot enough, the heat builds as you eat. I sometimes go a little cross-cultural in my chilli-case and use hot red pickled jalapeños from a jar found on the Tex-Mex shelves of the supermarket. And while you're there, do look out for the tiny French nonpareil (or *nonpareilles*) capers: they may be smaller but they pack more of a pungent punch than the larger capers.

Serves 4–6

3 x 15ml tablespoons olive oil

8 anchovy fillets, drained and finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, peeled and finely sliced, crushed or grated

½ teaspoon crushed chilli flakes, or 1–2 x 15ml tablespoons pickled red jalapeño chilli peppers (drained, sliced and diced), or to taste

500g spaghetti

1 x 400g can chopped tomatoes

150g (drained weight) pitted black olives, chopped a bit

2 x 15ml tablespoons small capers, well rinsed and drained

**2–3 x 15ml tablespoons chopped fresh parsley, to serve
(optional)**

salt and pepper, to taste

♥ Put water for pasta on to boil, though you don't need to get started on the sauce until it is pretty well boiling.

♥ Pour the oil into a wide, shallowish frying pan, casserole or wok, and put on a medium heat.

♥ Add the finely chopped anchovies and cook for about 3 minutes, pressing and pushing with a wooden spoon, until the anchovies have almost “melted”, then add the garlic and chilli flakes (or sliced then diced jalapeños) and cook, stirring for another minute.

♥ This is probably the stage at which you will want to be salting the boiling pasta water and adding the spaghetti to cook according to packet instructions.

♥ Going back to the sauce, add the tomatoes, olives and capers and cook for about 10 minutes, stirring every now and again, by which time it will have thickened slightly. Taste for seasoning.

♥ Just before the pasta is ready, remove about an espresso cupful of cooking water, and reserve it. When the pasta is cooked as desired, drain and add the spaghetti to the sauce in your wok or pan, adding a little reserved pasta water, if needed, to help amalgamate the sauce. Scatter with chopped parsley, if there's some to hand, and serve in slatternly style, preferably with an untipped cigarette clamped between crimson-painted lips.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The sauce can be made 2 days ahead. Transfer to non-metallic bowl to cool, then cover and refrigerate as soon as possible. Reheat gently in large saucepan, frying pan or wok, stirring occasionally, until piping hot.

FREEZE NOTE

The cooled sauce can be frozen in resealable container for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.



Japanese prawns

I call these Japanese prawns out of respect for the sake and wasabi I cook them in, but I am not claiming they are part of the culinary repertoire of Japan. Whatever its emanation, I must tell you this is probably the dish I cook for myself the most often. It's pretty well instant, it is definitely fabulous and it makes me feel smug and holy. Having said that, I should own up that I don't halve this recipe when I'm eating alone.

In keeping with virtuous mode, but also because it's easier, I eat this over salad, letting the savoury liquid dress and drench the leaves. It is good, too, and more robust, with brown basmati (a quick microwave-able sachet of already steamed rice can be the lazy answer) or soba noodles. Of course, it would be at its very peak of perfection if made with the raw organic prawns I like to keep in my fridge, but I can't count on having them, whereas the frozen ones are always the clunk of a freezer door away. Sometimes, I am in such a hurry, I bung some garlic oil in the wok and fling in ready-chopped ginger and chilli from the deep-freeze (bought like that, not the result of efficient planning) or from a jar, followed by the prawns, then splosh with wasabi-fortified sake, lime juice and water and cook as below. Dinner in comfortably under 5 minutes equals weekday salvation.

Serves 2

2 x 15ml tablespoons water

2 x 15ml tablespoons sake

½ teaspoon sea salt flakes or ¼ teaspoon pouring salt, or to taste

1 x 15ml tablespoons lime juice

½ teaspoon wasabi powder (or 1 teaspoon paste)

2 teaspoons garlic oil

2 spring onions, finely sliced

200g frozen raw king prawns

salad leaves, rice or noodles, to serve

**2–3 x 15ml tablespoons chopped fresh coriander, to serve
(optional)**

♥ In a jug, cup or bowl, mix together the water, sake, salt, lime juice and wasabi.

♥ Heat a wok or deep, heavy-based frying pan and, when warm, add the garlic oil and spring onions and stir-fry for a minute or so, then tip in the frozen prawns and cook for about 3 minutes or until they start to turn pinkish and lose their frozen glaze.

♥ Add the liquid mixture to the pan, bring to a bubble and cook for another 2 minutes, stirring the prawns about a bit in the sauce.

♥ When the prawns are completely cooked through, serve over salad, rice or noodles, sprinkling with fresh coriander, should you have some.





Speedy seafood supper

This is another instance of how your freezer can be your friend in forgetful times. If you haven't remembered to go shopping or haven't got time, energy or inclination, this is for you. Obviously, you need to have a stock of the mixed seafood in your deep-freeze; I keep prawns and squid separately, and also buy a ready-mixed selection containing those two plus mussels. And don't turn your nose up at the notion unless you want to cut it off to spite your face. I was put on to the frozen mixed seafood by a friend who is one of the most blazing food obsessives I know. If I have a couple of tomatoes in the house that need eating up, I de-seed and finely chop those rather than open a tin of tomatoes.

My favourite way to eat this is with nothing more than some crusty bread to dip into the juices. If you've got only stale bread in the house, splash it with cold water and put it in an oven preheated to 200°C/gas mark 6 for 10 minutes. If you're canny, of course, you'd keep some semi-baked loaves in the house.

Serves 2–4, with bread, and could stretch to 6 if tossed through some pasta

pinch saffron threads

250ml freshly boiled water

4 teaspoons garlic oil

6 spring onions, finely sliced

½ teaspoon dried tarragon

125ml dry vermouth or dry white wine

1 x 227g can chopped tomatoes (i.e. ½ regular can)

1 teaspoon sea salt flakes or ½ teaspoon pouring salt, or to taste

400g frozen mixed seafood

pepper, to taste

fresh herbs, to serve (optional)

♥ Put the saffron threads in a cup or bowl and add 250ml freshly boiled water.

♥ Warm the garlic oil in a wide, shallow, heavy-based pan over a medium heat and fry the spring onions and dried tarragon for a minute or so.

♥ Add the vermouth (or wine) and let bubble for a minute, then add the saffron in its yellow water, followed by the tomatoes, and let it all come back to the boil. Add half the amount of salt specified above.

♥ Turn up the heat to high, add the frozen seafood and bring the pan back to the boil, then turn down the heat to medium and cook at a robust simmer till the seafood is hot and cooked through, which should be 3 or 4 minutes (or according to packet instructions).

♥ Season with pepper to taste, and add the rest of the salt if required, sprinkle with any available herbs, if you feel like it, and serve, for pleasurable mopping, with some crusty bread.

Pasta with pancetta, parsley and peppers

I always have a stash of pancetta cubes in the fridge to spruce up whatever else I may have to hand, but here they rather take centre stage. If you want to use lardons instead, then do. They should be the same – the *cubetti di pancetta*, Italian, and the *lardons*, French – but for some reason the lardons are cut chunkier, and consequently a supermarket packet of them tends to weigh about 200g rather than the 140g of pancetta. Don't worry. Either pack size will do nicely here.

This may be an off-the-cuff standby but it really sings for our supper. The salt of the bacon, whichever way you cut it, is balanced fruitily by the sweet softness of the charred peppers. Against the fire of the chilli, there is the bright freshness of the lemon, though if you wanted to you could substitute some vinegary capers.

For me this is perfect post-hangover food, better even than the hotter [Slut's Spaghetti](#); alcohol leaves me wanting not just chilli and carbs but the bolstering comfort of a bit of fat, too.

I feel the pasta's storecupboard status doesn't rule out the inclusion of fresh parsley, since my kitchen is never without it. But know that this is altogether do-able without. I should admit, too, that when you cook it the pasta will probably look slightly better sauced than it does ([see here](#)); during the shoot I quite dopily – waiting for pasta to cook – chucked the panful of sauce into the colander by mistake, when my timer went off. Still, I salvaged most of it, and these things happen to us all.

Serves 2, heartily

1 teaspoon garlic oil

1 x 140g packet pancetta cubes, or 1 x 200g packet smoked lardons (or approx. 150g smoked streaky bacon,

snipped)

½ teaspoon dried chilli flakes

zest and juice 1 lemon

2 x 15ml tablespoons cold water

190g (drained weight) chargrilled or flame-roasted peppers, from a jar

20g (supermarket bunch) parsley, chopped

250g spaghetti

salt and pepper, to taste

♥ Put a big pot of water on to boil for the pasta.

♥ Heat the oil in a medium-sized, heavy-based pan (one you can toss the cooked pasta into later). Fry the pancetta cubes or lardons (or bacon) until they start to crisp, then add the dried chilli, grated lemon zest and juice, and 2 tablespoons water.

♥ Let this mixture bubble for a minute. Scissor the drained peppers (still in their colander) into bite-sized pieces, then add these to the pan with half the chopped parsley.

♥ Salt the pasta water once it is boiling and cook the pasta according to packet instructions. Fish out a small cupful of pasta water just before you drain it. When the pasta is cooked, drain loosely and tip into the waiting pan of sauce.

♥ Toss everything together well, and add more pasta water if you need it, then season and sprinkle with the remaining parsley.



Pantry paella

For a storecupboard standby, this is a bit of a showstopper. Of course, I include my freezer here, not least because the freezer is probably the most useful storecupboard of them all. That is where my supplies not only of frozen prawns and squid are filed, but also where I stash bits and bobs of leftover roast meats (bagged and frozen immediately after cooling, for up to 3 months), most of which could find their way into this, as much as into the [pilaff](#). Any pork leftovers, though, will always end up, and honourably, in this paella. And if there is no pork, I'd either add chicken or (more authentically) some diced chorizo sausages of which I keep a stock in the fridge.

I'm sure a card-carrying Iberophile could find this deficient in numerous ways – not least the fact that I pronounce it in the English style, sounding the “l”s – but I defy you to eat it and not want second helpings.



Serves 4 *hungry personas*

pinch saffron threads

4 x 15ml tablespoons (60ml) oloroso sherry

2 x 15ml tablespoons regular olive oil

3 spring onions, finely sliced

1 clove garlic, peeled and finely sliced

250g Bomba (or other) paella rice, or arborio rice

250g raw frozen prawns, thawed

3 tubes (100g) frozen baby squid, thawed and sliced

250g cold cooked pork, chopped into chunks

150g frozen peas

**500ml chicken stock (ready-made, concentrate or cube),
preferably organic**

salt, to taste

1 lemon, cut into wedges (to serve)

small bunch chopped fresh coriander, to serve

♥ Put the saffron threads into a small pan over a medium heat with the sherry and warm them, not letting the pan come to a boil. Leave to cool. Heat the oil in a wide, heavy-based pan. Cook the spring onion for a few minutes.

♥ Add the sliced garlic to the pan and cook for a minute or so more. Add the rice, slicking it in the oil, and then the prawns, sliced baby squid, pork and peas, and turn everything in the oil.

♥ Heat the chicken stock, or make up the concentrate/cube with boiling water, and add the hot stock to the pan, followed by the warmed sherry and saffron. Stir to mix and bring back to a bubble, then turn down to the gentlest simmer but leave uncovered.

♥ Cook *without stirring* for 15–20 minutes, by which time the rice should have absorbed the liquid and be tender.

♥ Now you can fork the rice through to separate the grains, and check the seasoning, adding salt to taste.

♥ Serve the paella edged with lemon wedges and sprinkled with coriander.



Mixed meat pilaff

This is enormously gratifying, especially when you know it is made from the leavings from other meals and a quick trawl through the kitchen. True, the fresh coriander, parsley and pomegranate seeds that I mark optional for serving elevate the pilaff from a dish you savour while eating to a dish you savour before eating too, but it is a recipe that allows for any amount of additions and omissions. Just ransack your fridge and storecupboards and proceed accordingly.

Serves 2–3

1 x 15ml tablespoon vegetable oil

1 onion, finely chopped

½ teaspoon cumin seeds

½ teaspoon coriander seeds

½ teaspoon dried thyme

225g basmati rice, or a mixture of brown basmati, red Camargue and wild rice

500ml chicken stock (ready-made, concentrate or cube), preferably organic

150g (approx. 2 breakfast cupfuls) shredded cold meat

salt and pepper, to taste

2–3 x 15ml tablespoons toasted pine nuts or flaked almonds, or a mixture

2 x 15ml tablespoons chopped fresh parsley, to serve (optional)

2 x 15ml tablespoons chopped fresh coriander, to serve (optional)

2–3 x 15ml tablespoons pomegranate seeds, to serve (optional)

♥ Warm the oil in a heavy-based saucepan which comes with a lid, then add the chopped onion and cook for 5 minutes over a lowish heat, stirring frequently, before adding the cumin and coriander seeds and thyme and cooking, as before, until the onion is soft; this should be about another 5 minutes, giving 10 minutes cooking time in total.

♥ Add the rice and push it about in the oily, spiced onion with a wooden spoon or rigid spatula until it is slicked and glossy. Heat the stock, or make up the stock concentrate/cube with boiling water, then pour the hot stock into the pan and bring to the boil. Cover the pan firmly with a lid and cook over the lowest heat possible for 15 minutes for regular basmati rice, or up to 40 minutes for the 3-way rice mix.

♥ Add the shredded meat and fork it all through, then replace the lid and leave it all to cook for another 5 minutes to let the meat heat through and the rice finish cooking.

♥ Check that the meat is piping hot and the rice is tender, season to taste, then take off the heat and fork through most of the pine nuts, herbs and pomegranate seeds, if using (or tip into a dish before doing this), and decorate each bowl of pilaff with the remaining bits.



Small pasta with salami

Although this started off as a last-minute children's supper (when I was faced unexpectedly with having to provide mid-evening sustenance to hungrily marauding teenagers), it has turned into a bit of a house special. I always have beans, tomatoes and pasta in the cupboard and my fridge is piled high with packets of salami, bought for filling toasted sandwiches and general grazing. If you want to use a proper *salame* (by which I mean the sausage, not pre-sliced) and cut it into chunks yourself, by all means do, but you will need to double, at the very least, the weight below. For speed and simplicity (and, pointedly, this is child's play) the pre-sliced salami does the trick, and I rather love the way the strips, when cooked, look like a lapdog's tongue.

I dare say you could use regular short pasta, not the midget size I stipulate here, but I never have. Whenever I'm asked for this, I am made to understand fully that deviation would not be tolerated.

Serves 3–4

300g ditalini or mezzi tubetti pasta

75g (about 15 slices) Milano salami, scissored into strips

1 x 400g can chopped tomatoes, plus ½ can water

2 x 15ml tablespoons (30g) butter

1 bouquet garni

1 x 400g can cannellini beans, drained and rinsed

♥ Bring some water for the pasta to the boil and salt generously – or to taste – then put in the ditalini or mezzi tubetti, which will probably need around 10 minutes (though check the pack), and get on with the sauce while it cooks.

♥ Warm a fairly wide, heavy-based pan – you can see the one I use on the right – and toss in the salami strips, not worrying if they clump together. Stir with a wooden spoon over a medium heat for a minute or two.

♥ Tip in the tomatoes and slosh about ½ can water around in the empty can and then add that, too.

♥ Drop in 1 tablespoon butter and stir well with your wooden spoon, then add the bouquet garni and the drained beans, stir and leave it to bubble away – firmly but gently – while the pasta finishes cooking.

♥ Just before draining the pasta, lower in a small cup and take out a little of the cooking water.

♥ Stir the drained pasta into the sauce, remove from the heat and now stir in the remaining butter. If you think the sauce needs it, splash in some of the pasta cooking water, and stir again with your wooden spoon. Leave to stand for 2 minutes before serving, removing the bouquet garni as you do so.



Chorizo and chickpea stew

If ever there were justification for cupboard love, this would be it: a full-on feast thrown together to enormous effect, simply with ingredients that you can more or less keep on permanent standby. And, like so many of these recipes, it's pretty well instant. After all, if you haven't got time to shop, it's hardly likely you'll be able to spend many hours at the cooker.

I am, anyway, a huge fan of bulgar wheat – think couscous, only more robust – but cooked like this, with some strands of pasta tossed in hot oil first, it really has something extra. I was taught to do this, just chatting stoveside, by an Egyptian friend when I was in my twenties and I've never seen any reason to change the drill. He, actually, didn't use torn-up spaghetti but, rather, lokshen, which are the short lengths of vermicelli customarily found in *echt* chicken soup.

This is a tradition about as far away from the chorizo-cooking culture as you could get, but the chickpea-studded, tomatoey and paprika-hot stew goes extremely well with the nubbly grain. I keep a stock of cherry tomatoes in sauce in the cupboard, but regular canned tomatoes could be substituted easily enough.

Serves 4

2 x 15ml tablespoons regular olive oil

50g spaghetti or vermicelli, torn into 3cm lengths

500g bulgar wheat

1 teaspoon cinnamon

2 teaspoons sea salt flakes or 1 teaspoon pouring salt

1 litre water

2 bay leaves

350g chorizo, cut into coins and then halved

4 x 15ml tablespoons amontillado sherry

**100g soft dried apricots, snipped into pieces with scissors
(optional)**

**2 x 400g cans chickpeas or mixed beans, rinsed and
drained in a sieve**

2 x 400g cans cherry tomatoes, plus 1½ cans water

salt and pepper, to taste

fresh coriander, to serve (optional)

♥ Warm the olive oil in a thick-bottomed pan on a medium heat.

♥ Fry the pasta bits in the oil for a minute, stirring, until they look like slightly scorched straws.

♥ Then add the bulgar wheat and stir for another minute or two.



♥ Stir in the cinnamon and the salt, and then pour the water into the pan. Add the bay leaves, and bring to a boil, then turn down to the lowest heat, add a lid, and leave for 15 minutes, until all the water has been absorbed.

♥ Put another thick-bottomed saucepan on a medium heat, add the chorizo pieces and fry until the orange oil runs out. Then add the sherry and let it bubble away. Add the apricots (if using), along with the chickpeas (or beans) and canned tomatoes, and half fill each empty tomato can with water and swill it out into the pan. Put on a high heat to bubble for about 5 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste.

♥ Serve with the bulgar wheat and, if there's any to hand, some chopped coriander.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The stew can be made up to 2 days ahead. Transfer to non-metallic bowl to cool, then cover and refrigerate as soon as possible. Reheat gently in large saucepan, stirring occasionally, until piping hot.

FREEZE NOTE

The cooled stew can be frozen in airtight container for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.



Making leftovers right

Tabbouleh

I'd be surprised if you had any chorizo and chickpea stew left over, but expect some bulgar wheat. I make a lot for two reasons: one, I find using most of a packet annoying, and know I'll just end up with cupboards full of rogue grains of bulgar wheat, however well I seal the bag; and two, I feel

*happier knowing I'm in the running for some **tabbouleh**. Yes, I know that the tabbouleh, with its reliance on fresh herbs (and they should be present, at about double the volume at least of bulgar wheat, in any self-respecting tabbouleh) is absolutely not a storecupboard recipe. But just because you didn't have time to go to the shops today, doesn't mean you won't have time tomorrow. Besides, it seemed wrong to separate satellite recipe from mother ship.*

It is best to work this out in terms of volume rather than weight, and I'm not saying that just because there's no way I'm going to weigh any leftover bulgar wheat. The cups I mention below are the ones used in American cooking and are now easy to find here, but you could just go up to the 250ml mark on a measuring jug (or consider the 1½ cups of the bulgar wheat as a regular breakfast cupful and then measure out your herbs accordingly). To be frank, the best way to do this is neither by weight nor volume, but taste.

Serves 2–4

1½ cups leftover cooked bulgar wheat

40g bunch (2 cups chopped) mint

80g bunch (2 cups chopped) flat-leaf parsley

25g bunch (¼ cup chopped) dill (optional)

2–3 medium-sized (1 cup chopped), tomatoes, de-seeded

3 spring onions, finely chopped

zest 1 lemon and juice 1/2, plus more to taste

1 teaspoon sea salt flakes or ½ teaspoon pouring salt, or to taste

2 x 15ml tablespoons garlic oil (or 2 tablespoons regular olive oil plus 1 clove garlic, minced)

splash fruity extra-virgin olive oil

pomegranate seeds (optional)

♥ Put the cold cooked bulgar wheat, the chopped herbs, tomatoes and sliced spring onions into a bowl. Zest in the lemon and mix.

♥ Now pour in the juice of ½ lemon, along with the garlic oil (or regular olive oil with some minced garlic) and the splash of extra-virgin olive oil and mix with a fork. Taste to see if you want any more lemon juice or salt. And if there are any pomegranate seeds to hand, sprinkle some over on serving; lovely alongside pretty much anything, but do consider a block of halloumi, sliced and fried in a hot, dry pan.





Indian roast potatoes

I know there are a lot of spices here to keep in the cupboard, but these potatoes are a fantastic brunch dish with a [Bloody Maria](#) and some fried eggs; moreover, I can't tell you how useful this is to bring out when you're roasting a chicken – again – and want to give supper a less quotidian feel. Look – you'll never find me complaining about a plain roast chicken ever, ever, ever, but that doesn't make me any the less appreciative of a recipe that will add a bit of an exotic party feel to a comfy favourite. It's not a sin to want to spice things up occasionally.

This doesn't have to involve any swinging from the chandeliers, culinarily speaking: in fact, it is a shamelessly lazified version of an altogether more hands-on Indian original.

Serves 6

900g (4 or 5 large) potatoes, unpeeled

**2 x 15ml tablespoons peppery cold-pressed rapeseed oil
(see [Kitchen Confidential](#)) or regular olive oil**

2 teaspoons ground turmeric

1 teaspoon fennel seeds

1 teaspoon cumin seeds

1 teaspoon nigella seeds

1 teaspoon black mustard seeds

½ teaspoon hot chilli powder

1 bulb garlic

½ red onion, finely diced

juice 1 lime

sea salt flakes or pouring salt, to taste

- ♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6. Scrub and then dice the unpeeled potatoes into 2–3cm cubes.
- ♥ Put the potato cubes into a freezer bag with the oil and spices, seal it, then shake everything about in the bag to coat the cubes.
- ♥ Tip them onto a wide, shallow baking sheet – high sides stop the potatoes crisping up. Break up the bulb of garlic and scatter the unpeeled cloves around the potato cubes.
- ♥ Cook in the oven for 1 hour without turning. Meanwhile, put the diced onion into a bowl, cover with the lime juice and toss, then leave to macerate while the potatoes cook.
- ♥ When the potatoes come out of the oven, transfer them to a warmed serving dish and sprinkle with some salt. Lift the onion dice out of the lime juice and scatter these over the potatoes.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The potatoes can be cut 1 day ahead. Submerge in cold water until needed, then drain and pat dry. Leftovers should be refrigerated when cool and can be kept for 2 days. Reheat in a 200°C/gas mark 6 oven for about 15 minutes, until piping hot.

Making leftovers right

Any stray, cold potatoes can be added to the [Quesadillas](#) along with the sliced avocado to great effect. In which case, you might want to dispense with the jalapeños in that recipe.



Curly pasta with feta, spinach and pine nuts

This can be a lifesaver when you suddenly find you have a tableful of people unexpectedly for supper, and all the more valuable should any of them be vegetarian. But it doesn't have to be regarded as for emergencies only: it's far too good to be kept behind closed doors simply in stealthy readiness. Anyhow, I like to know that I always have the wherewithal to cook something at a moment's notice.

A salty brick of wrapped feta, like halloumi, can live unopened for ages in the fridge and my spinach is frozen. As we were always told in childhood, spinach is very good for you, giving you all the minerals it absorbs through the soil. Unfortunately, it will absorb the less healthy stuff too, which is why it is worth buying organic spinach even when frozen: this is what I stock up on and recommend you do, too.

The curly pasta I favour here are called cavatappi (literally, corkscrews) – and, should this be of help, are no. 87 in the De Cecco catalogue – but fusilli are probably easier to find and fit the bill, equally.

Serves 6, as a main course

50g pine nuts

2 x 15ml tablespoons garlic oil

1 onion, peeled and sliced

500g cavatappi, fusilli or other short pasta

¼ teaspoon allspice

500g frozen leaf spinach, preferably organic

200g feta cheese, crumbled

3–4 x 15ml tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese

salt and pepper, to taste

- ♥ Put abundant amounts of water on to boil for the pasta.
- ♥ Toast the pine nuts by tossing them about in a hot, dry, heavy-based pan (for ease use one that will take the sauce later) until they become golden, then remove to a cold plate.
- ♥ Heat the garlic oil in the pan, and add the onion slices. Keep them on a lowish heat, stirring, for about 8–10 minutes, until soft. If they look like they're getting too brown, sprinkle with a little salt (to help draw out the juices and slow down browning).
- ♥ When the water comes to the boil, add salt and then the pasta.
- ♥ When the onion is ready, add the allspice. Then add the frozen spinach: you need to keep stirring this, to help the frozen spinach melt consistently.
- ♥ Just before you drain the pasta, scoop out about an espresso cupful of cooking water, and add to the spinach sauce mix.
- ♥ Crumble the feta into the spinach sauce, stirring as the snooker baize of spinach becomes creamy with the cheese melting into it. Stir in 3 tablespoons of the Parmesan, before tasting to see if you want to add any more.
- ♥ Drain the pasta and toss into the feta spinach sauce to mix, then season to taste. Decant into a, preferably warmed, serving bowl, then add the toasted pine nuts and toss through before serving.

Making leftovers right

Pasta salad

I do not consider myself a pasta salad person, rather the contrary, but I promise you that this pasta, albeit leftover, still has something to give. Cover and refrigerate it (for up to 2 days) straight after its first outing. To make a salad, fork it about a bit to break it up, then add some lemon juice and olive

*oil, a sprinkling of salt and a grinding of pepper, all to taste;
box it up and take it to work with you for your lunch.*



Standby starch

This is exactly what it says: an almost instant solution to the problem of having a meal to bulk up without time to cook potatoes or rice. True, I often use a packet of gnocchi on such an occasion, but they are less versatile. This goes with pretty well everything: a stew, roast chicken, some grilled fish or meat; furthermore, it can turn a paltry amount of cold meat into a substantial supper, especially if you add a drained, de-gloped can of chickpeas to the couscous before it gets soaked.

And about the soaking, I should be open. I know this is not the correct, the authentic way to cook couscous. You should actually soak it in cold water before steaming it over a simmering pan. But I find this works, and – as with the sprightly Rocket and [Lemon Couscous](#), which is cooked differently, but still not traditionally – it improves the quality of my cooking and eating life (is there any other?) immensely.



Serves 4–6, as part of a meal

250g couscous

¼ teaspoon dried thyme

½ teaspoon ground cumin

400ml chicken (or vegetable) stock (ready-made, concentrate or cube), preferably organic

salt and pepper, to taste

♥ Put the couscous in a bowl with the thyme and cumin.

♥ Heat the stock, or make up the stock concentrate/cube with boiling water, then stir the hot stock into the couscous, cover the bowl with clingfilm (or with a large plate) and leave for 10–15 minutes.

♥ Remove the clingfilm; all the liquid should have been absorbed. Fluff up the couscous with a fork and season well with salt and pepper. If you have a roasted chicken or other meats you are eating with this, then do add any pan juices to the finished couscous at the last minute to add extra flavour. But, if I'm serving this with something that doesn't have a sauce, I sometimes dribble in a little neat stock concentrate before forking to mix.

Halloumi with beetroot and lime

It's almost shameful how good dinner can be when it's just a case of opening a couple of packets. I wouldn't have guessed it myself, had it not been for the fact that I had some people over for supper and had to rustle up a vegetarian option at the last minute. Halloumi, otherwise known in my house as "squeaky cheese", is a fantastic standby: I think of it as vegetarian bacon, though not exclusively; I am a committed carnivore but couldn't envisage life without a packet or three in my fridge at all times. Beetroot I am more wary about, but I happened to have a vacuum-sealed pack of small and steamed beetroot, left as is and not poisoned with vinegar, and suddenly felt compelled to mix the intense saltiness of the former with the sometimes overwhelming sweetness of the latter.

It didn't just work: it *really* worked. True, I blended the beetroots with some lime juice and olive oil, but if you haven't got a blender, just chop up the beetroot and tumble it over the hot halloumi before spritzing with a bit of lime. And when I say "lime", know that I am here, as often, referring to squeezey lime: think lime-shaped bottle in vivid green plastic to depict its contents, the [juiced fruit](#) always available.

Any salad you have in the house will be good with this halloumi and beet mix, though I would be particularly grateful had I any of the darker, more peppery leaves to sit the halloumi on, with some warm pitta, or any bread, on the side. Alternatively, you could stretch to a side salad, making a dressing out of lime juice, ground cumin and olive oil and adding some peppery tortilla chips as you toss leaves and dressing together.

I know the slices of halloumi with their splodge of deep pink look a bit cheffy on their plates, but try and ignore that. One bite will let you know that this is a dish for the glutton not the tiresomely fastidious gourmet.

Serves 2

1 packet (generally 225–250g) halloumi

150g cold cooked beetroot (1 large or 2 small beets, or approx. ½ a vacuum-sealed packet)

2 teaspoons lime juice, or to taste

2 x 15ml tablespoons regular olive oil

♥ Cut open the packet of halloumi over the sink, to lose all the briny juices, then transfer to a board and slice. I get 8 slices out of 1 packet, but I know if I stopped rushing or had more dexterity (or any knife skills) I could easily get 10.

♥ Put on some [CSI gloves](#) (to avoid that touch of the Lady Macbeths) and get out 2 little beets, or 1 large, from the packet, and chop roughly before blitzing with a handheld blender stick (or in a blender), adding the lime juice and oil as you go.

♥ Warm a large, dry, non-stick frying pan over a high heat and, when hot, add the slices of halloumi. Keep the heat high and after a minute or so the halloumi should have scorch marks on the underside, then flip the slices over (I find a pair of cook's tongs most suitable for the task) and cook likewise, before transferring to a pair of salad-lined plates.

♥ Divide the beetroot and lime purée between the 2 plates, dolloping it alongside the halloumi strips, and serve with some warm bread.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The beetroot purée can be made 1 day ahead. Cover and refrigerate until needed and whisk before using.



Pepper, anchovy and egg salad

This is yet another recipe which comes via Anna Del Conte; it's also one that, by comfort-inducing coincidence, my mother used to make, too. Neither of them would approve, I'm sure, of my lazy shortcut in the form of the ready charred and skinned peppers that I buy in jars from the supermarket or a Spanish deli: Anna, I imagine, would tut at the lowering of standards and my mother would have tutted even more loudly at the extravagance. There is a positive concerto of disapproval going on inside my head. Luckily, it is instantly dispelled on eating. I cook to please others, certainly, but above all to please myself, and this pleases me very much.



Serves 4–6, depending on what goes alongside

4 eggs

2 x 290g jars (380g drained weight) chargrilled or flame-roasted red peppers

1 garlic clove, peeled

salt and pepper, to taste

4 x 15ml (60ml) tablespoons regular olive oil

2 x 15ml tablespoons chopped fresh parsley, plus more for sprinkling (optional but preferable)

1 x 15ml tablespoon drained capers (preferably tiny nonpareils), from a jar

about 12 anchovies, from a jar

♥ To make a tender-yolked, not-quite-hard-boiled egg, bring room-temperature eggs to the boil in a pan of water. Turn off the heat and leave them for 10 minutes. Refresh the eggs with cold water and then peel them. For seriously hard-boiled (advisable for those with a compromised or weak immune system, such as the old and frail, the very young and the pregnant), keep the heat under the pan for the 10 minutes. Once peeled, the eggs won't take long to cool down, although I prefer to eat them before they are outright chilly.

♥ Cut the drained peppers into strips and arrange them on a serving plate.

♥ Cover the peeled garlic clove with some salt in a bowl, and then crush the garlic to make a paste. Add a good grinding of pepper and the oil, sprinkle in the 2 tablespoons parsley (if using), and stir to mix.

♥ Quarter the eggs and arrange with the peppers, then scatter with the drained capers and add the anchovy fillets.

♥ Spoon the garlic (and parsley) sauce over the salad, then decorate with a little more parsley and serve with some good French bread.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The hard-boiled eggs can be made up to 4 days ahead. Cool but leave shells on, then store in airtight container in fridge,

and remove shells just before serving.

Everyday brownies

It's not as if I were short of a brownie recipe or two: I have over the years made them on easy autopilot; but I am no less grateful for this everyday, no-notice version. They are less extravagant – I use cocoa powder in place of the good-quality chocolate, and stud the mixture with a newsagent's or corner-shop bar or two of milk chocolate – although to taste them, you would never, never guess. They ooze with such dark elegance and deep, deep chocolatiness.

This is the recipe you turn to when a child or colleague informs you last thing that you're expected to bake something for a cake sale tomorrow. You can just smile serenely and head for the cupboard. If you're working from a more restrained array, so are clean out of muscovado, and there's no chance to nip to a garage for the chocolate, then just use regular white caster sugar and up the butter to 175g and the cocoa to a heady 100g.

A final note or, rather, nag: when I say cocoa powder, I do mean cocoa; do not under any circumstance ever substitute drinking chocolate.



Makes 16

150g unsalted butter

300g light brown muscovado sugar

75g cocoa powder, sifted

150g plain flour

1 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

pinch of salt

4 eggs

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

approx. 150g milk chocolate, chopped into small nuggety chunks

icing sugar, to dust (optional)

1 x 25cm square x 5cm deep foil-lined baking tin or 1 foil tray, approx. 30 x 20 x 5cm

♥ Preheat the oven to 190°C/gas mark 5. Melt the butter over a gentle heat in a medium-sized saucepan.

♥ When it's melted, add the sugar, stirring with a wooden spoon (still over a low heat) to help it blend with the melted butter.

♥ Sift together the cocoa powder, flour, bicarb and pinch of salt, and then stir into the pan; when mixed (this will be a very dry mixture, and not wholly blended at this stage), remove from the heat.

♥ In a bowl or jug, whisk the eggs with the vanilla extract and then mix into the brownie mixture in the pan.

♥ Stir in the chopped chocolate and quickly pour and scrape into a foil-lined baking tin or throwaway foil container, spreading the mixture with a spatula, and cook in the preheated oven for approx. 20–25 minutes. It will look set, dark and dry on top, but when you feel the surface, you will sense it is still wibbly underneath and a cake tester will come out gungy. This is desirable.

♥ Transfer the tin to a rack to cool a little before cutting into 16 and dusting with icing sugar. I love these gorgeously warm. But then again, I love them cold, too. Actually, when cold they are properly speaking more brownie-like: gooiily tender within and moreishly chewy on top.



MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The brownies can be made up to 3 days ahead and stored in airtight container. Will keep for total of 5 days.

FREEZE NOTE

The brownies can be frozen for up to 3 months in airtight container, layered with baking parchment. Defrost overnight in cool place.

Part II

KITCHEN
COMFORTS

CHICKEN AND ITS PLACE IN MY KITCHEN

A DREAM OF HEARTH AND HOME

AT MY TABLE

THE SOLACE OF STIRRING

THE BONE COLLECTION

KITCHEN PICKINGS

THE COOK'S CURE FOR SUNDAY- NIGHT-ITIS

CHICKEN AND ITS PLACE IN MY KITCHEN

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I have written before of my mother's roast chicken, our Saturday lunch ritual, the way she always cooked two chickens at the same time (one to eat, as she'd say, and the other for picking at from the fridge) and the lemony and rich, yet calming, savoury scent that filled the air as they cooked. And for me, a chicken remains the basic unit of home. I don't really feel a kitchen is mine until I've cooked a chicken there.

Even if I don't always follow my mother's practice of dedicating an entire bird for casual consumption, a fridge feels all wrong to me unless there is some cold chicken in it, either to pick at or, with minimal tweaking, to be turned into another meal. My methods of roasting a chicken have changed a little over time; it's less often now that I smear the pale breast thickly with butter before putting it in the oven, finding these days that a golden trickle of flavoursome oil does the trick just as well. I can never, though, quite stop myself from popping either a squeezed-out or still plump and juicy lemon-half inside the cavity.

I have, though, become increasingly fussy about the type of chicken I'm cooking. My mother would have been enormously sceptical about the contemporary emphasis on the free-range and organic, seeing it as little more than a scam to make people spend more money than they need to. If I disagree, it may in part be because we know a lot more about the obscene practices of factory farming than she ever did; but I concede, too, that she came out of a wartime childhood, and regarded any form of profligacy as poor form. I justify my extravagance (as she'd have seen it), not in a particularly lofty way: a generally uncharacteristic squeamishness comes upon me at the thought of eating the spooky stuff. Besides, the flavour I get from a superior bird is a juicy enough reward. As a quite terrible gravy-maker, I relish the fact that an organic chicken seems to make its own: the rich, amber liquid that collects at the bottom of the tin needs no more than a spritz of vermouth or lemon, or just some water from the kettle to help scrape up the flavour-rich nuggets that stick there. Plus, this flavour really does go bone-deep, and a single carcass left over from an organic bird makes the basis for a soup later in the week. But I realize that I am lucky to be able to make the choice, and feel grateful rather than crusading on the issue.

Plain roast chicken

Wherever your **chicken** has come from, count on giving it 20 minutes per 500g at 200°C/gas mark 6 plus 20 minutes overall, although I sometimes leave out the 20 minutes overall part and roast the chicken in a hotter oven at 220°C/gas mark 7. There are two things I should add: the chicken will take longer to cook if it is fridge cold, and you should check when it comes out of the oven that it is properly cooked through, by cutting into the flesh between the body and the thigh. The liquid that runs out should be clear once the chicken's cooked; it's worth remembering, though, that the dark meat of an organic bird is actually darker, and redder, than the dark meat of a factory-farmed one. The leg and thigh meat will keep a slightly pink tinge. But if you have any doubts, know that the

more luscious meat of the organic bird means that cooking it for longer shouldn't dry it out.



Roast potatoes

*My daughter prefers her roast chicken with a side-order of “Pie Insides” (which is to say, [Leeks in White Sauce](#)) and proper, old-fashioned **roast potatoes**. Since I felt my recipe for these didn't need an outing in its own right elsewhere on these pages, it seemed only fair – to make life easier in the kitchen now – to give a rapid reprise here. I work on the principle of 1 big potato per person and 1 extra for luck per 4 people. Peel each potato, and cut a central triangle-shaped piece out of the middle, which gives you 1 piece with 2 slanted edges, and 2*

pieces each with 1 slanted edge. Put all your cut up potatoes in a pan filled abundantly with cold, salted water, bring to the boil, and then let them bubble away rambunctiously for 4 minutes. Meanwhile, heat a large roasting tray in the oven (220°C/gas mark 7 if you have a single oven and your chicken's cooking in it, but if you've got a double oven, let the potato oven burn hotter, at 250°C/gas mark 9) with about 500g goose fat or 1 litre corn oil in it, per kilo of potatoes. Drain the potatoes, let them dry off a little, then put them back into their still hot pan, sprinkle over some semolina, using about 2 teaspoons per kilo of potatoes. Clamp the lid on and shake the pan about briefly, just to make the par-boiled potatoes a little fuzzy around the edges and then transfer them carefully to the hot fat and cook for 20–30 minutes per side, or until gloriously golden outside and fluffily tender inside.

Roast chook with leeks and squash

*And if you want the taste of a roast chicken dinner without quite as much fandango, then I suggest my Oz-inspired **roast chook with leeks and butternut squash**. Put your chicken in a large pan, halve and de-seed a butternut (but do not bother to peel), cut it into roughly 5cm chunks and tumble it into the pan along with 2 or 3 fatly sliced leeks (or 1 leek and a couple of chunked-up, but unpeeled, potatoes) and an unwaxed lemon cut into 8, before drizzling with garlic-infused oil, adding a sprig or two of rosemary or thyme and roasting in a 220°C/gas mark 7 oven in the traditional manner.*

A roast chicken, cooked in either of the above ways, will always find a place in my home, and repeatedly, but nothing can ever feel as important to me as my **Mother's Praised Chicken**, which is not merely a recipe, but my family's culinary fingerprint. It's not quite poached, not quite braised, and so I've settled on "praised" – which feels exactly right, as for me both cooking and eating it feel like a devotional act.

My mother's praised chicken

This may well be – indeed is – the smell, the taste, the dish that says “family” to me and my siblings, and brings our long-absent mother back to the kitchen and the table with us. But the fact that I’ve cooked it more often and over more years than I’ve cooked anything else doesn’t make writing a recipe for it any easier. If anything, it makes it harder, much harder.

Relax: obviously, it’s not the reliability from a practical perspective that’s in question; rather, I cook this so often I know that one written-down version of it can’t take into account or begin to convey all its possible permutations. For example, you could toss in some pancetta cubes before you add the chicken and maybe use cider as your flavour-giving alcoholic beverage of choice; or you could add some ginger, freshly grated or sliced, along with the oil and use Chinese cooking wine or sake in place of the white wine or vermouth and put coriander stalks in, along with the parsley or instead, and add fresh, de-seeded red chilli, cut into fine almost-rings, as well as chopped coriander, at the end. At all times, you can play with the vegetables: fennel, if you’re a fennelphile, brings a beautiful aniseed fragrance, which, if you cared to, you could boost by adding a splash of pastis in place of the wine; you can similarly think of adding parsnips and some chunks of squash or pumpkin, though these would probably be better added halfway, or even later in the cooking process. And very often, when all is heaped into the pan at the beginning, just before it is left to cook itself into aromatic succulence, I grate in the zest of 1 lemon, then squeeze in the juice and maybe add a sprinkling of dried mint, too. I could go on and on ...



By its very nature, this symbolizes the very free-style form of cooking that a recipe seems to argue against. So, let me reassure you that really all you need to know is that you simply brown the chicken before adding vegetables and just enough liquid to cover, and cook them slowly before eating on top of rice. I like brown basmati here, and work on 75–100g per head before cooking, depending on the ages and appetites of the eaters. On the whole, I tend to go for the higher rather than lower number – no huge surprise, I’m sure – not because I think it’s all needed, but because one of my favourite uses of leftover meat is a variation of a salad I make with leftover turkey at Christmas: chunks or shreds of cold chicken stirred into cold brown basmati rice, with pomegranate seeds, sunflower seeds or any mixture of similar seeds, fresh dill, lemon juice, salt and 1–2 drops of gorgeously flavoured oil (a rich, mustardy yellow cold-pressed rapeseed – see [Kitchen Confidential](#), – being my favourite).

But we’ll get to leftovers later and, obviously if you want, you can ditch the rice and think of serving steamed potatoes, instead. And if you can steam them above the chicken, so much the better. But rice it has to be in our house. Since I have a rice cooker, this also happens to be the easy

option for me; though, most pressingly, it is part of the ritual for us. And, as I am presenting this in its role as a family favourite, my kitchen perennial, in fact, I feel I can allow myself to be bossier than normal, even telling you how you should eat it: by this I mean the Lawsonian familial practice of adding fresh fronds of dill and some English mustard – just a pinprick or great, sinus-clearing teaspoonfuls – as we greedily, gratefully eat.

Serves 4–8 (cooked this way it seems to go much further than roast chicken, so you can feed more first time or have plenty for the rest of the week)

1 large chicken, preferably organic

2 teaspoons garlic oil

100ml white wine or dry white vermouth

2–3 leeks, cleaned, trimmed, and cut into approx. 7cm logs

2–3 carrots, peeled and cut into batons

1–2 sticks celery, sliced

approx. 2 litres cold water

1 bouquet garni or 1 teaspoon dried herbs

fresh parsley stalks or few sprigs, tied or banded together

2 teaspoons sea salt flakes or 1 teaspoon pouring salt

2 teaspoons red peppercorns, or good grinding pepper

to serve:

chopped leaves, from parsley stalks above

chopped fresh dill

English mustard

♥ Get out a large, flame-safe cooking pot (with a lid) in which the chicken can fit snugly: mine is about 28cm wide x 10cm deep.

♥ On a washable board, un-truss the chicken, put it breast-side down and press down until you hear the breastbone crack. (As

you may imagine, I like this.) Then press down again, so that the chicken is flattened slightly. Now cut off the ankle joints below the drumstick (but keep them); I find kitchen scissors up to the task.

♥ Put the oil in the pan to heat, then brown the chicken for a few minutes breast-side down, and turn up the heat and turn over the chicken, tossing in the feet as you do so. Still over a vigorous heat add the wine or vermouth to the pan and let it bubble down a little before adding the leeks, carrots and celery.



♥ Pour in enough cold water to cover the chicken, though the very top of it may poke out, then pop in the bouquet garni or your herbs of choice, and the parsley stalks (if I have a bunch, I cut the stalks off to use here, but leave them tied in the rubber band) or parsley sprigs along with the salt and red peppercorns (I just love these beautiful red berries) or a good grinding of regular pepper.

♥ The chicken should be almost completely submerged by now and if not, do add some more cold water. You want it just about covered.

♥ Bring to a bubble, clamp on the lid, turn the heat to very low and leave to cook for 1½–2 hours. I tend to give it 1½ hours, or 1 hour 40 minutes, then leave it to stand with the heat off, but the lid still on, for the remaining 20–30 minutes.

♥ Serve the chicken and accompanying vegetables with brown basmati rice, adding a ladleful or two of liquid over each shallow bowl, as you go, and putting fresh dill and mustard on the table for the eaters to add as they wish.

FREEZE NOTE

The cooked meat can be frozen, as soon as it is cool, in resealable bags or airtight containers for up to 2 months.

Making leftovers right

For my first leftovers outing, I tend to heat up what liquid is left (remembering to use it within 1–2 days), along with some of the shredded cold chicken, squeeze in lemon or lime juice and stir in some English mustard, and eat it just as it is or over noodles or rice, either way garnished with fresh dill and maybe some parsley or coriander, too. There's certainly the salad mooted in the introduction to the recipe to consider, and then there are the meals I make if there have been only 4 of us at the table for the original poached chicken and I thus have enough for a meal later. It's not only, you see, that chicken cooked this way goes further: it makes it all so luscious and succulent that you never have cold, dry chicken syndrome to worry about. So much so, that I'd say that if you are ever thinking of making a chicken salad, cook it like this first. (Please remember to take the chicken off the bone and refrigerate it as soon as possible, tightly wrapped in foil – and use it up within 3–4 days.)

Chicken, bacon and avocado salad

This is one of my favourite combinations, and though I know that, with some good bread to eat alongside, this could stretch

*to 4, I could much too easily fork it all down myself. The combination of succulent cold chicken, the soft clay of the avocado, the crunch of the lettuce and the salty shards of **bacon** make for addictive eating. Give me a BLC over a BLT any day!*

I love a faintly sweet vinegar here, and plump for a moscatel, but I know it's not easily come by. I do think it's worth tracking one down (it is so often my vinegar of choice) but otherwise a seasoned rice vinegar is generally stocked by supermarkets these days and makes for a fine substitute. Unless you like a really sweet vinaigrette, I wouldn't go the balsamic route.

Serves 2–3 (2 very generously, but could serve 4 as a modest lunch with a baguette or a pile of soft wraps)

1 teaspoon garlic oil

4 rashers American-style bacon or other thinly sliced rindless, smoked streaky bacon

½ iceberg lettuce, torn into fork- or bite-sized pieces

225g cooked chicken, shredded (about 3 breakfast cupfuls, loosely packed)

2 smallish avocados

2 teaspoons Dijon mustard

1 x 15ml tablespoon (sweetish) vinegar, such as moscatel or seasoned rice vinegar

pepper, to taste

splash olive oil or rapeseed oil (optional)

1 x 15ml tablespoon chopped chives, to serve

♥ Heat the oil in a frying pan and fry the bacon until crisp. Remove to a piece of foil or kitchen roll, but don't wash out the pan.

♥ Put the lettuce into a large salad bowl and add the shredded cold chicken.

- ♥ Halve the avocados, removing the stones, and scoop out spoonfuls of the pale green flesh onto the lettuce and chicken.
- ♥ Add the mustard to the oily bacon juices in the pan, whisking to combine. Then whisk in the vinegar, grind in pepper to taste, pour over the salad and swiftly and deftly toss to mix, adding a splash of olive or rapeseed oil, if more oil is needed.
- ♥ Break the bacon up into pieces, crumbling most of it into the salad, and toss again.
- ♥ Finally, sprinkle with the remaining bacon and the chives.



Chinatown chicken salad

*There are many versions of this **salad**, but I've majored on one that provides the most crunch factor, not least because I sometimes leave out that essential ingredient, the wonton wrapper. When I'm in Chinatown, or any oriental store, I buy a packet or two, but the truth is they only come frozen and you don't need a whole packet for the salad. (Still, they are delicious as a Chinese version of the Italian fried and sweetened pastry strips: just fry as below and dust with icing sugar: good with coffee.) I love the name of this salad so much, I won't consider changing it even if, in place of wontons, I throw in a similarly crunchy handful of tortilla chips.*



Serves 6, as a main meal

50g wonton wrappers (or handful tortilla chips)

vegetable oil (for frying wontons)

for the dressing:

1 red chilli, de-seeded and finely chopped

2 teaspoons chopped fresh ginger

4 teaspoons lime juice or rice vinegar

3 x 15ml tablespoons soy sauce

splash sesame oil

½ teaspoon sugar

for the salad:

50g salted peanuts, chopped into pieces or whole, if wished

500g or 1 head iceberg lettuce, shredded

150g beansprouts

4 spring onions, cut into thirds and julienned

1 red pepper, de-seeded and cut into fine strips

300g shredded cooked, cooled chicken (about 4 breakfast cupfuls, loosely packed)

handful fresh chopped coriander, to serve

♥ If you are using the wonton wrappers, begin by heating about 1 cm oil in a frying pan.

♥ Once the oil is hot, peel off the papery wrappers from the pack and add them, in batches of 3–4 at a time, to the pan. Be careful, they need just a few seconds a side to turn golden, and will continue to darken as you remove them to a baking sheet lined with some kitchen roll.

♥ Continue cooking the wonton wrappers in batches until you have a baking sheet full of crisp golden squares. Leave to cool a little, while you get on with the salad they are to adorn.

♥ Mix the dressing ingredients in a jug, or a jar with a lid, stirring together or shaking, to mix.

♥ In a large bowl, toss together the peanuts, lettuce, beansprouts, spring onion, red pepper and shredded cold chicken.

♥ Add half the cooled wonton wrappers or tortilla chips (if using), breaking them into pieces into the bowl, then dress the salad, tossing again to mix before adding the other half of the crispy wonton wrappers (or the tortilla chips) and the chopped coriander, sprinkling both on top. Serve at once.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The wontons can be fried 2–3 hours ahead. Leave on some kitchen roll at room temperature until needed.

Quick chick Caesar

*This is another example of the rewards of culinary recycling. Of course, frying up croutons doesn't take very long, but my tortilla-chip version feels stresslessly instant. I think of it as a quick-time variant, mainly because I otherwise make my **Caesar** with croutons of roast, cubed, garlicky potatoes – and very well that goes down, too. If you prefer, you could, fattoush-style, replace the tortilla chips with pitta bread which you split, toast, then break into shards.*

People can be awfully tiresome about anchovies (not that the rusty strips of something salty left to die on pizzas are what anchovies should truly taste of) and, in any case, they are not part of the original Caesar, so I haven't listed them below. However, in the interests of transparency I should tell you that I do add them to my own quick Caesar when ransacking the kitchen to assemble this. I either mush one or two pinky-brown fillets up in the dressing or, if I have some of those silvery marinated anchovies, like slim sardines, I just toss them in with the chicken.

Note: Because there's a raw egg in this, you should not give it to anyone who might have a weak or compromised immune system, such as pregnant women, young children or the elderly.

Serves 2

1 egg

2 x 15ml tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1 teaspoon garlic oil

3 x 15ml tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese

juice ½ lemon

½ teaspoon sea salt flakes or ¼ teaspoon pouring salt (use none if you add anchovies)

1 romaine or cos lettuce, or 2 hearts

150g cold chicken, shredded (approx. 2 breakfast cupfuls, loosely packed)

pepper, to taste

generous handful (approx. 50g) natural tortilla chips

♥ Crack the egg into a bowl and whisk well, as you add the oils, Parmesan and lemon juice. If you're not going to add an anchovy or two, whisk in the salt.

♥ Break the crisp lettuce into bite-sized pieces and put into a salad bowl. Drop in the shredded cold chicken and mix to combine, and season with pepper, to taste.

♥ Toast the tortilla chips for a couple of minutes in an oil-less pan over a medium heat.

♥ Give the dressing another whisk, pour it over the salad and toss to mix. Add the tortilla chips (and some anchovies, if you like) and toss again before wolfing down.



Thai chicken noodle soup

*Even if you don't have much chicken left over, you should still make this. A few shreds will be plenty. (And this recipe is worth bearing in mind even when your starting point is not leftover **chicken**: if you were to bung in some frozen prawns at the end, making sure you cook them through, this would make for a fabulous storecupboard supper.) This is a very laissez-faire recipe all round, actually: when I cooked it for the photo shoot I forgot to put the vegetables in and it was still heavenly. I did try to make up for my absent-mindedness by giving the tender-shoot stir-fry a beauty-shot of its own, so you can see the mixture of pak choy, bok choy, spindly asparagus, Chinese*

kale, peanut shoots and Chinese chives. But I happily use some leafy greens and a julienned or sliced spring onion along with a handful of beansprouts instead. Similarly, if you can't get the ravishing cellophane packages of almost equally cellophane vermicelli, don't be put off making this; udon, soba, rice noodles, spaghetti or linguine could be substituted.

Serves 2–3 as a main course, 4–6 as a starter

1 litre chicken stock

150g thin rice noodles or mung bean thread vermicelli

200ml coconut milk

1 x 3–4cm piece fresh ginger, peeled and sliced thinly, then cut into skinny strips

2 x 15ml tablespoons fish sauce

1 fresh long red chilli, de-seeded and cut into strips

1 teaspoon turmeric

1 teaspoon tamarind paste

1 teaspoon soft brown sugar

2 x 15ml tablespoons lime juice

leftover chicken, shredded – approx. 150g (about 2 breakfast cupfuls, loosely packed)

250g tender-shoot stir-fry or other assorted vegetables

2–3 x 15ml tablespoons chopped fresh coriander, to serve

♥ Put the chicken stock in a good-sized pan to heat up.

♥ Put the noodles in a bowl and pour boiling water over or cook as instructed on the packet.

♥ Add the remaining ingredients, except the vegetables, to the pan and bring to a boil.

♥ When the chicken is piping hot, add the vegetables and when they are tender – a minute or two should be plenty if you're using the tender shoots – add the drained noodles. Or

simply divide the noodles between bowls and pour the soup over them.

♥ Serve sprinkled with chopped fresh coriander.



Poached chicken with lardons and lentils

I know I tend towards miserablism if caught in the wrong mood or when hungry, but I feel that it is asking for trouble to wait for other people to give you comfort in this world. Perhaps this is a melodramatic way of introducing my poached chicken with lardons and lentils, but that's how strongly I feel about it. For some reason, a lot of people are surprised that anyone would bother to cook a proper meal when eating alone, but I'm a firm believer that it's a Good Thing: the succour that comes from the self can be very sustaining and, moreover, I find that cooking for myself stops me, paradoxically, from eating too much. If I go without dinner, I am practically welded to the fridge all night.

Besides, sometimes I just need the sort of food that comforts and bolsters and makes the world feel a safe place. This is that food. In fact, it is what American magazine journalists would call their "go-to" recipe in times of stress; no food can dispel unhappiness, but cooked properly, wholesomely and lovingly, it can make one feel stronger. This also makes a perfect comfort supper for 2, in which case just double the chicken and add only 250ml extra water.

Don't get me wrong: you don't have to be unhappy to want to eat this; in fact it can be the perfect supper when merry. If I'm going to a party and fear that I will be filled with sour wine or just come back starving, I cook this in advance then totter into the kitchen once I'm back, for a quick bit of reheating. I spoon in more English mustard (I have a weakness for the strong stuff) when I eat, but that's all I need to add. Although, if there is some of the [Jumbo Chilli Sauce](#) in the fridge, it certainly gets drizzled on.

If you want to lose the lardons, do, but for me everything's better with bacon. Still, I can see that those after

goodness and purity might want to lose that luscious salty fat.
Not me, though ...

Serves 1

2 x 15ml tablespoons garlic oil

**100g smoked lardons or pancetta (or diced smoked streaky
bacon)**

1 carrot, peeled and halved lengthwise, roughly chopped

**1 leek, cleaned, trimmed and halved lengthwise, roughly
chopped**

3 x 15ml tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

½ teaspoon dried mint

grated zest 1 lemon

125g puy lentils

1 teaspoon English mustard

**1 chicken supreme (i.e. a skinned breast with peg bone in),
preferably organic**

500ml water

salt and pepper, to taste

♥ Fry the lardons, carrot, leek, parsley, mint and lemon zest in the oil for about 7 minutes, stirring frequently, in a smallish, heavy-based pan (big enough to lay 1 chicken breast in) that has a lid.

♥ Stir in the lentils and cook for another minute, before adding the yellow gloop of mustard and stir that in, too.

♥ Sit the chicken on top of everything in the pan, and add the water. Bring to the boil, put on a lid and simmer very, very gently for 45 minutes, until the chicken is cooked through and the lentils are tender. Season with salt and pepper, to taste.

♥ You can eat now, but everything is at its most tender best made in advance and reheated. I let it cool in the pan with the lid off, but for no longer than 1 hour, then put the lid back on

and stash the pan in the fridge. Later, I warm it in the pan with the lid on, until everything's piping hot again. Why add to the washing up?

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Let it cool and refrigerate as soon as possible (within 1 hour), then reheat, within 1–2 days, as directed in recipe and until piping hot right through.



A DREAM OF HEARTH AND HOME

Maple pecan bundt cake

Blueberry cornmeal muffins

Red velvet cupcakes

Buttery cream-cheese frosting

Gooseberry and elderflower crumble

Devil's food cake

Chocolate chip cookies

Baked egg custard

Coffee toffee meringues

Swedish summer cake

Vanilla custard

Marmalade pudding cake

Orange and blackberry trifle

Lemon polenta cake

Coffee and walnut layer cake

Venetian carrot cake

Flourless chocolate lime cake *with margarita cream*

Buttermilk scones

Jumbleberry jam

Gooseberry chutney

Spiced pumpkin chutney

Blackberry vodka

Drunken fool

Seed-cake

Raspberry Bakewell slice

Treacle slice

Guinness gingerbread

Chocolate orange loaf cake

Sweet and salty crunch nut bars

Rice Krispie brownies

Blondies

By some coincidence (although, with Freud, I doubt there is truly such a thing), as I sit down to write an introduction to a batch of recipes that have given succour to me, no less than to those I've cooked them for, it is exactly a decade since I was finishing *How To Be A Domestic Goddess* – a book whose title may have been wilfully misunderstood, but whose message (I like to think) has been taken unapologetically to heart.

Not that any apologia is needed, by those of us who warm our souls by the stove. Besides, to replay the arguments in defence of baking – what could be thought of as trotting out the post-modern manifesto I mooted ten long years ago – might seem an act of jumpy defensiveness. I do want to say one thing, though: a domestic goddess I ain't. But that was not the point in the first place: the title – that title – was never intended as some self-styled appellation. The American critic and satirist H.L. Mencken said that there should be some special typeface – like italics, only slanted backwards – called “ironics”, and perhaps that was the font I should have chosen. But it's not just that irony is difficult to get across in print; it's not the whole story. The vision of the gingham-aproned Madonna of the Muffins, yes, that part was intended to be gently ironic, knowingly ridiculous, but my belief in the comfort to be gained from some stoveside pottering, and the sense of warm accomplishment that baking can confer, that I was giving to you straight.

I still feel it is in some way the transformational element of baking that speaks so directly to us; it is, after all, a belief in the possibility of transformation, of perfectability, that both

Eastern and Western cultures share. It may sound absurd to link our basic, hopeful sense of human purpose to the “menial” act of whipping up a cake, but I know, I feel, that the link is there. Moreover, why disparage the menial in the first place?

And that leads to me to one last point in what is in danger of becoming an *Apologia Pro Vita Mea*: what always stunned me about the broad-brush claim that to celebrate cooking is to be the enemy of womankind was that it seemed so essentially anti-feminist to denigrate an activity just because it had always been traditionally female.

The subtitle of *Domestic Goddess* was “Baking and the Art of Comfort Cooking”, and comfort cooking is what this chapter is also about. I regard the kitchen as my place of comfort – whether I’m boiling an egg, making a cup of tea or mixing up a batch of cupcakes – but there is something about baking that marks out for me a special, less frenetic time, when I can allow myself to cook for the sheer pleasure of it. I know it doesn’t always seem this way, but a cake is not actually one of the basic necessities of life. Even to make one is a kind of luxury. And I, appropriately, luxuriate in it.

I am aware that many of you shudder at the very idea. So let me tell you a couple of things. For years I thought that there were cooks and there were bakers, and I was definitely in the first camp. But it’s not so. Whereas cooking is looser, less rigorously rule-bound – while you can decide you want three carrots in your stew one day, and two another, you can’t say, “I feel like putting three eggs in my cake today,” if the recipe calls for two – it is, in a sense, the constraints of baking that free one up. You don’t need to think too much, you just *do*.



It's the certainties of baking that offer such sweet solace, along with the fragrant fug that wafts from the oven, scenting the house with soothing smells. The grind of daily life can be so fraught that, when my head is buzzing after an overcharged week, it's at the oven I can begin to decompress. A little stirring, some rhythmic mixing: don't knock it till you've tried it.

And, like everything else, the more you do, the easier it becomes. Although it would be nearer the truth to say that none of this is very difficult in the first place. That's to say, if you can read and follow instructions, you can bake. It is that simple.

- When baking, all ingredients should be at room temperature, unless otherwise specified.
- For freezing or keeping, cakes and cookies should be cooled first. Where no freezing or make-ahead tip is given alongside a recipe, neither is recommended.
- Recommended keeping time is for best quality, though cakes and cookies may well keep for a couple of days longer.



Maple pecan bundt cake

As I get older, I realize how stamped one is, ineluctably, by character and temperament; and that only by accepting this can one begin to curb or change patterns of thinking or behaviour. You may think I am straying from my field here, but, as I've said before, anything that is true out of the kitchen is as true in it, and of it. However, although I've no doubt that the way one cooks is a function of said character and temperament, sometimes I believe that cooking can actually help us to escape our nature.

To wit, I had always thought there was nothing about me that is temperamentally suited to baking: I am impatient, clumsy, bad at authority. But you know what? I've made do. My creations are always going to look a little ramshackle, and there are times when I take a cake to someone and feel the need to lie, telling them my children iced it, but baking gives me pleasure and I can follow a recipe for long enough to mix up a batter. And to accommodate my lack of finesse, I've found a way of choosing a tin that makes me look good. I'll explain: making a cake mixture is always simple, but pour it into a fancy bundt mould and you'll bake a cake that looks like a work of art. You have to splash out on a bundt tin that is heavy (so the cake doesn't burn) and non-stick (so it comes out like the picture on the box) but from then on it's plain sailing, or happy baking.

Perhaps the notion of escaping one's nature is sadly flawed from the off. But I do find that in cooking I can sometimes express those sides of my character I wouldn't really want to air in any other way. I think of myself as the sort of person who hates fussiness and daintiness, and yet give me a bundt tin that could turn out a cake looking like Chartres cathedral – OK, cut me some slack here – and I'm lit up with delight.

So long as the quality of the bundt tin is good, it doesn't matter (to me) what shape it's in. Choose whichever mould you like best; luckily they all come in the same size, 23cm across at the widest point, and with a 2.5 litre capacity. Stasher and hoarder that I am, I'm afraid, I have far too many shapes to choose from in my cupboard, from mother-of-the-bride hat, through turreted castle to the fleur-de-lys embellished beauty here ([see here](#)). The reason I chose this particular shape for this cake, was that it seemed to show its nutty, gooey stuffing off to maximum effect once sliced. Some bundt cakes are at their most beautiful when showily whole; this one cuts into prettily shaped and pleasing slices.

And this is the cake that emblematically scratches that Domestic Goddess itch: it's feelgood food (for cook and eater) by way of some simple stirring. The nutty syrupy filling is simply forked into being; you could make the cake batter with no more equipment than a bowl and a wooden spoon. But I'm afraid even my alter ego, the Domestic Goddess, is lazy, so I use an electric mixer. But beware the processor here: it's easy to overmix as you blitz, and while a dense sponge is good, a rubbery one – clearly – is not.

Not only do I love making this cake, but I get a rare feeling of calm contentment just seeing it on its stand on the kitchen surface. Then there's the eating of it, a greedy slice alongside a mid-afternoon mug of coffee, which produces nothing less than a surge of body-and-soul-bolstering joy. Now, this is what a weekend is for ...

Cuts easily into 12 slices

for the maple pecan filling:

75g plain flour

30g soft unsalted butter

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

150g pecans (or walnuts), roughly chopped

125ml maple syrup

for the cake:

300g plain flour

1 teaspoon baking powder

1 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

125g soft unsalted butter

150g caster sugar

2 eggs

250ml crème fraîche or sour cream

1–2 teaspoons icing sugar, for decoration

flavourless oil, for greasing

1 x 23cm bundt tin

♥ Preheat the oven to 180°C/gas mark 4. Using flavourless oil (or a squirt of cooking spray) grease your bundt tin, and leave upside down on newspaper for the excess oil to drain out.

♥ Make the filling for the cake by mixing together the 75g flour and 30g butter with a fork, till you end up with the sort of mixture you'd expect when making crumble topping. Then, still using the fork, mix in the cinnamon, chopped pecans (or walnuts) and maple syrup, to form a sticky, bumpy paste. Set aside for a moment.

♥ For the cake, measure the 300g flour, the baking powder and bicarb into a bowl.

♥ Now, cream the butter and sugar (i.e. beat well together until light in texture and pale in colour), then beat in 1 tablespoon of the flour mixture, then 1 egg, then another tablespoonful of flour mixture followed by the second egg.

♥ Add the rest of the flour mixture beating as you go, and then finally the crème fraîche or sour cream. You should expect to end up with a fairly firm cake batter.

♥ Spoon just more than half the cake batter into the oiled bundt tin. Spread the mixture up the sides a little and around

the funnel of the tin to create a rim. You don't want the sticky filling to leak out to the sides of the tin.

♥ Dollop the maple filling carefully into the dent in the cake batter, then cover the filling with the remaining batter. Smooth the top and put the tin into the oven for 40 minutes, though it's best to check with a cake tester after 30 minutes.

♥ Once cooked, and the cake tester comes out clean where it hits the sponge (obviously, any gooey filling will stick to the tester), let the cake cool on a wire rack for 15 minutes in its tin, then loosen the edges with a small spatula, including around the middle funnel bit, and turn the cake out onto the rack.



♥ When the cake is cold, dust with icing sugar by pushing a teaspoonful or so through a tea strainer.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Can be baked up to 2 days ahead. Wrap tightly in clingfilm and store in airtight container. Dust with icing sugar just before serving.

FREEZE NOTE

The cake can be frozen, tightly wrapped in double layer of clingfilm and a layer of foil, for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight at room temperature and dust with icing sugar just before serving.



Blueberry cornmeal muffins

Mixing up a batch of muffins during the week, while in theory perfectly do-able, ain't never gonna happen. It's not a time issue (you just stir the batter into being, and perfunctorily at that) and the 20 minutes they take to cook could be easily accommodated during the time it takes to plead with one child to get up, while finding another's missing trainer. It's rather that too much bad temper would ooze its way into the batter along with the blueberries. Weekday mornings are undeniably fraught, even if kitchen activity is the least of it, and the only thing that makes them manageable, if only just, is routine. To deviate one bit from that would blow the system.

True, the weekends more often find me in pancake-making mode, but a muffin can be (not even snarlingly) accommodated too. My friend and agent, Ed Victor (provider of the [meatloaf](#), and much sustenance in general) says that he likes to exercise first thing in the morning as it enables him to get on with his day feeling superior and smug. That may be going too far: I'd rather get there by making a muffin. It might count as upper body exercise.

I always feel that little bit more downhome diva when I use cornmeal, though I suspect this is my weakness for kitchen-kitsch Americana speaking. But I take my pleasures where I can, and advise you to do so too. Those of us who feel happy just looking at a quaint farmstead-wholesome tub of cornmeal or at the sight of a scoopful of that almost-sparkling, pale-yellow grain, are to be envied not ridiculed. (Or a bit of both.) But it isn't just a kind of city-child sentimentality about the great rural spaces that makes me go for cornmeal here. I love its subtly sweet graininess – both wholesome and comforting at the same time, a rare combination – into which the blueberries pop jammily, their juices oozing into the golden gritty crumb.

I beat my drum quite loudly enough ([see here](#)) to feel I shouldn't need to raise the matter again here, but nevertheless, a reminder: a home-baked muffin is not a dome-headed muffin. And the extra heft given by the cornmeal ensures a decidedly flat-topped muffin, but also makes that crusty top rather deliciously chewy above the loose-textured, berry-studded sponge.

As with most muffins, you get the best of them if you eat them while still warm.

Makes 12

150g plain flour

100g cornmeal

2 teaspoons baking powder

½ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

150g caster sugar

125ml vegetable oil or other flavourless oil

125ml buttermilk, or plain runny yogurt

1 egg

100g blueberries

1 x 12-bun muffin tin

♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6 and line a muffin tin with papers.

♥ In a large bowl, mix the flour, cornmeal, baking powder, bicarb and sugar.

♥ In a measuring jug or bowl, pour in the oil and buttermilk (or yogurt) and whisk or fork in the egg.

♥ Stir the oil mixture into the bowl of dry ingredients – remembering that lumpiness is a good thing when making muffins – and fold half the blueberries into your thick golden batter.

♥ Divide this batter between each muffin case (they will be about two-thirds full) and drop the remaining blueberries on top; you should have about 3 for the top of each muffin.

♥ Cook in the oven for 15–20 minutes, till a cake tester comes out cleanish (obviously it will be stained if it hits a berry). Leave the muffins in the tin on a wire rack for 5 minutes, then remove the muffins, in their cases, to the wire rack to cool a little (not too much) before you serve or eat them.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Best eaten on day of making but muffins can be baked up to 1 day ahead and stored in airtight container, layered with baking parchment. Reheat in warm oven for 5–8 minutes before serving. Will keep for 2 days in a cool place.

FREEZE NOTE

Can be frozen in airtight container, layered with baking parchment, for up to 2 months. Defrost for 3–4 hours on a wire rack at room temperature and reheat as above.





Red velvet cupcakes

I first made these cupcakes at the request of my step-daughter Phoebe, a good few years ago, but such was their popularity *chez moi* (not that French should be spoken around them) that I have been at it ever since. There isn't space to go into their history here, but whatever the origins of this cake, making a batter that includes such an amount of food colouring takes an act of faith. I don't feel there's any way I could talk you into it were you not ready, but I suppose you could always use some grated beetroot as a natural substitute, if you insist.

Some recipes specify 6 tablespoons (that's 90ml) of red food colouring, but one's got to draw the line somewhere, and I prefer food colouring pastes, not least because you always need less for the same intensity of colour. But I should warn you that the heaped tablespoonful of red food colouring paste specified ([see here](#)) is more or less the entire contents of one of the little tubs. I make these so often (and Christmas-red, whatever the season, is my red of choice) that I've now managed to get my hands on a catering size jumbo-tub, and have also learnt to keep a pair of [CSI gloves](#) to hand.

If you want to make this as one big cake (though I won't go so far as to suggest you make it in the shape of an armadillo, as per the groom's cake in the film *Steel Magnolias*) as I did for my daughter Mimi's sixteenth birthday (yes, I gulp as I say that; only yesterday, it seems, I was writing about making the Barbie cake for her fourth), then know that the amounts ([see here](#)) make enough batter for 2 x 25cm cake tins filled not too deep, and enough icing to squidge them together and decorate the top.

Talking of the icing, when I make these for Mimi, I am under strict instructions to do without the cream cheese, making just a butter icing; the [buttery cream-cheese frosting](#) I make for Phoebe is not, however, authentic either. The icing

traditionally used to top these vibrant little numbers is called a cooked flour frosting. Well, yes ... and now are you glad I didn't go into detail about their *fons et origo*?



Makes 24

for the cupcakes:

250g plain flour

2 x 15ml tablespoons cocoa powder, sifted

2 teaspoons baking powder

½ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

100g soft unsalted butter

200g caster sugar

1 x heaped 15ml tablespoon Christmas-red paste food colouring

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

2 eggs

175ml buttermilk

1 teaspoon cider vinegar or other vinegar

2 x 12-bun muffin tins

♥ Preheat the oven to 170°C/gas mark 3 and line the muffin tins with paper cases.

♥ Combine the flour, cocoa, baking powder and bicarb in a bowl.

♥ In another bowl, cream the butter and sugar, beating well, and when you have a soft, pale mixture beat in the food colouring – yes, all of it – and the vanilla.

♥ Into this vividly coloured mixture, still beating, add 1 spoonful of the dried ingredients, then 1 egg, followed by some more dried ingredients, then the other egg, followed by the rest of the dried ingredients.

♥ Finally, beat in the buttermilk and vinegar and divide this extraordinary batter between the 24 cases. Bake in the oven for about 20 minutes by which time the redcurrant-sorbet-coloured batter will have morphed into a more sombre, but still juicily tinted, sponge – more maroon acrylic than red velvet, to be honest.

♥ Leave them to cool on a wire rack and do not ice with the frosting ([see here](#)) till absolutely cold.



Buttery cream-cheese frosting

As I've said earlier, you can use all butter rather than half butter and half cream cheese for this icing. Equally, decorate as pleases you, too. I like to use red sugar (sometimes called red sanding sugar) to hint at their deeply toned interiors, and some dark chocolate in a vain attempt at something a little more elegant. For the children (whose taste I am anyway pandering to here) I advise, instead, a shake of some chocolate-flavoured sprinkles from a jar.

for the icing:

500g icing sugar (no need to sift if using a processor)

125g cream cheese

125g soft unsalted butter

1 teaspoon cider vinegar or lemon juice

chocolate sprinkles and red sugar, for decoration (optional)

- ♥ Put the icing sugar into a processor and whizz to remove lumps.
- ♥ Add the cream cheese and butter and process to mix. Pour in the cider vinegar (or lemon juice) and process again to make a smooth icing.
- ♥ Ice each cupcake, using a teaspoon or small spatula.
- ♥ Decorate with chocolate sprinkles and red sugar, or as desired.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The cupcakes can be baked 2 days ahead and stored, un-iced, layered with baking parchment in airtight containers. The frosting can be made 1 day ahead: cover with clingfilm and refrigerate; remove from fridge 1–2 hours before needed to allow to come to room temperature then beat briefly before using. Best iced and eaten on same day but iced cupcakes can be kept in fridge in airtight container for up to 1 day. Bring to room temperature before serving.

FREEZE NOTE

Un-iced cupcakes can be frozen, layered with baking parchment, in airtight containers for up to 2 months. Defrost for 3–4 hours on a wire rack at room temperature. Frosting can be frozen separately in airtight container for up to 3 months; defrost overnight in fridge then bring to room temperature and beat briefly before use.



Gooseberry and elderflower crumble

I am never more serene than when I have a crumble baking in the oven. True, all things are relative and serenity is not one of my virtues, but the slow, rhythmic, repetitive activity of rubbing butter into flour – pressing the pads of index and middle fingers flutteringly against the more hardworking pad of the thumb – is in itself calming. More reassuring still is that old-fashioned, Sunday-lunch smell, with its sweet promise of pudding to come. In my book, there is no such thing as a bad crumble, but some are better than others. What I'm after is the juicy contrast between slightly tart fruit and the melting butteriness of the rubble on top of, and sinking just a little into, it. For me this means rhubarb – and we've been there in the past – or gooseberry. Both can justifiably lay claim to the crown, but gooseberry is perhaps the true queen of crumbles.

Admittedly, the gooseberry, with its almost otherworldly aspect, that strange lit-up acid greenness, has a real blink-and-you'll-miss-it season, but that is what underscores my compulsion to cook with it when the fruit is readily available. Of course, you could always freeze them – first loose, on a tray, then stashed in well-tied freezer bags – and make this crumble at will throughout the year, but it's not quite the same. (Though I say that as someone who has been known to buy imported strawberries in February.)

So, by all means, use the recipe that follows as a blueprint, taking whatever fruit you may use in the goosegogs' stead up to a kilo if there is much trimming and peeling to be done. The tarter the substitute fruit the better, and do reduce the sugar if good sense indicates it. The elderflower cordial here is to perfume the gooseberries – it is, after all, the traditional pairing – and for other fruit I would add a small slosh of vanilla extract instead.

One final note: please do not feel that if you don't make the crumble topping by hand, you are unworthy of creating it. On days when time or mood just do not allow for even 5 minutes with my hands in a bowl, I routinely use my freestanding mixer to do the work.

Serves 8

850g gooseberries

50g caster sugar

1 x 15ml tablespoon (15g) unsalted butter

1 x 15ml tablespoon elderflower cordial

for the crumble topping:

200g plain flour

2 teaspoons baking powder

150g cold unsalted butter, diced

100g demerara sugar, plus 1 tablespoon for sprinkling

1 x pie dish approx. 21cm diameter (25cm outer edge to edge) x 6cm deep

♥ Preheat the oven to 190°C/gas mark 5 and slip in a baking sheet or swiss roll tin.

♥ Hull the gooseberries and put them in a wide pan over a gentle heat with the caster sugar, tablespoon of butter and elderflower cordial for about 5 minutes, shaking the pan every now and again, until the butter has melted and the gooseberries are slicked with glossy, fragrant jade juices.

♥ Decant these to your pie dish and put to one side while you make the topping.

♥ If you're **making this topping by hand**, put the flour and baking powder in a large bowl, shake or fork to mix, then add the cold, cubed butter and rub it in, lightly, between the pads of your fingers. Or just mix in using the flat paddle of a **freestanding mixer**. Stop when you have a soft, sandy mixture with the odd larger, almost broad-bean shaped, lump.

♥ Add the 100g demerara sugar and use a fork to mix in gently – a spoon or mixer or even your fingers might make the butter start to clump.

♥ Top the waiting fruit in its pie dish with the crumble mixture, making sure it is evenly dispersed right up to the inner edges of the dish. Some bubbling up of fruity juices is inevitable – and, indeed, desirable – but it's good to guard against overflowing.

♥ Scatter the remaining tablespoonful of demerara sugar over the top then pop the crumble in the oven on the heated-up baking sheet, and bake for 35–45 minutes until the top is lightly browned. This is best served when it has been left to stand for 10 minutes, and eaten with cold, thick but still runny cream.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The crumble can be assembled 1 day ahead. Cover with clingfilm and store in fridge until needed. Bake as directed, but allowing an extra 5–10 minutes' cooking time and check it is piping hot in the centre.

FREEZE NOTE

Crumble topping can be made and frozen in resealable plastic bags, for up to 3 months. Sprinkle topping direct from freezer over the fruit, breaking up large lumps with your hands. The assembled but unbaked crumble can be frozen, wrapped in double layer of clingfilm and a layer of foil, for up to 3 months. Defrost for 24 hours in fridge and bake as above.

Devil's food cake

Forget the name, this cake is heavenly. The crumb is tender, the filling and frosting luscious. When I made it one Friday, I expected my children, resident food critics much in the mould of The Grim Eater, to find it too dark, too rich, not sweet enough: you get the gist. Instead, I came down on Saturday morning to find nothing but an empty, chocolate-smearred cake stand and a trail of crumbs.

You may prefer to prepare this the other way round from me, and get the frosting underway before you make the cakes. Either way, read the recipe through before you start cooking (I shouldn't have to remind) to get the shape of things in your head, not least because the frosting is softer, stickier than you may be used to. While you're making it, don't panic. The mixture will seem very runny for ages once the chocolate has melted and you will think you have a liquid gleaming glaze, beautiful but unfit for purpose; leave it for about an hour, as stipulated, though, and it will be perfect and spreadable. It never quite dries to the touch, but this is, in part, what makes the cake so darkly luscious. Goo here is good.



Serves 10–12

for the cake:

50g best-quality cocoa powder, sifted

100g dark muscovado sugar

250ml boiling water

125g soft unsalted butter, plus some for greasing

150g caster sugar

225g plain flour

½ teaspoon baking powder

½ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

2 eggs

for the frosting:

125ml water

30g dark muscovado sugar

175g unsalted butter, cubed

300g best-quality dark chocolate, finely chopped

2 x 20cm sandwich tins

♥ Preheat the oven to 180°C/gas mark 4. Line the bottoms of both sandwich tins with baking parchment and butter the sides.

♥ Put the cocoa and 100g dark muscovado sugar into a bowl with a bit of space to spare, and pour in the boiling water. Whisk to mix, then set aside.

♥ Cream the butter and caster sugar together, beating well until pale and fluffy; I find this easiest with a freestanding mixer, but by hand wouldn't kill you.

♥ While this is going on – or as soon as you stop if you're mixing by hand – stir the flour, baking powder and bicarb together in another bowl, and set aside for a moment.

♥ Dribble the vanilla extract into the creamed butter and sugar – mixing all the while – then drop in 1 egg, quickly followed

by a scoopful of flour mixture, then the second egg.

♥ Keep mixing and incorporate the rest of the dried ingredients for the cake, then finally mix and fold in the cocoa mixture, scraping its bowl well with a spatula.

♥ Divide this fabulously chocolatey batter between the 2 prepared tins and put in the oven for about 30 minutes, or until a cake tester comes out clean. Take the tins out and leave them on a wire rack for 5–10 minutes, before turning the cakes out to cool.

♥ But as soon as the cakes are in the oven, get started on your frosting: put the water, 30g muscovado sugar and 175g butter in a pan over a low heat to melt.

♥ When this mixture begins to bubble, take the pan off the heat and add the chopped chocolate, swirling the pan so that all the chocolate is hit with heat, then leave for a minute to melt before whisking till smooth and glossy.

♥ Leave for about 1 hour, whisking now and again – when you're passing the pan – by which time the cakes will be cooled, and ready for the frosting.

♥ Set one of the cooled cakes, with its top side down, on a cake stand or plate, and spread with about a third of the frosting, then top that with the second cake, regular way up, and spread the remaining frosting over the top and sides, swirling away with your spatula. You can go for a smooth look, but I never do and probably couldn't.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The cake layers can be baked 1 day ahead and assembled before serving: wrap tightly in clingfilm and store in airtight container. Iced cake will keep for 2–3 days in airtight container in a cool place.

FREEZE NOTE

Un-iced cake layers can be frozen on day of baking, each wrapped in double layer of clingfilm and a layer of foil, for up to 3 months. Defrost for 3–4 hours on wire rack at room temperature.



Chocolate chip cookies

It seems strange that I've managed to write seven books (I don't count this one, since at time of writing I feel to include it might jinx it) without one plain chocolate chip cookie (by which I mean a plain cookie with chocolate chips in it). It's true that the Totally Chocolate Chocolate Chip Cookie made an appearance once, and it's only buoyed up by its success that I've felt confident enough to create this one. For here's the thing: you'd think a plain cookie with a few chocolate chips folded into the mixture would be a simple matter. It's not. It's never difficult to make, just difficult to get right. I may be picky, but to my mind, or my mouth, a cookie that's too crisp feels dry and disappointing and a cookie that's too chewy tastes like dough. I want a bit of tender, fudgy chewiness but an edge of crisp bite, too.

I've tried. I can't tell you how often I've tried. Many cookies have been baked, and many have been eaten. What do they say? Dirty work, but someone's got to do it. And the cookie recipe that follows is happy evidence that my hard work has not been for naught.



Makes approx. 14

150g soft unsalted butter

125g soft light brown sugar

100g caster sugar

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

1 egg, fridge-cold

1 egg yolk, fridge-cold

300g flour

½ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

1 x 326g packet milk chocolate morsels or choc chips

1 x large baking sheet

♥ Preheat the oven to 170°C/gas mark 3. Line a baking sheet with baking parchment.

♥ Melt the butter and let it cool a bit. Put the brown and white sugars into a bowl, pour the slightly cooled, melted butter over them and beat together.

♥ Beat in the vanilla, the cold egg and cold egg yolk until your mixture is light and creamy.

♥ Slowly mix in the flour and bicarb until just blended, then fold in the chocolate chips.

♥ Scoop the cookie dough into an American quarter-cup measure or a 60ml round ice-cream scoop and drop onto the prepared baking sheet, plopping the cookies down about 8cm apart. You will need to make these in 2 batches, keeping the bowl of cookie dough in the fridge between batches.

♥ Bake for 15–17 minutes in the preheated oven, or until the edges are lightly toasted. Cool on the baking sheet for 5 minutes before transferring to wire racks.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The cookies can be made up to 3 days ahead and stored in an airtight container. Will keep for a total of 5 days.

FREEZE NOTE

The baked cookies can be frozen in airtight container or resealable bags for up to 3 months. Defrost for 2–3 hours at room temperature. Unbaked cookie dough can be scooped onto parchment-lined baking sheets and frozen until solid. Transfer frozen dough to resealable bags and freeze for up to 3 months. Bake direct from frozen, as directed in recipe but adding extra 2–3 minutes to baking time.

And you could always freeze the spare egg white (bag it, label it and freeze for up to 3 months) for [meringues](#) at a later date. Use within 24 hours of defrosting.





Baked egg custard

There are some smells that make me almost weepy with gratitude. This custard, as it bakes tenderly in the oven, filling the house with the scent of nutmeg and vanilla and nursery-sweet egginess, is one, bringing, as it does, instant, airborne comfort.

Food that tastes like this – like an ideal childhood, smooth and sustaining – should be simple to make, and this is. There are two steps that might give you pause, not because either of them is difficult but because they could be thought – erroneously – to be dispensable. I'm referring to the straining of the egg, sugar and milk mixture into the dish, and the placing of the dish in a water-bath. Don't even think about giving either a miss, for these two steps are what give the custard its melt-in-the-mouth softness.

I think this is at its best cooked in a relatively small dish (about 17cm diameter) but I realize this is not a standard pie dish size. You can use one, but in a wider dish (the regulation issue is 22cm diameter) the custard is shallower and will need to bake for ½ hour less than stipulated ([see here](#)). I can't promise the less deep version will be as good, but it's still worth the effort, for cook and eater alike.

One final note: I specify 568ml full-fat milk (don't even think of using semi-skimmed) because that's still – a throwback to Imperial times – how the old 1 pint is sold in the UK. If you have a litre or so in the house, just measure out 600ml; and I've cooked it with 500ml just as successfully ...

Serves 4, or 2 greedy people eating it warm once and cold later

butter, for greasing

568ml (or 1pt) full-fat milk

4 eggs

50g caster sugar

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

fresh nutmeg

1 x round ovenproof dish approx. 17 x 6cm

♥ Preheat the oven to 140°C/gas mark 1 and butter a round ovenproof dish. Pour the milk into a saucepan and heat until hot but not actually boiling. Or, if you like, you can pour it into a jug and zap it in the microwave.

♥ In a bowl that's large enough to take the milk as well, whisk the eggs, sugar and vanilla. Then, still whisking, pour in the hot milk.

♥ Sit the buttered dish in a roasting tin to make a *bain marie* – your water-bath (see next step). Strain the custard mixture through a sieve into the buttered dish, then grate some nutmeg generously over the top.

♥ Now pour freshly boiled water into the tin, to come about halfway up the baking dish, and gingerly (you don't want slopping and spillage) put it into the oven and cook for 1½ hours. You want the custard set but only just. Take the tin out of the oven, and the dish out of the tin, and let the custard cool a little before eating. I find a baked custard at its seductive best when it's warm rather than hot. I like it cold, as well, especially with a few raspberries, but don't put it in the fridge: that will ruin it. Or it does for me.



Coffee toffee meringues

It's hard to believe that out of nothing more than egg whites and sugar comes a creation quite as spectacular as a meringue. It seems miraculous, but then I am no specialist in the chemistry of cooking. Eating is my thing, and I am simply happy to wallow in the texture-sensation that is the contrast between crisp outer shell and a centre that has still a bit of squidge to it. Left plain, and served with some tart berries and a dollop of softly whipped cream, a meringue is hard to beat. But that's not to say we shouldn't try.

The coffee-toffee route almost drove itself: both the sound of the words and the taste of the combination give me pleasure, and had to be fused for me, in meringue form. I add a little brown sugar to the meringue mixture, both for mellowness and to deepen the manilla tint, and the toffee sauce is rich in it, too. Go sparingly with the sauce: you want the merest dribble, really. Still, although the meringues are obviously sweet, the coffee taste keeps the sugar in check and allows for the absurd addition of a toffee sauce in the first place.

You don't have to add the liqueur to the sauce or top the buff-coloured meringues with a sprinkling of chopped hazelnuts, but it works for me.

Makes 8–10

for the meringues:

200g caster sugar

50g soft light brown sugar

2 teaspoons instant espresso powder

pinch cream of tartar

4 egg whites

100g toasted chopped hazelnuts, for topping (optional)

for the toffee sauce:

1 x 15ml tablespoon (15g) butter

75g golden syrup

25g soft light brown sugar

60ml double cream

2 teaspoons Frangelico hazelnut liqueur (optional)

for the filling:

600ml double cream

1 x large baking sheet

♥ To make the meringues: preheat the oven to 140°C/gas mark 1 and combine the 200g caster sugar and 50g light brown sugar, the coffee powder and cream of tartar in a bowl, and set aside.

♥ Whisk the egg whites in a grease-free bowl (the purists' choice is copper, but I am happy with stainless steel) until they are beyond foamy and soft peaks have started to form.

♥ Begin to add your sugar mix 1 tablespoonful at a time, whisking all the while, until you have a glossy thick meringue the colour of oyster silk lingerie.

♥ Line a baking sheet with baking parchment or Bake-O-Glide, and spoon out dollops of meringue (about 2 big dessert spoonfuls) to give roughly 6cm-diameter circles of meringue. Spike or fluff the tops as you go to give texture; you should get 8–10 meringues.

♥ Sprinkle the top of each meringue with ½ teaspoon chopped hazelnuts or so, saving the rest for later.

♥ Put in the preheated oven for about 45 minutes, by which time the meringues should be dry on the outside, but still gooey in the middle, and a little fragile to the touch. Take out of the oven but do not remove them from the baking sheet.

♥ To make the toffee sauce: melt the butter, golden syrup and light brown sugar in a pan over a low heat, swirling gently (but not stirring) occasionally, then bring to a boil and let it bubble for 2 minutes.

♥ Take the pan off the heat and whisk in the 60ml cream and the liqueur (if using). Pour into a small heatproof jug – you won't have more than about 150ml here – to get cold.

♥ When you are ready to assemble the meringues, whip the 600ml double cream until firm but not stiff. Crush a dent – don't worry about making a splintering mess – into the top of each meringue, then split it a little and fill from above with a dollop of whipped cream. Drizzle on some of the sauce and sprinkle with some more chopped hazelnuts.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The meringues can be made 1 day ahead and stored in airtight container. Sauce can be made 1 day ahead: store in fridge in a bowl or jug covered with clingfilm. Remove from fridge 1–2 hours before it's needed and allow to come to room temperature.



Swedish summer cake

My greed doesn't confine itself to eating food. I love reading about it, too. My collection of cookery books is now nearing 4,000, which gives you some indication of my mania, but doesn't tell the whole story. In addition to the books I buy compulsively – once you have a collection, there is no good argument, ever, for *not* adding to it – there are the pages I tear out of magazines and the scribbled notes I take when I eat at friends' houses. And my most treasured are the recipes people give me that have been passed down through their family. When I say “give” I should be a little more honest: I hector and badger, especially if I think someone may be able to hand over a recipe with particular significance for me.

Just as living in Italy in my late teens started me on a lifetime's love of Italian cooking, so summering in Scandinavia between the ages of eight and twelve has left me with a profound nostalgia for Scandinavian food. When I mentioned this once (and even dared try a little long-forgotten Swedish) to Anna Engbrink, who was working at Scott's, a restaurant in London I seemed to visit rather too often (my husband being a chain-smoker and this being one of the few eateries with outside space to smoke in), she told me about her grandmother's cooking. I pressed her, week in, week out, for her grandmother's recipe for a cake they seem to make all over Scandinavia to celebrate Midsummer's Day, and after an awful lot of begging, she produced this. Or rather, a version of the recipe that follows. Anna's grandmother, unsurprisingly, was Swedish; but those long-ago big-skied summers of mine were spent mostly in Norway, and so I instinctively changed the recipe slightly to give it a taste of the Norwegian Midsummer *bløtkake* I remember. *Bløtkake* simply means “wet cake” and my custard is a lot runnier than Anna's grandmother, or any other Swedish (or Danish for all I know) cook, would make it. Not only do I prefer this, but it's a lot quicker and simpler.

Not that any of this recipe is actually complicated, but I don't deny its assembly can be fiddly, or that it reads a lot harder than it cooks. This is always the way with recipes that are process-heavy, even if the individual processes are not in themselves demanding. I've given each part – cake, custard, assembly – its own ingredients list, because it's easier to cook that way; but to make shopping more straightforward, I'd advise you to read through all three parts first and jot down what you need.

When I read the original recipe given me by Anna, I was touched most by the appended note that said “my grandmother used to make us pick the strawberries fresh out of her garden while she made the bases”. All very Elvira Madigan, I know, but more than that, it reminded me of going into the woods behind the house where we used to stay in Norway, to pick blueberries for breakfast.

Rest assured, that if you, like me, have no strawberries growing in the garden, indeed no garden, this cake will bring the sweet scent of a Scandinavian summer straight to your kitchen.



The cake cuts into 8–10 generous slices

*for the **vanilla custard***

I make this up first, indeed a day before I get on with the cake, because splitting the processes lightens the overall burden, and you need this properly cold before you use it. Since it takes under 5 minutes to make, whenever you do it – providing you leave time for it to cool, about 3 hours – it won't be a major hassle.

If you hate waste as much as I do, then freeze the egg whites (for up to 3 months), marking the bag that there are 2 whites inside (or you may forget how many), then defrost in the fridge and use them within 24 hours of defrosting, to make meringues at a later date. (You could knock up half a batch, i.e. 4 or 5, of the [Coffee Toffee Meringues](#), whenever the mood takes you or the occasion lends itself.)

2 egg yolks

2 x 15ml tablespoons caster sugar

2 teaspoons cornflour or potato flour

250ml full-fat milk

½ vanilla pod or 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

♥ If using the vanilla pod, put everything in a pot over a low to medium heat, stirring non-stop, until it starts to thicken. *Do not let it boil.* If using the vanilla extract, as I tend to, put everything in except the extract and proceed as above.

♥ When it starts to thicken – just over 3 minutes at medium heat, but just under 5 if you keep the flame cautiously low – take it off the heat. Remove the vanilla pod, if using.

♥ Transfer to a cold bowl, mix in the vanilla extract, if using, and continue stirring until it is a little cooler, then cover with clingfilm – touching the surface of the custard – to stop the custard getting a skin when it's cold. Or wet a piece of baking parchment and place that right on top of the custard.

for the cake

This is much easier when made with the assistance of gadgetry, be it a hand-held electric whisk or freestanding mixer; but since the existence of the cake pre-dates the invention of either, it can obviously be made with a wire whisk and elbow grease.

3 eggs

250g caster sugar

90ml hot water from a recently boiled kettle

1½ teaspoons baking powder

150g plain flour

butter, for greasing

1 x 23cm springform or other round cake tin

♥ Preheat the oven to 180°C/gas mark 4 and line the bottom of the cake tin with baking parchment and butter the sides.

♥ Whisk the eggs and sugar together briskly until pale and moussy and more than doubled in volume, then, still whisking

but slightly more gently, add the hot water.

♥ Mix the baking powder and flour in a separate bowl and gradually whisk these in, making sure there are no lumps. You may need to stop once or twice for a scrape-down.

♥ Pour and scrape the mixture into the prepared tin and bake in the preheated oven for approximately 30 minutes, or until it is golden, well-risen and a cake tester comes out clean.

♥ Let the cake stand in the tin on a wire rack for 5–10 minutes before – carefully – unmoulding and leaving it to cool on the rack.



to *assemble* the cake

If, like me, you are clumsy, this is the hardest bit. On the other hand, any clumsiness is either easily concealed or adds to the homespun charm of it all. It pays to be positive here. What I mean is that, if you do not have excellent knife skills or a steady hand, you may find it hard to cut this cake horizontally into 3 equal layers. Don't worry. I broke one of the layers while cutting the cake you see on the previous picture, but once it's sandwiched with berries and custard cream, this doesn't really show. Perhaps it leans a little in one direction, so that the custard drips more from one side than another, but I love that look. I don't want this cake neat, which is just as well.

750g good strawberries

2–3 teaspoons caster sugar, depending on sweetness of berries

500ml double cream

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

♥ Put 250g strawberries to one side, and start preparing the remaining 500g. Hull these, halve the smaller berries and quarter the larger ones, dropping them into a bowl. Sprinkle with sugar – how much depends on how tart or sweet the berries – shake and leave until they glisten: 10 minutes will be just fine, though 1 hour would make them juicier and glossier.

♥ Whisk the double cream and vanilla extract until it holds its peaked shape when the beaters are lifted out.

♥ Fold a third of the whisked cream into the fully cooled [vanilla custard](#) you made earlier.

♥ When the cake, too, is thoroughly cool, take out a bread knife and, courageously, slice the cake horizontally into 3 layers. It wouldn't be the end of the world, I suppose, if you simply cut it into 2 layers.

♥ Put one cake layer on its serving platter or stand, and top with half the vanilla-custard-cream, then arrange half the

macerating strawberries on top, concentrating more on the outer edges of the cake than the centre. Top with the second layer of sponge and repeat as before with the rest of the custard-cream and cut berries.

♥ Now set the third cake layer on top and cover with the waiting whipped cream, arranging the 250g reserved strawberries as desired: I hull most of them, and cut some, but like to have a few whole, unhulled berries lying plumply and decoratively here and there.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The custard can be made 1 day ahead, cooled and refrigerated immediately. The strawberries can be cut 1 day ahead and stored in a covered bowl in fridge; remove from fridge and sprinkle with sugar 1 hour before serving.

FREEZE NOTE

The unadorned cake layers can be frozen on day of baking, for up to 1 month. Slice cake and reassemble with a circle of baking parchment between each layer. Wrap cake in double layer of clingfilm and 1 layer of foil. Defrost for 3–4 hours on a wire rack at room temperature and use the same day.

Marmalade pudding cake

Now, this *is* a beauty. I don't mean flash or fancy – rather the opposite; there is something austerely handsome about its appearance, and yet gorgeously warming about its taste. But then, this laid-back Sunday-lunch pudding is what kitchen food is all about. I'm happy to leave the picture-perfect plate-decoration dessert to the professional chef and patissier. When I want to eat one, I'll go to a restaurant. That way, everyone's happy.

I don't want to be too prescriptive about this marmalade pudding cake – which has the surprisingly light texture of a steamed sponge – as it doesn't seem in the spirit of things. I love the bitter edge of a thick-shred, dark marmalade and so tend to go for a proper, glamorously auburn, tawny one here; if this is too full-on for you, choose a fine-shred marmalade, instead.

Serves 6–8

250g soft unsalted butter, plus some for greasing

75g caster sugar

75g light brown muscovado sugar

150g marmalade, plus 75g for the glaze

225g plain flour

½ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

1 teaspoon baking powder

4 eggs

zest and juice 1 orange (reserve juice ½ orange for the glaze)

1 x 24cm square Pyrex or other ovenproof dish

- ♥ Preheat the oven to 180°C/gas mark 4, and butter the ovenproof dish.
- ♥ Put the 75g marmalade and juice of ½ orange into a small pan and set aside to make a glaze later.
- ♥ Put all the other ingredients for the pudding batter into a food processor, process them and then pour and scrape the batter into the buttered dish, smoothing the top. **If you're not using a processor**, cream the butter and both sugars by hand or in a freestanding mixer, beat in the marmalade followed by the dry ingredients, then the eggs and finally the orange zest and juice.
- ♥ Put in the oven and cook for about 40 minutes – though give a first check after ½ hour – by which time the sponge mixture will have risen and a cake tester will come out cleanish. Remove from the oven and leave in the dish.
- ♥ Warm the glaze mixture in the pan until melted together, then paint the top of the sponge, letting the chunks or slivers of peel be your sole, unglinting decoration on top of the mutely gleaming pudding-cake. Know that this sponge will keep its orange-scented warmth for quite a while once out of the oven, so you could make it before you sit down for the main course.



♥ Use a large spoon or cake slice (or both) to serve, and put a jug of custard or cream on the table to eat with.

Making leftovers right

Orange and blackberry trifle

I urge you to try and keep some of this cake back and, once it's cold, wrap it well and keep it in the deep-freeze (in an airtight container for up to 1 month) until you need something effortless for a supper party. All you need do (for exact measurements and step-by-simple-step guide) is to defrost for 3–4 hours at room temperature, arrange some slices on a

plate, douse with *orange* juice and liqueur and top with blackberries strewn with orange zest.

But I admit it's hard to override the temptation to keep (for up to 2 days in the fridge, covered with clingfilm) whatever pudding-cake may be left from its first outing and heat up the odd bowlful or just eat it cold straight from the dish.



Lemon polenta cake

gluten free

This cake is a sort of Anglo-Italian amalgam. The flat, plain disc is reminiscent of the confections that sit geometrically arranged in patisserie windows in Italy; the sharp, syrupy sogginess borrows from the classic English teatime favourite, the lemon drizzle cake. It is a good marriage: I love Italian cooking in all respects save one – I find their cakes both too dry and too sweet. Here, though, the flavoursome grittiness of the polenta and tender rubble of ground almonds provide so much better a foil for the wholly desirable dampness than does the usual flour.

But there is more to it than that. By some alchemical process, the lemon highlights the eggy butteriness of the cake, making it rich and sharp at the same time. If you were to try to imagine what lemon curd would taste like in cake form, this would be it.

Although I am greedily happy to slice and cram messily straight into my mouth, letting damp clumps fall where they will, this cake is best eaten – in company at least – with spoon and fork. Either way, consider it a contender for teatime comfort and supper-party celebration alike.

Cuts into 16 slices (*though I wouldn't presume people will eat just 1 each ...*)

for the cake:

200g soft unsalted butter, plus some for greasing

200g caster sugar

200g ground almonds

100g fine polenta/cornmeal

1½ teaspoons baking powder (gluten-free if required)

3 eggs

zest 2 lemons (save the juice for the syrup)

for the syrup:

juice 2 lemons (see above)

125g icing sugar

1 x 23cm springform or other round cake tin



♥ Line the base of your cake tin with baking parchment and grease its sides lightly with butter. Preheat the oven to 180°C/gas mark 4.

- ♥ Beat the butter and sugar till pale and whipped, either by hand in a bowl with a wooden spoon, or using a freestanding mixer.
- ♥ Mix together the almonds, polenta and baking powder, and beat some of this into the butter-sugar mixture, followed by 1 egg, then alternate dry ingredients and eggs, beating all the while.
- ♥ Finally, beat in the lemon zest and pour, spoon or scrape the mixture into your prepared tin and bake in the oven for about 40 minutes. It may seem wibbly but, if the cake is cooked, a cake tester should come out cleanish and, most significantly, the edges of the cake will have begun to shrink away from the sides of the tin. Remove from the oven to a wire cooling rack, but leave in its tin.
- ♥ Make the syrup by boiling together the lemon juice and icing sugar in a smallish saucepan. Once the icing sugar's dissolved into the juice, you're done. Prick the top of the cake all over with a cake tester (a skewer would be too destructive), pour the warm syrup over the cake, and leave to cool before taking it out of its tin.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The cake can be baked up to 3 days ahead and stored in airtight container in a cool place. Will keep for total of 5–6 days.

FREEZE NOTE

The cake can be frozen on its lining paper as soon as cooled, wrapped in double layer of clingfilm and a layer of foil, for up to 1 month. Defrost for 3–4 hours at room temperature.

Coffee and walnut layer cake

Neither of my grandmothers, nor indeed my mother, was a baker but this cake is nonetheless *the* cake of my childhood. When I was little, I used to make it for my younger sister's birthday every year, beating away vigorously with my bowl and wooden spoon. This, however, is a simplified version: everything just goes into the processor.

The cake I made and ate when young was more milky coffee than espresso, but here I've bolstered it without consideration to my children. If that's your constituency or concern here, or if you yourself have a nostalgic longing for muted sweet comfort, replace the 4 teaspoons of instant espresso powder with 2 teaspoons of instant coffee granules dissolved in a tablespoonful of boiling water.



cut into 8 generous slices

for the sponge:

50g walnut pieces

225g caster sugar

225g soft unsalted butter, plus some for greasing

200g plain flour

4 teaspoons instant espresso powder

2½ teaspoons baking powder

½ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

4 eggs

1–2 x 15ml tablespoons milk

for the buttercream frosting:

350g icing sugar

175g soft unsalted butter

**2½ teaspoons instant espresso powder, dissolved in 1 x
15ml tablespoon boiling water**

25g walnut halves, to decorate

2 x 20cm sandwich tins

♥ Preheat the oven to 180°C/gas mark 4. Butter the 2 sandwich tins and line the base of each with baking parchment.

♥ Put the walnut pieces and sugar into a **food processor** and blitz to a fine nutty powder. Add the 225g butter, flour, 4 teaspoons espresso powder, baking powder, bicarb and eggs and process to a smooth batter. Add the milk, pouring it down the funnel with the motor still running, or just pulsing, to loosen the cake mixture: it should be a soft, dropping consistency, so add more milk if you need to. (**If you are making this by hand**, bash the nuts to a rubbly powder with a rolling pin and mix with the dry ingredients; then cream the butter and sugar together, and beat in some dry ingredients and eggs alternately and, finally, the milk.)

♥ Divide the mixture between the 2 lined tins and bake in the oven for 25 minutes, or until the sponge has risen and feels springy to the touch.

♥ Cool the cakes in their tins on a wire rack for about 10 minutes, before turning them out onto the rack and peeling off the baking parchment.

♥ When the sponges are cool, you can make the buttercream. Pulse the icing sugar in the **food processor** until it is lump free, then add the butter and process to make a smooth icing.

♥ Dissolve the instant espresso powder in 1 tablespoon boiling water and add it while still hot to the processor, pulsing to blend into the buttercream.

♥ If you are doing this **by hand**, sieve the icing sugar and beat it into the butter with a wooden spoon. Then beat in the hot coffee liquid.

♥ Place 1 sponge upside down on your cake stand or serving plate. Spread with about half the icing; then place on it the second sponge, right side up (i.e. so the 2 flat sides of the sponges meet in the middle) and cover the top with the remaining icing in a ramshackle swirly pattern. This cake is all about old-fashioned, rustic charm, so don't worry unduly: however the frosting goes on is fine. Similarly, don't fret about some buttercream oozing out around the middle: that's what makes it look so inviting.

♥ Gently press the walnut halves into the top of the icing all around the edge of the circle about 1 cm apart.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The cake can be baked 1 day ahead and assembled before serving. Wrap cake layers tightly in clingfilm and store in airtight container. The buttercream can be made 1 day ahead: cover with clingfilm and refrigerate; remove from fridge 1–2 hours before needed to allow to come to room temperature then beat briefly before use. The iced cake will keep for 2–3 days in airtight container in a cool place.

FREEZE NOTE

The un-iced cake layers can be frozen on day of baking, each wrapped in double layer of clingfilm and a layer of foil, for up to 3 months. Defrost for 3–4 hours on wire rack at room

temperature. Icing can be frozen separately in airtight container for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge then bring to room temperature and beat briefly before use.



Venetian carrot cake

gluten free & dairy free

I long thought that carrot cake was an American invention, until I found out that an early version was made by Venetian Jews in the original ghetto.

This modest disc is very different from the gargantuan US model with its rich sweet cream-cheese filling and topping, and although – apart from a glorious goldenness – it's not much to look at, it is divine to eat. It also has the added virtue of being attractive to those with dairy and gluten allergies: it came to me dairy free, and I decided to use ground almonds in place of flour to keep the gluten-averse brigade happy, too, but more particularly because it tastes perfect to me like this.

Only those with less austere eating habits will care to dollop alongside each damply crumbling wedge of cake my Italianate nod to the American cream-cheese frosting – a soft, rum-flavoured mascarpone cream.

Serves 8–10

for the carrot cake:

3 x 15ml tablespoons toasted pine nuts

2 medium carrots (approx. 200–250g)

75g golden sultanas

60ml rum

150g caster sugar

125ml regular olive oil, plus some for greasing

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

3 eggs

250g ground almonds

½ teaspoon nutmeg

finely grated zest and juice ½ lemon

for the mascarpone cream (optional):

250g mascarpone

2 teaspoons icing sugar

2 x 15ml tablespoons rum

1 x 23cm springform or other round cake tin

♥ Preheat the oven to 180°C/gas mark 4. Line the base of your cake tin with re-usable non-stick [silicone liner](#) or baking parchment and grease the sides with olive oil. Toast the pine nuts by browning in a fatless pan; the oven alone is not enough to scorch out the paleness.

♥ Grate the carrots in a processor (for ease) or with a coarse grater, then sit them on a double layer of kitchen roll and wrap them, to soak up excess liquid.

♥ Put the golden sultanas in a small saucepan with the rum, bring to the boil, turn down and simmer for 3 minutes.

♥ Whisk the sugar and oil – I use my freestanding mixer, but it wouldn't be much of a faff by hand – until creamily and airily mixed.

♥ Whisk in the vanilla extract and eggs and when well whisked, fold in the ground almonds, nutmeg, grated carrots, golden sultanas (with any rum that clings to them) and, finally, the lemon zest and juice.

♥ Scrape the mixture into the prepared cake tin and smooth the surface with a rubber spatula. The batter will be very shallow in the tin.

♥ Sprinkle the toasted pine nuts over the cake and put it into the oven for 30–40 minutes or until the top is risen and golden and a cake tester comes out sticky but more or less clean.

♥ Remove from the oven and let the cake sit in its tin on a wire rack for 10 minutes before unspringing and leaving it on the rack to cool.

♥ Remove the cake to a plate to serve; mix the mascarpone with the icing sugar and rum and put in a bowl to spoon alongside, for those who want.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The cake can be baked up to 3 days ahead. Wrap tightly in clingfilm and store in airtight container in a cool place. Will keep for total of 5–6 days.

FREEZE NOTE

The cake can be frozen (still on base of tin if easier), carefully wrapped in double layer of clingfilm and 1 layer of foil, for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight at room temperature.





Flourless chocolate lime cake

with margarita cream

gluten free

There is something about a flourless chocolate cake that makes it so damn easy to eat. This is one of my fallback favourites for pudding when I have friends over for supper.

Serves 8–10

150g dark chocolate, chopped

150g soft unsalted butter, plus some for greasing

6 eggs

250g caster sugar

100g ground almonds

4 teaspoons best-quality cocoa powder, sifted

zest and juice 1 lime

icing sugar, to dust (optional)

1 x 23cm springform or other round cake tin

♥ Preheat the oven to 180°C/gas mark 4, line the base of your cake tin with baking parchment and butter the sides.

♥ Melt the chocolate and butter together either in a heatproof bowl suspended over a pan of simmering water, or in a microwave (following manufacturer's instructions), then set aside to cool slightly.

♥ Beat the eggs and sugar together until about tripled in volume, pale and moussy. I do this **using a freestanding mixer**, but a **hand-held electric model** would be just fine too; obviously, **by hand** is possible but would demand tenacity and muscle.

- ♥ Mix the ground almonds with the cocoa powder and fold this gently into the egg and sugar mixture, followed by the slightly cooled chocolate and butter. Finally, fold in the zest and juice of your lime.
- ♥ Pour and scrape this mixture into the prepared tin and bake in the preheated oven for 40–45 minutes (though start to check at 35); the cake will be just firm on top, but still have a bit of wobble underneath.
- ♥ Remove from the oven and sit the cake in its tin on a wire rack to cool. Once the first heat has left it, drape a clean tea towel over the cake to stop it getting too crusty, though a cracked and cratered surface is to be expected; it's crunch I'm avoiding here.
- ♥ When cold, unmould, dust with icing sugar if you wish and serve with the jaunty Margarita Cream that follows.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The cake can be baked up to 3 days ahead. Store in airtight container in a cool place and dust with icing sugar just before serving.

FREEZE NOTE

The cake can be frozen (still on base of tin if easier), wrapped carefully in double layer of clingfilm and a layer of foil, for up to 1 month. Defrost overnight at cool room temperature and dust with icing sugar just before serving.

Margarita cream

I love the biting lime notes of this cream. Although its taste plays on the hint of lime in the cake, it also acts as a foil: sharp and light against the rich dark chocolate.

60ml lime juice (2–3 limes), or from a [squeezy bottle](#)

1 x 15ml tablespoon tequila

1 x 15ml tablespoon triple sec or Cointreau

75g icing sugar

250ml double cream

♥ Stir the lime juice, tequila and orange liqueur together in a good-sized bowl, then whisk or fork in the icing sugar and let it dissolve in the sour, strong liquid.

♥ Slowly whisk in the double cream and keep whisking until you have a light, floaty, aerated mixture, then serve with the [Chocolate Lime Cake](#). (Though there's nothing to stop you presenting this in small glasses, on some other occasion, to be eaten like syllabub.)

Buttermilk scones

Last summer, I gave up abroad and took a staycation in Cornwall. Apart from one gorgeous, glinting day, it rained and blustered and blew, and I loved it. There I was, with a fire burning inside, the mackerel-coloured sea swirling outside, living off the fat, that's to say the clotted cream, of the land.

Scones, of course, provide one of the best vehicles for clotted cream, treacle tart being the other (and for an easy recipe for the latter, [see here](#)). The buttermilk in these scones not only gives them a slight tang, all the better to enjoy the jam and cream on top, but is also what yields such a melting, tender crumb.

These scones do look as though they are suffering from cellulite (I dare say we all might if we ate too many of them) but proper scones should not have the smooth-sided denseness of the shop-bought variety. And they are so worth making. Until you have made a batch of scones you won't have any idea how easy they are to throw together. Frankly, it shouldn't take longer than 20 minutes to make and bake them, from start to finish. Even though the process is hardly lengthy enough to warrant cooking them in advance, I like to make up quite a big batch – and this recipe will give you about 18 scones – and freeze some (they thaw incredibly quickly) to produce a near-instant cream tea at some future date.

Makes 17–18

500g plain flour

2 teaspoons bicarbonate of soda

2 teaspoons cream of tartar

2 teaspoons caster sugar

50g unsalted butter

25g soft vegetable shortening

300ml buttermilk

1 egg, beaten, for an egg-wash (optional)

1 x large baking sheet

1 x 6cm fluted scone cutter

♥ Preheat the oven to 220°C/gas mark 7 and line a large baking sheet with baking parchment. Put the flour into a bowl with the bicarb, cream of tartar and sugar.

♥ Chop the butter and the vegetable shortening into pieces and drop them into the flour.

♥ Rub the fats into the flour – or just mix any old how – and then pour in the buttermilk, working everything together to form a dough.

♥ Lightly flour your work surface. Pat the dough down into a round-edged oblong about 4cm thick, then cut out 6cm scones with a fluted cutter. (Mine are never a uniform height, as I pat the dough into its shape without worrying whether it's irregular or not.)

♥ Arrange the scones fairly close together on your lined baking sheet, and brush with beaten egg (to give golden tops) or not, as you wish. Cook for 12 minutes, by which time the scones will be dry on the bottom and have a relatively light feel. Remove them to a wire rack to cool, and serve with clotted cream and Jumbleberry Jam ([see here](#)).

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Scones are best on day they are made but day-old scones can be revived by warming in oven preheated to 150°C/gas mark 2 for 5–10 minutes.

FREEZE NOTE

Baked scones can be frozen in airtight containers or resealable bags for up to 1 month. Defrost for 1 hour at room temperature and warm as above. Unbaked scones can be put on parchment-lined trays and frozen until solid. Transfer to resealable bags and freeze for up to 3 months. Bake direct from frozen, as

directed in recipe, but allowing extra 2–3 minutes' baking time.



Sterilizing Jars

I consider a jar straight from a dishwasher (as long as I haven't touched the inside when I take it out) to be a sterilized jar, but those with higher standards should wash their jars in warm soapy water before rinsing and letting them dry in a cool (140°C/gas mark 1) oven for 10 minutes. If you're putting warm jam or chutney into them, jars must be used warm. If there is vinegar in the recipe, use a jar with a vinegar-proof lid, such as a Kilner or re-usable pickle jar.

Jumbleberry jam

As the name suggests, this jam does not rely on a do-or-die ratio of berry ingredients. Although there is one ratio that *does* matter, which is the equal weight of berries and sugar. When I rootled the recipe out of one of my kitchen notebooks, what I found was a not very helpful scribble that I hope I can illuminate here. In my defence, the whole point of Jumbleberry Jam is that you use up what you've got. It doesn't matter if you don't use all the fruits I've specified below, or if you use them in different proportions. Essentially a recipe is only an honest account of how something was made at a given time. If it helps you feel safer, by all means emulate more closely what I made, and for this I suggest 200g of redcurrants, 150g each of blackcurrants and blackberries, 125g each of raspberries and strawberries and 100g blueberries.

If this jam-making is a mopping up operation (and I did give serious consideration to placing this recipe in the Cook It Better section), then I would probably make half the amount, and not – if you're in the UK – bother with the blueberries since they tend to cost more and have less taste than other local berries in season; but if I have some blueberries knocking around (and I do have a weakness for them in muffins or mixed with pomegranate seeds in yogurt), I'm happy to pluck them from the fridge and toss them in the pan, too.

Remember, though, to weigh the fruit first, and then measure out the sugar to match. If you have a good proportion of redcurrants (which are naturally pectin-rich), then you may prefer to use preserving sugar rather than jam sugar (the latter has pectin included). I use jam sugar because I am impatient – I know it makes the jam set faster, and means I don't need to fret that it won't set.

Makes enough for approx. 6 x 250ml jars

**750g mixed berries, such as red-and blackcurrants,
raspberries, strawberries and blueberries**

750g jam sugar

6 x 250ml sealable jars

♥ **Sterilize** your jars. Put a few saucers into the deep-freeze to help you later to tell, without a thermometer, when the jam has reached setting point.

♥ Quarter the strawberries (unless they are very small, in which case halve them), and put these with all the berries into a large, wide pan; bear in mind that the fruit and sugar will froth up hugely as they cook. Add the sugar and give a good stir.

♥ Stop stirring and put the pan on a low heat.

♥ Give the pan a gentle shake now and then, to encourage the sugar to melt into the fruits, but *resist* the temptation to stir. When the sugar has dissolved, you may turn up the heat.

♥ Bring to the boil, then turn down to a medium heat so that you have a consistent, vigorous simmer, i.e. a contained boil that is not threatening to boil over! Keep an eye on your pan but *do not stir*.

♥ After about 15 minutes, take a saucer from the deep-freeze, remove the pan from the heat and, carefully, take a teaspoonful of jam and smear it on the saucer. Sit the saucer down for a couple of minutes and then push the surface of the jam with a teaspoon or finger; if it is beginning to wrinkle, the jam has set. If it doesn't set, return the pan to the heat and repeat the process after a few minutes. If you prefer to use a jam/sugar thermometer, you will see when the red line hits the word "Jam", around the 105°C mark.

♥ When you judge the jam to be ready, take it off the heat. Put a jam funnel into the neck of a sterilized jam jar and carefully fill with jam, sealing each jar when you've finished, and then leave to cool.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Can be stored in a cool, dark place for up to 1 year. Once opened, store in fridge and use within 1 month.



Gooseberry chutney

I'm a pushover for a chutney: not only because I like eating it, but because I derive so much pleasure from making it. I almost feel that I should be ashamed of how easy it is. Not that I've ever pretended it's hard work, but somehow putting a jar of home-made chutney on the table just *seems* so smug.

There is only one problem with chutney, which is that those of us who are drawn to make it, deriving a sense of calm and security from filling cupboards with good things, tend to be hoarders by nature. I can keep chutney hidden away for too long, much in the way that I leave new clothes (far too special to be worn, of course) hanging in the wardrobe.



In a funny way, I find if I make less, I'm better at using up what I have. Perhaps that's because making small batches – like the 3 little jars here – is altogether less of an operation. You don't start to feel like you're opening a cannery; rather that you're making the most of the beautiful goosegogs' short

season. And you are. Though, please, check out the [crumble](#) too.

Anyway, enjoy the 3 jars here: give one to a friend, maybe, but savour the rest with cold ham, a loaf of bread and slab of cheese, dolloped alongside the [Roast Duck Legs](#) or, in an Anglo reworking of the classic French *maquereaux aux groseilles*, served as a suitably zingy relish with some plain grilled mackerel.

Makes enough for 3 x 250ml jars or 750ml

500g gooseberries, washed and de-bearded

1 onion, peeled and finely chopped

2 teaspoons finely chopped, de-seeded red chilli

2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh ginger

1 teaspoon ground turmeric

½ teaspoon ground cloves

1 teaspoon ground coriander

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1 x 15ml tablespoon sea salt flakes or 1½ teaspoons pouring salt

250g demerara sugar

350ml cider vinegar

3 x 250ml sealable jars (or 1 x 750ml) with vinegar-proof lids

♥ [Sterilize](#) your jars.

♥ Put the gooseberries, chopped onion, chilli, ginger, turmeric, cloves, coriander, cumin and salt into a pan.

♥ Tip in the sugar, pour in the vinegar and give everything a good stir. Bring to a boil and cook over a medium heat, at a brisk simmer, for 30–40 minutes, until the mixture thickens and some of the berries have oozily popped.

♥ Ladle into your sterilized jars, sealing with their lids, and leave to cool.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Make the chutney 2 months before use to allow it to mature. Store in a cool, dark place for up to 1 year. Once opened, store in fridge and use within 1 month.

Spiced pumpkin chutney

Like the gooseberry chutney above, this is notionally a season-celebrating recipe, too. I suppose you could make this chutney equally well with butternut squash, which seems almost perpetually available these days, but the bulging bright hugeness of a pumpkin is fabulously compelling. Just taking one home from the shops feels as if you're celebrating the harvest festival in a significant way.

If it is a whole pumpkin you've lugged home, then you might be wise to check the index for any mention of butternut or squash and modify the recipe to accommodate your autumnal glut. If you buy your fruit and veg from a greengrocer rather than in a supermarket, you should be able to buy pumpkin by the half or quarter or, if you're in luck, to the desired weight.



Makes enough for 6 x 250ml jars or 1.25 litres

1.25kg pumpkin, to yield approx. 1 kg once peeled and de-seeded

2 medium onions

1 Bramley cooking apple, cored

100g golden sultanas

2 red bird's-eye chillies, de-seeded and chopped

275g soft light brown sugar

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1 teaspoon ground ginger

1 teaspoon ground cloves

2 teaspoons sea salt flakes or 1 teaspoon pouring salt

2 heaped tablespoons minced fresh ginger

625ml white wine vinegar

6 x 250ml sealable jars (or 1 x 1.25 litre) with vinegar-proof lids

♥ [Sterilize](#) your jars.

♥ Peel and de-seed the pumpkin, then cut it into very small dice. Peel and finely chop the onions and apple.

♥ Put all the ingredients into a large, wide saucepan and bring to the boil, stirring to dissolve the sugar.

♥ Simmer over a medium heat for about 1 hour by which time the chutney will have thickened and the pumpkin become tender. The timings for this process can vary according to the pumpkin, so watch the pan after 45 minutes and cover loosely if the chutney is thickened but the pumpkin still not soft.

♥ Spoon into sterilized jars, put the lids on, and leave to cool.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Make the chutney 2 months before use to allow it to mature. Store in a cool, dark place for up to 1 year. Once opened, store in fridge and use within 1 month.



Blackberry vodka

Bottling my own liqueur makes me feel homespun and happy, as if at any minute I might be paying a visit to some invalid neighbour bearing homemade calf's foot jelly. It's completely nonsensical, of course, but in the scheme of things there are greater nonsenses than pottering about with a Kilner jar.

Perhaps it's the very unnecessaryness that makes work like this so comforting. Most of the time we cook because a meal needs to be put on the table, and gratifying though feeding people is, the task can feel relentless, too. I can see why some might find this recipe a time-wasting exercise and not to be countenanced; I on the other hand, feel grateful if there is ever any time to be wasted, and celebrate it – like this.





Makes enough to fill a 70cl bottle plus 250ml

1 x 70cl bottle vodka (regular-sized bottle)

500g blackberries

200g caster sugar

**1 x 1.5 litre wide-necked bottle or sealable jar (such as
Kilner jar), for steeping**

**1 x 70cl vodka bottle or 1 litre sealable bottle for keeping
(optional)**

♥ [Sterilize](#) your wide-necked bottle or jar, and pour in the vodka. Keep the original vodka bottle for decanting into later

(you can soak it to get rid of the label), or consign it to the recycle bin if you have another, prettier, bottle to use instead.

♥ Tip the blackberries and sugar into the jar, and then seal with the lid.

♥ Shake the jar patiently until the sugar dissolves – it will eventually, just keep shaking the contents from side to side.

♥ Put the jar in a cool, dark place, not too inaccessible as you will need to shake it daily for a couple of weeks, then once a week after that for about a month.

♥ After about 6–8 weeks – a few weeks more won't hurt, though – sterilize the vodka bottle or other bottle of your choice, strain the vodka of its berries (reserving the fruit if you want to make the Drunken Fool that follows), then decant the liqueur into the bottle. And if you don't intend to bottle this, but just to lower a ladle in and tip straight into shot glasses, then don't bother to strain.

♥ You will have about 250ml blackberry vodka over if you re-use your original 70cl vodka bottle, as the addition of the berries and sugar will have given you more liquid. Pour this into a 250ml hip flask, or use to make the Drunken Fool that follows, along with a shot of the stuff for each person eating it.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The strained blackberry vodka can be kept in a cool, dark place for 1 year.

Making leftovers right

Drunken fool

It feels criminal to throw the berries away, once they've given their life's blood to your vodka. By themselves, they'd be a poor excuse for a treat, but folded into softly whipped cream with some crumbled shop-bought meringues they seem to get their second wind, and earn your double delight by providing a most gratifyingly named pud.

Makes enough to fill 6 small martini glasses

300ml double cream

1 x 15ml tablespoon icing sugar the blackberries retrieved from their vodka

2 shop-bought meringue nests few dashes of the freshly made blackberry vodka

- ♥ Softly whisk the double cream with the icing sugar. Be careful not to overwhip as stirring in the soaked blackberries makes it thicken up quite a bit.
- ♥ Fold in the blackberries, and crumble in the meringue nests.
- ♥ Dribble in a little blackberry vodka and ripple through gently by folding, briefly, again.
- ♥ Fill 6 small martini glasses with the fool, top each with a dash of blackberry vodka, then serve with biscuits or cookies of your choice, and a shot of blackberry vodka for those who want.



CUT AND COME AGAIN

In the old days, the sort of cakes that could be made, brought out and sliced when guests called, then rewrapped and put

back in the tin until next needed, were called “cut and come again”; these were good plain cakes, that kept well, and were serviceable, welcoming and spoke of the quiet comforts of home.

Well, I’m not sure the term “quiet comforts” has much meaning, other than symbolic or indeed ironic, in my home, but I love the feeling that I’ve got something on the kitchen counter to offer any one passing, with a cup of tea or coffee. Not even the man mending the boiler leaves without a foil-wrapped parcel.

Because the whole point of the cakes or traybakes that follow is that they don’t need a special occasion to be made or eaten, and because it dispenses with any sticking issues (as well as with washing up), I confess to using throwaway foil trays for many of them. And now that I have settled on a uniform-sized one (30 x 20 x 5cm) intended for the barbecue, I find them fairly easily in shops, even when it isn’t summertime.

Seed-cake

I think of seed-cake as quintessentially English: elegant and plain and wholesome without being indelicately heavy. Of course, that is not “English” in any real, living sense. My own memories of it are from childhood, sometime in the last century, let’s be frank, and even then seed-cake was anachronistic, bespeaking an Edwardian age of Madeira m’dear, or some earlier fusty Victorian time when caraway was thought to be beneficial to the digestion.

Actually, the recipe pre-dates even the fussy Victorians. It is the cake eaten by poor Jane Eyre on one of the few happy days of her childhood, when she savours some snatched time with her beloved schoolfriend, Helen, and their teacher, Miss Temple, who “got up, unlocked a drawer, and taking from it a parcel wrapped in paper, disclosed presently to our eyes a good-sized seed-cake”.

I remember being uplifted by the thought of seed-cake, if not the taste, when I was young. I recall, too, seeing a recipe for it in my mother’s yellow-paged, obviously unillustrated *Mrs Beeton*; to me both Brontë and Beeton incarnations were hushed evocations of the ultimate comforting seed-cake.



Nevertheless, I have played fast and loose with both versions: Miss Temple's cake would not have been made using chemical raising agents and Mrs Beeton's was a great deal more sensible and less rich than mine. Still, I make no apologies: I put this buttery, marzipanny version here because I love it, and hope you will, too. Besides, the addition of ground almonds makes the cake keep longer without drying out, the better to come again and cut it.

I want your guests to feel with Jane that "we feasted that evening as on nectar and ambrosia; and not the least delight of the entertainment was the smile of gratification with which our hostess regarded us, as we satisfied our famished appetites on

the delicate fare”. Reader, that smile of gratification – the sometime domestic goddess’s badge of honour – is yours: with scant work, but miraculous effect, you’ve earned it.

Cuts into a good 16 slices

175g soft unsalted butter, plus some for greasing

175g caster sugar, plus 1 x 15ml tablespoon for sprinkling

150g plain flour

2 teaspoons baking powder

75g ground almonds

4 teaspoons caraway seeds

3 eggs

1 x 900g (2lb) loaf tin

♥ Preheat the oven to 180°C/gas mark 4. Line the 900g loaf tin (still often sold as a 2lb loaf tin) with a paper loaf-tin liner or line the bottom with baking parchment and butter the sides.

♥ Cream the butter and 175g sugar together, beating until light and fluffy.

♥ Combine the flour, baking powder, ground almonds and caraway seeds in a bowl and add 1 tablespoonful to the creamed butter-sugar mixture, then, beating steadily, add 1 egg at a time, with a spoonful of dried ingredients between each egg.

♥ When all your ingredients are combined, spoon into the lined loaf tin, and smooth the top before sprinkling with the remaining tablespoon of sugar. Bake for about 45 minutes, though check at 35 and be prepared to go on for 50 minutes. It will smell headily aromatic when cooked, and the top and edges will be starting to turn crisply golden.

♥ Cool in the tin on a wire rack, and when no longer hot to the touch, slip the cake in its liner out of the tin onto the rack. The centre of the cake will sink a little as the cake cools, but this is the way of the loaf (as you can see more clearly in the picture

of the [Chocolate Orange Loaf Cake](#); it's not that you or your oven have done anything wrong.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

This cake can be baked up to 2 days ahead. Wrap tightly in clingfilm and store in airtight container in a cool place. Keeps for up to 7 days in total.

FREEZE NOTE

The cake can be frozen, wrapped in a double layer of clingfilm and a layer of foil, for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight at room temperature.

Raspberry Bakewell slice

Strictly speaking, this doesn't really fit into the "cut and come again" category as the fresh fruit, those raspberries seeping tartly into the soft frangipane that blankets them, makes this something you can't have hanging around for long. But here's the thing: it goes fast. And it's true to say that anyone who cuts themselves a piece most certainly does come to cut again, the second slice following swiftly on the first.

Only the rare few consider pastry-baking a casually undertaken activity; and yet this pie in a tray is the work of moments. A foil tray helps (and helps the dough cook to a crisp buttery finish fast, too) but the real lifesaver is this press-in, no-roll dough – my everyday answer to the pastry problem, real or imagined.



Makes 16 slices

for the base:

225g plain flour

60g icing sugar

pinch salt

225g soft unsalted butter, plus some for greasing

1 x foil tray or baking tin, approx. 30 x 20 x 5cm

for the filling:

150g soft unsalted butter, plus some for greasing

4 eggs

150g caster sugar

150g ground almonds

250g seedless raspberry jam

250g fresh raspberries

50g flaked almonds

♥ Preheat your oven to 180°C/gas mark 4. Line the baking tin with foil and grease it, or grease your foil tray.

♥ Mix the flour, icing sugar, salt and 225g butter in a food processor until you have a cohesive dough. Press into the bottom of your tin. Be patient – I promise you have enough to fill the bottom – just work the dough with the back of a spoon or your hands (preferably your knuckles), to get an evenish surface.

♥ Bake the base for 20 minutes, then leave to cool in the tin for about 5 minutes.

♥ While the base is in the oven, melt the 150g butter for the filling in a small pan, then take off the heat to cool a little, say the 5 minutes while the base is cooling.

♥ Put the eggs, caster sugar and ground almonds into a food processor and blitz to a paste. With the motor running, pour the slightly cooled melted butter down the funnel and stop when all is combined, though you may want to scrape down the contents then pulse to finish.

♥ Whisk the jam in a bowl to make it a little more spreadable, and duly spread it over the base, then tumble the raspberries

over the jam. Scrape the almond filling out of the processor, and spread over the raspberry layer.

♥ Sprinkle with the flaked almonds, and bake for about 45 minutes, testing after 35: it is ready when it's risen with gentle puffiness and has become tinted gold from the heat.

♥ Cool – or not if you can't wait (but be wary of the hot jam layer) – before slicing.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Crust and filling can be prepared 1 day ahead of baking. Press crust into tin, wrap with clingfilm and refrigerate. Put filling in a bowl and cover with clingfilm then refrigerate. Remove from the fridge 1–2 hours before use to allow to come to room temperature and beat briefly before spreading over the crust.

FURTHER NOTE

Leftovers can be kept in fridge, covered with clingfilm, for 1–2 days. If possible bring to room temperature before serving.

Treacle slice

Oh my, oh my – am I *really* pleased to have found a way of making a treacle tart without tears? For this is not a temptation anyone in their right mind (not that I would presume) could resist. On paper, I admit that the notion of a dough, plain to the point of dourness and draped with syrup thickened with breadcrumbs, sounds unappetising. How is it then that it is the most desirable delicacy, and one of my favourite puddings in the world? Perhaps it's better not to ask, but simply eat in gratitude.

The breadcrumbs do need to be fresh, itself a bit of a misnomer, as the bread will be stale before being processed (or grated) to a crumb. I always keep a stash of these in my deep-freeze, and don't even bother to thaw them before using. If you can find a source of proper breadcrumbs outside the home, that's fine, but don't even think of using that orangey powder which comes in boxes and calls itself breadcrumbs.



The reason I give the breadcrumbs a measure as well as a weight, is that I have found there is no constant relationship

between volume and weight, and it is the volume that matters. Yes, the recipe calls for quite a lot, but once the crumbs have soaked up the buttery, lemony syrup, what you have is a gorgeous chewiness, more fluffy than heavy. The plain base makes complete sense: you need elegant balance for the near temple-aching sweetness of the ginger-coloured topping.

Which brings us to clotted cream, my accompaniment of choice here: mad though it sounds to think of a substance that is over 50 per cent fat as having a tamping-down effect, its lusciousness seems to temper the sweetness with cool efficiency. Still, those who'd prefer to eat this not as a cream-topped slice, but swathed with custard and spooned out of a bowl will not find any argument from me.

Makes about 16 slices

for the base:

200g plain flour

50g soft unsalted butter, plus some for greasing

50g vegetable shortening

1 x 15ml tablespoon lemon juice (reserve zest for the topping)

2 x 15ml tablespoons iced water

for the topping:

1 x 454g tin golden syrup

25g soft unsalted butter approx. 150g breadcrumbs (550ml in a measuring jug)

zest lemon (see ingredients for the base)

1 egg, beaten

1 x foil tray or baking tin, approx. 30 x 20 x 5cm

♥ Preheat your oven to 180°C/gas mark 4. Line your baking tin with foil and grease it, or grease your foil tray.

♥ Put the flour, 50g butter and vegetable shortening for the base into a food processor and blitz until you have a crumbly

rubble.

♥ Combine the lemon juice and iced water and pour down the funnel with the engine running until the mixture clumps together, making a pale, damp dough.

♥ Press this dough into the bottom of your foil/baking tin, using the back of a metal spoon or your hands to make a relatively smooth, even base. Bake in the oven for 20 minutes.

♥ Meanwhile, melt the golden syrup and 25g butter in a heavy-based saucepan on a low heat. Stir in the breadcrumbs, not worrying that you appear to have a thick, sawdusty, sticky mixture.

♥ Take the pan off the heat, allow to cool a little, then add the lemon zest and beat in the egg. Pour the mixture over the cooked pastry base and put back into the oven for 20 minutes.

♥ When it's ready, the filling should have risen slightly and look as if it is just about set: dry at the edges, but with the promise of stickiness at the centre.

♥ Take out of the oven and leave to cool only a little: this must be sliced and is best eaten while still fragrantly warm.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The slice can be made up to 1 day ahead. Cool in tin and cover with clingfilm then refrigerate. Reheat in oven preheated to 180°C/gas mark 4 for 20 minutes, or until warmed through. Leftovers can be kept in fridge, covered in clingfilm, for 2–3 days.

FREEZE NOTE

The slice can be frozen in its tin, wrapped tightly in a double layer of clingfilm and a layer of foil, for up to 1 month. Defrost overnight in the fridge and reheat as above.





Guinness gingerbread

I adore the deceptive plainness of gingerbread. It is definitively unfancy, and yet the flavour is so rich, and its deep-toned tang so subtle. Here the tang is a little more emphatic as sour cream and liquorice-evocative stout give heady lift, but still this is – for all the treacly sugar and pungent spices – gentle and cosy-making though almost alarmingly addictive.

So although this started life in my kitchen as a spot-hitting accompaniment for a hot drink, I find that a small square with some diced mango makes for a fantastic end to a kitchen supper and, eaten still warm with some of the sour and scarlet [plums](#) is a perfect Sunday-lunch pud.

If using the foil tray, makes 24 small, squat squares or 16 generous rectangular slabs

150g butter, plus some for greasing

300g golden syrup

200g dark muscovado sugar

250ml Guinness

2 teaspoons ground ginger

2 teaspoons ground cinnamon

¼ teaspoon ground cloves

300g plain flour

2 teaspoons bicarbonate of soda

300ml sour cream

2 eggs

1 x 23cm square baking tin or 1 x foil tray approx. 30 x 20 x 5cm

♥ Preheat your oven to 170°C/gas mark 3. Line your square tin with foil and grease it, or grease your foil tray.

♥ Put the butter, syrup, muscovado sugar, Guinness, ginger, cinnamon and ground cloves into a pan and melt gently over a low heat.

♥ Take off the heat and whisk in the flour and bicarb. You will need to be patient and whisk thoroughly to get rid of any lumps.

♥ Whisk the sour cream and eggs together in a measuring jug and then beat into the gingerbread mixture, whisking again to get a smooth batter.

♥ Pour this into your lined square tin, or into a barbecue-type foil tray, and bake for about 45 minutes; when it's ready it will be gleamingly risen at the centre, and coming away from the tin at the sides.

♥ Let the gingerbread cool before cutting into slices or squares.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The gingerbread can be baked up to 1 week ahead. Wrap in baking parchment followed by layer of clingfilm and store in airtight container in a cool place. Keeps for total of 2 weeks.

FREEZE NOTE

The gingerbread can be frozen, wrapped in layer of baking parchment and double layer of foil, for up to 3 months. Defrost on wire rack at room temperature for 3–4 hours and cut into squares.





Chocolate orange loaf cake

A loaf cake is just the thing to have about your kitchen: it promises sustenance without showiness; and the rich and scented sombreness of this one confers more gravitas than the flighty words “chocolate cake” would seem to convey.

But then this is no decadent fancy, rather a slice-able slab of cocoa-rich serenity. The chocolate is intoxicatingly present, deep and dark in taste, but the texture of its crumb is light. When I was a child, there was a chocolate bar that was advertised as “the sweet you can eat between meals without ruining your appetite”. Hard to believe now, isn’t it? However, the thing about this cake – which has a citrus tang so mellow it comes through as warm spice – is that you feel you can snaffle a slice mid-morning or mid-afternoon without feeling the slightest bit weighed down, digestively or psychologically. Result.

Cuts into 10–12 slices

150g soft unsalted butter, plus some for greasing

dab flavourless vegetable oil, for greasing

2 x 15ml tablespoons golden syrup

175g dark muscovado sugar

150g plain flour

½ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

25g best-quality cocoa powder, sifted

2 eggs

zest 2 regular oranges and juice of 1

1 x 900g (2lb) loaf tin

♥ Preheat the oven to 170°C/gas mark 3 and line your loaf tin with baking parchment or a paper loaf-tin liner.

♥ Beat the already soft butter with the syrup – if you dab a little oil on your tablespoon measure with a sheet of kitchen roll, the syrup shouldn't stick to the spoon – and the sugar until you have a fairly smooth caffè Americano cream, though the sugar will always have a bit of grit about it.

♥ Mix the flour, bicarb and cocoa powder together, and beat into the syrup mixture 1 tablespoonful of these dry ingredients before beating in 1 egg. Then add another couple of spoonfuls of the dry ingredients before beating in the second egg.

♥ Carry on beating in the remaining dry ingredients and then add, still beating, the orange zest and finally, gradually, the juice. At this stage, the batter may suddenly look dimpled as if slightly curdled. No need to panic!

♥ Pour and scrape into the prepared tin and bake for 45 minutes, though check 5 minutes before and be prepared to keep it in the oven 5 minutes longer if need be. A cake tester won't come out entirely clean, as the point of this cake, light though it may be, is to have just a hint of inner gunge. Leave to cool a little in its tin on a wire rack, then turn out with care and leave on the rack to cool.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The cake can be baked up to 3 days ahead. Wrap tightly in clingfilm and store in airtight container. Will keep for 5 days total.

FREEZE NOTE

The cake can be frozen, tightly wrapped in a double layer of clingfilm and a layer of foil, for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight at room temperature.



Sweet and salty crunch nut bars

Be still my beating heart! On second thoughts, perhaps this is not the best thing to say here, given the likelihood of this lusciously over-the-top piece of chocolate excess inducing just such an outcome. I wouldn't want to make this very often, so impossible is it to walk away from with conviction. I fear it is the kitchen equivalent to crack cocaine.

Still, as the French might well say, "Everything in moderation, even moderation." This is gloriously intemperate, riotously vulgar. I love it.

The key is in the blaring balance between sweet and salty: it's like several klaxons going off in your head as you eat. And it's strange that while I would normally eschew an all-milk chocolate offering, I prefer it here to the dark-and-milk mixed version. Not that either is bad, and since the jury is matched on this, I feel it only just to alert you to the options. For what it's worth, I like the darker version in a round tin and cut into panforte-type skinny wedges, and my preferred milk chocolate version set in a rectangular tray and cut into chunky, squat slabs (rather as I feel and look after eating too many of them).



The round springform tin cuts into approx. 24 slender(ish) slices; the foil tray yields 18 large or 36 small pieces

200g dark chocolate *and* 100g milk chocolate

(or 300g milk chocolate in total)

125g unsalted butter

3 x 15ml tablespoons golden syrup

250g salted peanuts

4 x 40g Crunchie bars

1 x 25cm springform tin (or other round cake tin) or 1 x foil tray approx. 30 x 20 x 5cm

♥ Line your cake tin with foil or use a foil tray.

♥ Break up or chop the chocolate into pieces, and drop into a heavy-based saucepan. Add the butter and syrup, put on a low heat, and melt gently together.

♥ Tip the peanuts into a bowl, and crush the Crunchie bars with your hands, letting the golden-glinting rubble fall into the nuts.

♥ Take the melted chocolate mixture off the heat and stir in the peanuts and crushed Crunchie bars, then tip straight into the cake tin or foil tray. Smooth the top of the mixture as much as you can, pressing down with a silicone spatula or CSI-gloved hand.

♥ Put into the fridge for about 4 hours and, once set, cut into slices as desired.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The bars can be made 1 day ahead. Transfer slices to airtight container, layered with baking parchment, and store in fridge. Keeps for 3–4 days.



Rice Krispie brownies

While this undeniably lacks the dignity of, say, the Chocolate Orange Loaf Cake, I don't feel it needs to apologize for itself, or I for it. There's a time and a place for everything, even a raucous piece of confectionery made from melting butter, chocolate and syrup and using this rich goo to stick little drop-pearls of puffed rice together.

True, there's nothing subtle about these, and, what's more, they contain milk chocolate, dark chocolate *and* chocolate chips, but as Mae West famously did say: "Too much of a good thing can be wonderful." The other day, inspired yet further by excess, I threw in some white chocolate chips as well.

The 23cm tin cuts into 16 squares; the oblong tin gives 24 slices. (*Even smaller pieces make excellent if counter-intuitive dinner-party accompaniments to a post-prandial espresso.*)

100g unsalted butter

5 x 15ml tablespoons (75g) golden syrup

150g good-quality milk chocolate, chopped

50g good-quality dark chocolate, chopped

150g Rice Krispies

150g milk chocolate morsels or chips (or use half dark and half white chocolate chips)

1 x 23cm square cake tin or 1 x foil tray approx. 30 x 20 x 5cm

♥ Line your cake tin with foil or get out one of my trusted barbecue foil trays.

♥ Put butter, golden syrup and chopped chocolates (not the chips) in a heavy-based and fairly wide saucepan and melt over a low heat.

- ♥ Stir to mix the glossy goo, take it off the heat, then quickly pour and stir in the Rice Krispies.
- ♥ Still off the heat, quickly stir in the chocolate chips and spoon and scrape the mixture into your tin of choice. I find it easier, once the gunk is in the tin, to smooth the top with hands covered in a pair of CSI gloves.
- ♥ Put in the fridge to set for about 4 hours before cutting.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The brownies can be made up to 2 days ahead. Wrap tray tightly with clingfilm and store in a cool place. In warm or humid weather, store in fridge. Cut into squares before serving. Keeps for 3–4 days.

Blondies

These began life, in one of my many ink-splodged and grease-stained notebooks, as Chocolate Chip Oatmeal Squares, morphed into Chewy Chocolate Chip Squares and have now earned a place in my kitchen, enduringly, as Blondies. The oatmeal in the earliest title had to go: the ingredient remains, hidden – as this was intended as a bit of a kiddie-pleaser, and the smaller people won't even consider anything that promises oatmeal. I felt that offering up the promise of chewiness along with chocolate chips would do the trick, which it did. And once – having produced a batch just a few days after making brownies – I said that these were, in a way, blondies. The name stuck. It has been known to suggest some sort of intended disparagement, but none at all is implied here. On the contrary, I have an almost fanatical fervour for these squidgy-bellied beauties.

Indeed, I made so many versions, I began to wonder if my compulsion to get them right was altogether healthy; I feared it might be to do with the condensed milk. There's something about cooking with ingredients that should make me blush which in fact draws me obsessively towards them. Mostly, I have quite a rigid “three strikes and you're out” rule. But I couldn't give up with these, and it wasn't until my fourth (or was it fifth?) go, that I felt truly happy – even ecstatic – with what I'd made. My first attempt produced something that was impossibly sweet and, although gorgeously gungy within, took so long to cook that the crust became too crunchy, and I knew I had to rejig. I then made a version that tasted more like a flapjack and, although grown ups liked it, I felt sure I could do better. At this point, my daughter said rather strictly, “Mum, you've gone from one extreme to the other. Find some middle ground,” and I knew she was right. But as it turned out, there was no miraculous Third Way. I suspected I was beginning to lose the plot when I cooked a different version

three days running. But that was a plot worth losing, as it turned out I found the answer.

The chocolate chips ought really to be white to live up to the pale promise of the title, but the condensed milk gives enough of that vanilla-richness as it is. Besides, we all know that (outside Scandinavia) there is no such thing as a natural blonde over twenty-four; so you could just say that, with the dark splotches of chocolate dotted about, the Blondies are just showing their roots.

Makes 16 pieces

200g porridge oats, not instant

100g plain flour

½ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

150g soft unsalted butter

100g light muscovado sugar

1 x 397g can condensed milk

1 egg

1 x 170g packet dark chocolate morsels or chocolate chips

1 x 23cm square cake tin or 1 x foil tray approx. 30 x 20 x 5cm

♥ Preheat the oven to 180°C/gas mark 4 and line your square cake tin with foil – this makes it easier to get the Blondies out once they're cooked – or use a foil barbecue tray.

♥ Combine the oats, flour and bicarb in a bowl.

♥ In another bowl mix or beat the soft butter with the sugar until pale and airily creamy, then beat in the condensed milk followed by the oats, flour and bicarb mixture.

♥ When these are well mixed, beat in the egg, and into this relatively thick mixture fold the chocolate chips.

♥ Dollop this thick bumpy batter into the prepared tin, and smooth it down with a spatula, then cook in the preheated oven for about 35 minutes. When ready, it will be quite a

pronounced dark gold around the edges and coming away from the tin. It will look and feel cooked on top, though just beneath it will still seem frighteningly squidgy, not to say, wibbly. But it firms up as it cools in the tin, so to end up with the requisite chewiness you have to take it out of the oven while it feels a tad undercooked.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The blondies can be baked up to 3 days ahead and stored in airtight container. Will keep for 5 days total.

FREEZE NOTE

The blondies can be frozen for up to 3 months in airtight container, layered with baking parchment. Defrost overnight in a cool place.



AT MY TABLE

Roast seafood

Date steak

Spatchcocked poussin *with baby leaf salad and sourdough croutons*

Chicken with 40 cloves of garlic

Garlicky soup/garlicky chicken sauce

Carbonnade à la flamande *or beer-braised beef casserole*

Pappardelle with butternut and blue cheese

Venetian lasagne

Sweet potato supper

Homestyle jerk chicken *with rice and peas*

Coconutty rice soup

San Francisco fish stew

Earlier in this book, I discussed the sort of food I most often cook for friends when an unforgiving schedule or just general midweek pandemonium rules out any more expansive stoveside pottering. These recipes, here, I think of rather as my weekend collection, the Country Casuals of the kitchen. Of course, in true life (as my children used to call reality, when they were little) the actual day of the week is not the deciding factor. But the food that follows certainly smacks of Saturday supper to me, if only in spirit.

I use the word supper pointedly: I feel I can never emphasize enough that whatever else I'm inviting people to, it's certainly not a dinner party. For me, the distinction is pre-eminently one of tone, and maybe this in turn is a case of managing my and my guests' expectations. In the old days, people used to issue invitations by announcing that they were

“at home”; the only place I want to receive people is in my kitchen, indeed “at my table”. I want the food to be welcoming and expansive, but I don’t feel the need to demonstrate my bona fides with a show of formality.

As always, I prefer not to rely on a succession of courses. I have no objection to providing a little something for people to pick at over drinks ([see here](#) or rely unapologetically on the traditional bar snacks of nuts or olives) and I neither resent cooking nor recommend austerity. But having to jump up throughout a meal, clearing and resetting the table, doesn’t sound like a very agreeable way to spend an evening.

One of the things I love about having friends over to eat is that being able to relax into it. As someone whose greed can make choosing from a menu anxiety-laden, I revel in the simplicity of the home kitchen, for all that you have to cook the food rather than order it. Plus, you don’t have to add fancy flourishes to justify a mark-up (you’re not charging, after all) any more than you have to seduce anyone with novelty or impress with technical wizardry. A richly brown vat of beef braised in beer may not have the picture-perfect prettiness to earn it a place on a restaurant menu, but I regard this gorgeous stew as one of the most welcoming dishes to come out of a home kitchen. The comforts of the carbonnade are not to be underestimated. Sometimes, having people over for supper gives licence for delicious extravagance – I wouldn’t roast a tin of lemony, roast-potato-studded seafood every day, any more than I would summon forth a bubbling pan of San Francisco fish stew – whereas, at other times, a tableful of friends demands a celebration of the down-home and unluxurious, such as jerk chicken with rice and peas. There’s no one right thing to cook for supper any more than there is any one right way to live your life.

And if I skip starters, you’ll never hear me ruling out something special to end with. Grapes, cheese – and no more than that – may do on some days; on others, there is the panoply of puddings elsewhere in these pages.



Roast seafood

This recipe is, for me, the perfect having-friends-for-supper food: it has just the right element of quiet, easy prep before people arrive and simple last-minute action as they're sitting at the table.

Of course, it's entirely right that roast seafood feels like a treat: after all, it doesn't come cheap. But when it's fresh, tender-fleshed and cooked *à point*, it is surprisingly filling and on just the right side of rich; the sharpness of the lemon and blanketing starch of the potato keep it all in check. Oven-cooking seems to intensify all the flavours but in a way that underscores rather than overwhelms: this is, above all, a chic and simple feast.

You can embellish, but it's not necessary: all I'd suggest is a green salad with and perhaps the [No-Fuss Fruit Tart](#) after. But if the season's not right for that, or you're catering for people who go gooey at the sight of chocolate, then bring out the [Flourless Chocolate Lime Cake](#).





Serves 6

750g potatoes (about 3 baking potatoes)

8 cloves garlic, unpeeled

2 small red onions

1 unwaxed lemon

4 x 15ml tablespoons regular olive oil

350g small clams in their shells

6–8 baby squid

575g or 16 unpeeled raw medium king prawns with their heads on

**3 x 15ml tablespoons dry white vermouth or white wine
sea salt flakes and pepper**

2–3 x 15ml tablespoons roughly chopped parsley, to serve

♥ Preheat the oven to 220°C/gas mark 7. Cut the potatoes, without peeling, into thick slices and each slice into quarters. Put them into a large roasting tin with the whole cloves of garlic.

♥ Quarter the onions, peel them (I find it easier to do it this way around), then halve each quarter horizontally. Quarter the lemon and cut each quarter into 1cm pieces. Add the onion and lemon to the tin with the potatoes and garlic.

♥ Drizzle over 2 tablespoons of the oil and cook in the oven for 1 hour.

♥ Meanwhile, soak the clams in a bowl of water – if any are smashed or don't close after they've soaked, throw them away. Slice the squid into rings.

♥ After 1 hour, take the tin out of the oven and place on a low heat on the hob so that the pan doesn't cool while you add the seafood.

♥ Arrange the drained closed clams, baby squid rings and whole raw prawns over the potatoes, garlic, lemon pieces and onions.

♥ Splash the seafood with the remaining 2 tablespoons of oil and the vermouth, then season with salt and pepper.

♥ Put the roasting tin back in the oven for 15 minutes, by which time the clams should have opened and the prawns pinked up. Discard any clams that have not opened.

♥ Scatter with freshly but not too finely chopped parsley and serve straight from the tin: it couldn't look more beautiful.



MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Potatoes can be prepared 1 day ahead. Submerge in a bowl of water and store in fridge. Drain and pat dry before using.
Onions and lemons can be cut 1 day ahead and stored in bowls tightly covered with clingfilm in fridge.

Date steak

All steak is a treat, but this juicy sirloin with its sweet and sharp barbecue sauce is something special: perfect for a little dinner *à deux* on a Saturday night or any other evening when the occasion calls for it.

It may sound a little too hearty, if we're talking romantic suppers, to be suggesting a baked potato with sour cream on the side, but you and I both know that would be too right to avoid. You could always consider just the one potato, half each. I think, too, some crisp green beans alongside for crunch and general liveliness, but I take a *laissez-faire* attitude here and know that you won't go far wrong whatever you choose to serve with this.



Serves 2

2 x 15ml tablespoons dark muscovado sugar

2 x 15ml tablespoons red wine vinegar

1 x 15ml tablespoon Dijon mustard

1 x 15ml tablespoon soy sauce

1 x 15ml tablespoon redcurrant jelly

2 teaspoons chopped fresh ginger

1 x 15ml tablespoon tomato purée (or sundried tomato paste)

1 x 15ml tablespoon garlic oil

2 sirloin steaks, approx. 300g each

♥ Put the sugar, vinegar, mustard, soy sauce, redcurrant jelly, ginger and tomato purée (or sundried paste) into a small pan and whisk together over a gentle heat.

♥ Bring to the boil, then turn down the heat and let simmer for about 5 minutes until the sauce has thickened slightly; now take it off the heat and leave to one side while you cook the steaks.

♥ Either fry or griddle the steaks: if you are frying, heat the garlic oil in a heavy-based pan first; if you are griddling, paint the meat with the oil before placing it on a very hot griddle.

♥ Cook the steaks for about 3 minutes a side, for warmed through but still rare meat – how long you need to cook them depends on the thickness of the meat and, of course, how you like your steaks.

♥ Take the steaks off the heat and double-wrap in foil; leave them to rest for about 5 minutes out of a draught.

♥ Open the foil and put any juices that have collected there into the saucepan of barbecue sauce, whisking to mix.

♥ Put the steaks on 2 warmed plates and pour or drizzle the sauce over them, to taste.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The sauce can be made 1 day ahead. Transfer to a non-metallic bowl, cover with clingfilm and refrigerate. Warm gently and add meat juices before serving.



Spatchcocked poussin *with baby leaf salad and sourdough croutons*

It's not often that I'd suggest 1 poussin for 2 people, but spatchcocking, then halving and sitting it on the richly fruited, nut-studded salad makes this more of a meal. I'm not stopping you from having a bird a piece, but I don't believe you need to; this feels like a feast. By all means serve with some delicious wine, but for an unextravagantly treaty and altogether romantic weekend supper for 2, I don't think you can do better.



Serves 2

1 poussin

2 x 15ml tablespoons regular olive oil

½ teaspoon of paprika

3–4 sprigs fresh thyme, plus more for decoration

4 garlic cloves, unpeeled

1 x 15ml tablespoon golden sultanas

2 x 15ml tablespoons dry white vermouth or white wine

1 x 15ml tablespoon pine nuts

1–2 thick slices sourdough bread

150g watercress, spinach and rocket salad or other feisty leaves

½ teaspoon Dijon mustard

½ teaspoon sea salt flakes

1 x 15ml tablespoon moscatel vinegar

3 x 15ml tablespoons cold-pressed rapeseed oil (see [Kitchen Confidential](#)) or good extra-virgin olive oil

♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6 and leave the bread slices out on a wire rack to dry a little. To spatchcock the poussin, get some strong, sharp scissors (or poultry shears) and cut down either side of the spine, take out the spine, then press down on the breast of the poussin to open it out flat. Cut the poussin in half. Put it into a small roasting tin; you can toss in the spine to give extra flavour for the dressing later.

♥ Drizzle over 1 of the tablespoons olive oil, sprinkle over the paprika and thyme sprigs and throw in the unpeeled garlic cloves. Roast for 30–40 minutes or until the poussin is reddish-gold on top, and cooked through.

♥ Meanwhile, put the sultanas into a small pan with the vermouth (or white wine). Bring to a bubble on the hob, take off the heat and leave for about 10 minutes – or, better still, leave to cool while the poussin is roasting.

♥ Toast the pine nuts in a hot, dry frying pan until golden and put to one side. Slice the crusts off the bread and cut into croutons. Heat the remaining tablespoon olive oil in the frying pan and fry the croutons until golden and crisp. Remove to a plate.

♥ Once the bird is cooked, take the tin out of the oven and let it stand for 5–10 minutes. Discard the spine and burnt thyme. While you're waiting, you can arrange the salad leaves on a couple of plates.

♥ Whisk together the Dijon mustard, salt, vinegar and 3 tablespoons of the cold-pressed rapeseed or extra-virgin olive

oil in a bowl, then remove the poussin and garlic cloves to a board, add the juices from the roasting tin to the dressing, and whisk again. If you want to get every last bit of pan-flavour out, add a little hot water from a recently boiled kettle and swill out the pan before adding this, too, to the dressing, then whisk in the soused sultanas.

♥ Sit each half poussin on top of the salad on the plates and add 2 garlic cloves (provided they don't look too burnt, though scorched and caramelised is good). Give the dressing one final whisk and pour it over, then strew with the toasted pine nuts, croutons and a few fresh sprigs of thyme.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Poussin can be spatchcocked 1 day ahead. Put in roasting tin and cover tightly with clingfilm. Store in fridge.



Chicken with 40 cloves of garlic

When I was young, this old French classic was still – though in a quiet way – very much in vogue. I dare say it was because the novelty of using so many garlic cloves had not worn off; it seemed somehow dangerously excessive. Even so, I don't think anyone would think it quite unremarkable now to put 40 cloves of garlic in a casserole. Certainly, if you peeled and chopped – let alone minced – the garlic, it would be inedible, but garlic cloves cooked encased in their skins grow sweet and caramelly as they cook, like savoury bonbons in their sticky wrappers, rather than breathing out acrid heat. This is a cosy supper, not a caustic one.

It entered my canon under someone else's auspices. A few years ago, for the fortieth birthday of a then-colleague and friend of mine, Nick Thorogood, his partner asked everyone to contribute something written expressly for purpose to be compiled in a fat tribute of a book. Since most of Nick's and my conversation dwells, with almost foetid passion, on food, it seemed only proper to write a recipe for him. And given that it was his fortieth birthday, this seemed the right recipe.

It is not quite the classic version (not that there is only one: food is as variable as the people who cook it) but it sticks to the basic principles. Maybe because the white meat on chicken tends towards the utterly tasteless these days, I prefer to use not a whole chicken, but thigh portions only. Naturally, this wouldn't make sense if you were raising your own chickens, then slaughtering them for the pot, as was the custom when this recipe came into being (and very good it would have been, too, for adding oomph to an old bird) but if you're following the contemporary shopping model, it works very well. For some reason, I veer towards recipes that can easily be cooked in one of my wide and shallow cast-iron casseroles (and see the entry on Buffet Casseroles in [Kitchen Caboodle](#)) and this fits the bill perfectly.

By all means, add some steamed or boiled potatoes alongside if you wish, but I'd prefer, by far, a baguette or two to be torn up and dunked into the flavoursome juices; though don't rule out the option of sourdough toast, which is the perfect vehicle for spreading the sweet-cooked garlic onto. Otherwise, some fine beans or baby peas or a plain green salad is all you need for a sure-fire salivation-inducing supper.



Serves 4–6

2 x 15ml tablespoons regular olive oil

8 chicken thighs (with skin on and bone in), preferably organic

1 bunch or 6 spring onions

small bunch fresh thyme

40 cloves garlic (approx. 3–4 bulbs), unpeeled

2 x 15 tablespoons dry white vermouth or white wine

1½ teaspoons sea salt flakes or ¾ teaspoon pouring salt

good grinding pepper

♥ Preheat the oven to 180°C/gas mark 4. Heat the oil on the hob in a wide, shallow ovenproof and flameproof casserole (that will ultimately fit all the chicken in one layer, and that has a lid), and sear the chicken over a high heat, skin-side down. This may take 2 batches, so transfer the browned pieces to a bowl as you go.



♥ Once the chicken pieces are seared, transfer them all to the bowl. Finely slice the spring onions, put them into the casserole and quickly stir fry them with the leaves torn from a few sprigs of thyme.

♥ Put 20 of the unpeeled cloves of garlic (papery excess removed) into the casserole, top with the chicken pieces skin-

side up, then cover with the remaining 20 cloves of garlic.

♥ Add the vermouth (or white wine) to any oily, chickeny juices left in the bowl. Swill it around and pour this into the casserole.

♥ Sprinkle with the salt, grind over the pepper, and add a few more sprigs of thyme. Put on the lid and cook in the oven for 1½ hours.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Chicken can be browned and casserole assembled 1 day ahead. Cover tightly and store in fridge. Season with salt and pepper and warm casserole gently on the hob for 5 minutes before baking as directed in recipe.

Making leftovers right

Garlicky soup/Garlicky chicken sauce

*If I do have any chicken left over – and I don't think I've ever had more than 1 thigh portion – I take out the bone then and there and put the chicken in the fridge. Later (within a day or two), make a **garlicky soup**, by removing the chicken, adding some chicken stock or water to the cold, jellied juices, placing it over a high heat and, when that's hot, shredding the chicken into it and heating it through thoroughly, till everything is piping hot. You can obviously add rice or pasta. Otherwise, mash any leftover garlic into the concentrated liquid (which will be solid when cold), chop up some leftover chicken and put it all into a saucepan with some cream. Reheat gently until everything is piping hot and use as a pasta sauce or serve with rice.*

Carbonnade à la flamande *or beer-braised beef casserole*

There is something about cooking the classics that feels like coming home. In part, this is because I was brought up on them. But there's more to it than autobiographical lure; there is a reason why these old favourites endure. With every apology to all Belgians, real French food – as opposed to the frou-frou rosette-rapacious restaurant variety – is everything home cooking should be: comforting, transporting, with a reach that far extends the pettifogging, constraining vagaries of fad and fashion.

In truth, I do feel bad including this Belgian classic – *carbonnade* for the francophone contingent, *stoofvlees* for the Flemish – within the French culinary canon. I intend no disrespect to the land of Hercule Poirot, René Magritte and Jacques Brel, but am referring here to a manner of cooking rather than a geographical entity. And, actually, although it's rare to find the French including any foreign dish in their own domestic repertoires, this beer-braised beef stew (along with its kitchen compatriot, *lapin aux pruneaux*) was long ago cheerfully assimilated into the kitchens of France.

This carbonnade surely earns a place in yours, as it has in mine. It's time it resurfaced over here, I feel. This is a simple enough recipe – I scarcely bother to sear the meat – that feeds a huge tableful of people cosily. And – always comforting music to my ears – it is at its best if cooked ahead, cooled and then refrigerated before being reheated. True, it takes a long time to cook (not that you have to do a thing to it while it's in the oven) but you can pleasurably wallow in the rich, warm scent as it does. Obviously, embark on this only when time is no issue. Should you be a freeze-ahead kind of a person, know that a vat of this cooked over the weekend,

makes many near-instant weekday meals ahead, when time may be scarcer but the need for comfort greater.

In some parts of Belgium (as well in France and the Netherlands) a little vinegar is added; I find the bitterness of beer needs no accentuation. In fact, to counter that I add a little dark brown sugar (you could, though it's unorthodox, throw in some prunes instead) but it's not just the sweetness I'm after. Originally, gingerbread was sprinkled into the stew as it cooked, to season and thicken it: the combination of allspice and dark sugar here evoke that spiced richness; I let flour, more prosaically, thicken it.

The Belgians, Lor' love 'em, like to eat this with *frites*. I take a less complicated route and, as those in the Alsace region of France do with their *coq au vin*, I often eat my beer-braised beef with pappardelle or other wide egg noodles. I also recommend serving it with fluffy gnocchi to soak up the juices and, to that same end, a big bowl of steamed potatoes or mash.

The beer itself should be good and dark, but there are so many fantastic Belgian beers widely available now that the choice is yours, though English Dark Ale could be substituted. And – *ça va sans dire* – have beer, not wine, on the table to drink alongside.

A final note: it is the shin of beef that makes this stew so sweetly succulent; by all means substitute regular stewing beef if you must, but it will never cook to the melting softness of shin.

Serves 8

1 x 15ml tablespoon duck or goose fat or oil of your choice

250g smoked lardons

4 onions, chopped

2 teaspoons dried allspice

2 teaspoons dried thyme

1.5 kg shin of beef, in approx. 4–5cm cubes

50g plain flour

625ml beef stock (good ready-made, cube or concentrate is fine), preferably organic

4 teaspoons grain mustard

3 x 15ml tablespoons dark brown sugar

625ml dark Belgian beer, or English Dark Ale

4 bay leaves

**1 teaspoon sea salt flakes or ½ teaspoon pouring salt
good grinding pepper**



♥ Preheat the oven to 150°C/gas mark 2.

- ♥ Get out a large, heavy-bottomed casserole and, on the hob over a medium to high heat, melt 1 tablespoon fat, or warm 1 tablespoon oil. Add the lardons and cook, stirring frequently, for 5–10 minutes, till they've crisped up a bit.
- ♥ Add the chopped onion, stirring well so that they're mixed into the bits of bacon, and turn down the heat to low and cook – stirring every now and again – for 10 minutes, by which time the onions will have softened.
- ♥ Stir in the allspice and thyme and then tumble in the cubed shin of beef and, for ease, with a pair of spatulas or suchlike, toss and turn the meat in the pan.
- ♥ Shake in the flour and stir to mix as best you can.
- ♥ Pour the stock into a large jug and stir in the mustard and sugar and then add the beer (if it will fit) before pouring this over the stew in the pan.
- ♥ Stir to mix then leave to come to the boil, add the bay leaves and salt and a good grinding of pepper, then clamp on the lid and stagger to the oven with the heavy pan.
- ♥ Cook gently for 3 hours, until the meat is fork tender, and – if you can bear it – let it cool, uncovered, before covering and refrigerating, then leaving it to bring joy to another day. Still, it's fabulous enough the day it's cooked and patience is an overrated virtue.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The stew can be made up to 2 days ahead. Transfer to non-metallic bowl to cool. Cover and refrigerate as soon as possible. To reheat, put stew back in casserole dish and reheat very gently on stove, until piping hot; or reheat in oven at 150°C/gas mark 2 for 1 hour, until piping hot.

FREEZE NOTE

The cooled stew can be frozen, in airtight container, for up to 3 months (and you can freeze in smaller portions for weekday suppers). Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.

Pappardelle with butternut and blue cheese

This is one of those welcoming, big-bowl suppers, perfect for feeding friends cosily rather than assaulting them with a panoply of courses. (Not that I'd say no to some [Guinness Gingerbread](#) after, though.) Its comfiness, however, doesn't detract from its sumptuousness. This recipe – and let me attest to this unhesitatingly – makes no claims to Italianate authenticity: squash with sage and pine nuts, *si*, but blue cheese, too? *Beh* ... as they say in Italy when they wish to signal that they are perplexed and yet world-wearily confirmed in their prejudices, their ironic acceptance of the way the world turns. And, yes, adding blue cheese to an otherwise fairly traditional sage-scented squash-sauced pasta can, in Italy, be legitimate cause for such a response.

But since this very dish has passed muster with the ultimate arbiter of *la cucina italiana*, Anna Del Conte (author of the *Gastronomy of Italy*, and many other learned, practical, inspiring, must-have manuals and proper, enjoyable reads), I'm not going to fuss and fret about a rogue ingredient. But it's not Anna Del Conte's approbation (reassuring though it was) that makes me happy both with its creation in my kitchen and its inclusion here: the point is, ultimately, it's my own palate I have to rely on. If I didn't trust that, I could neither cook food nor write about it.

I must say, bountiful though this dish is, I often greedily halve it for just two of us: once you start eating it, you never want to stop. I feel that all too often, I confess, but here it's the punchy play of tastes and textures contrasted with the gentle, comforting tangle of the thick pasta ribbons that I give myself up to so blissfully. Soft, oniony cubes of squash are answered by the salty, sharp and pungent cheese; a little sage breathes its necessary but not overbearing bitterness, and the waxy,

scorched pine nuts give quiet crunch, a hint of nubbliness, to this meltingly gorgeous concoction. I claim no credit, nor feel that wallowing in its deliciousness is any kind of boasting: it's just the ingredients at work – and boy, they really do.

Having said that, I am prepared to be lenient as regards omissions or substitutions: leave out the blue cheese if you want, or put some crumbled Cheshire or Wensleydale in its place or – if you can find it – some Italian ricotta salata. And while, for me, this is indisputably at its best with pappardelle, those thick (in both senses – wide and hefty) ribbons, which sometimes come with one ruffled edge, I think there is a good case to be made for rigatoni, the oversized corrugated tubes, or conchiglie, the toothsome, ridged, shell-shaped pasta, too. Just bear in mind, that with a sauce that is so richly resonant, the pasta must be robust.

Serves 6

1 large butternut squash, approx. 1.25–1.5kg, or 800g ready-cubed

1 medium–large onion

2 x 15ml tablespoons regular olive oil

$\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon smoked paprika

1 x 15ml tablespoon unsalted butter

3 x 15ml tablespoons marsala

125ml water

salt, to taste

100g pine nuts

500g pappardelle or other robust pasta

6 fresh sage leaves

125g soft blue cheese, such as Saint Agur

♥ Peel and de-seed the butternut squash, and cut into roughly 2cm cubes.

- ♥ Peel and finely chop the onion and fry in the olive oil in a large heavy-based pan that can accommodate the pasta later. When the onion starts to become golden, add the paprika.
- ♥ Tumble in the cubes of butternut squash and then add the butter, turning everything together in the pan. Once the squash is slicked with the oniony oil and butter, add the marsala and water. Let the pan come to a bubble, then put the lid on, turn down the heat and simmer for about 20 minutes or until tender.
- ♥ Meanwhile, put a large pan of water on for the pasta, adding salt only when it comes to the boil; and toast the pine nuts separately in a hot, dry pan on the hob until scorched a dark gold, then tip them into a bowl or plate to cool.
- ♥ Lift the lid off the squash pan and check the butternut is tender; if not, then cook for a little longer without the lid on – the squash should hold its shape and not turn to a mush. Once it's ready, season to taste – go easy with the salt because the blue cheese will add extra saltiness later – and take off the heat and let it wait for its happy union with the pappardelle.
- ♥ Cook the pasta according to packet instructions, though check a couple of minutes before the manufacturers declare it will be ready. While waiting for the pasta to cook – you should give the pan a loose stir or swirl every now and again – you can finely chop the sage leaves and crumble the cheese. Sprinkle most of the sage over the squash, keeping some back, and give a quick stir; but keep the cheese for now.
- ♥ Before you drain the pappardelle, lower a mug or cup into the pan and hive off a little pasta-cooking water, then tip the drained pasta into the resting sage-sprinkled squash pan and slowly turn the pasta in the sauce to combine; or you can do this in a capacious warmed bowl. If you find the sauce too dry, or if it all needs a little help coming together, add some of the pasta-cooking water – the starch in it encourages the sauce to emulsify, the better to cling to the pasta.
- ♥ Drop in the crumbled cheese and about a half of the pine nuts, then – much as though you were tossing a salad – gently

combine, before sprinkling the other half of the pine nuts and the reserved chopped sage on top.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Squash sauce can be cooked 1 day ahead. Simmer until the squash is just tender then transfer to non-metallic bowl to cool. Cover and refrigerate as soon as possible. Reheat gently in a saucepan before adding sage and continuing as directed in recipe.

FREEZE NOTE

Squash sauce can be frozen, in airtight container, for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.



Venetian lasagne

I call this “Venetian” lasagne, not only because in place of the layers of pasta, there are slim slabs of **polenta**, which I always associate with Venice (although there the polenta would be white rather than made with the golden grains I use here, and I doubt a Venetian would own up to using instant polenta), but also because even the word Venetian has such dreamily evocative associations.

True, few people go to Venice to eat, but I am happy to feel transported there as I ease myself into this comforting pile-up of rich meat sauce and sweet, grainy, cheese-thickened polenta, dreaming of the mournful and inky winter evening light over the lagoon.

But back to the practicalities of the everyday kitchen: I use instant polenta (one of my faithful standbys) but I find that disregarding the packet instructions to make it up with water and using chicken stock (again making the most of a storecupboard staple), rather than boiling up bones myself, as well as stirring in Parmesan, makes a big difference. I must backtrack, though, and draw attention to this tripling of my slatternly ways by admitting that I throw in grated Parmesan out of a tub. This is a newish vice, but the truth is I have found, in the fridge section of my local supermarket and emanating from Italy, tubs of fresh, ready-grated Parmesan (organic to boot – as if that were a mitigating factor) that is still tender-crumbed and authentic, if mild, tasting, rather than that sawdust with the stink of a teenage boy’s socks that used to pass itself off (and maybe still does) as Parmesan. If my heroine, the afore-mentioned Anna Del Conte, were to catch wind of this, she would, I’m sure, be disgusted. But I have to be honest, and I do keep tubs of grated and flaked Parmesan in the fridge, and very useful they are, too. By all means, grate your own Parmesan or use Cheddar (which is easier to grate and all Italians I know are mad for it).

The beauty of this recipe is that it is both a luscious treat and an easy fix. Both components – polenta and meat sauce – are made in advance, and then there is the simple matter of layering up and cooking it in the oven when you want to eat. Plus I have been known to use (both to mould the polenta and cook the finished article) throwaway foil trays (see [Kitchen Confidential](#)), thus dispensing with washing-up into the bargain.

Serves 8–10

25g dried porcini mushrooms

125ml marsala

125ml water

2 x 15ml tablespoons regular olive oil

1 onion, peeled

1 medium carrot, peeled

1 stick celery

1 teaspoon dried thyme

2 teaspoons sea salt flakes or 1 teaspoon pouring salt, or to taste

500g minced beef, preferably organic

3 x 15ml tablespoons tomato purée

1 x 400g can chopped tomatoes

1 bay leaf

1 x 375g packet instant polenta

4 teaspoons chicken stock concentrate or 1 stock cube, or more to taste

1 x 15ml (15g) tablespoon soft butter

2 x 80g tubs fresh grated Parmesan cheese

3 x foil trays or ovenproof dishes/roasting tins approx. 30 x 20 x 5cm

♥ Put the porcini mushrooms, marsala and water into a small pan and bring to the boil, then take off the heat and scissor the softened mushrooms into smaller pieces.

♥ Warm the oil in a heavy-based pan with a lid, and finely chop the onion, carrot and celery either by hand or in a processor and scrape them into the pan.

♥ Let the vegetables soften over a gentle heat for about 5 minutes or so, then stir in the thyme and salt.

♥ Add the minced beef, breaking it up with a fork, and let it brown a little. Then stir in the tomato purée, canned tomatoes and bay leaf.

♥ Add the porcini mushrooms with their dark, gorgeously flavoured liquid and bring the contents of the pan to a boil. Once the sauce is bubbling, put the lid on, turn the heat down to very low and leave to simmer gently for about 45 minutes to 1 hour. If you're using a wide pan, the shorter time should be enough; if the sauce is piled up higher, you'll probably need the full hour.

♥ While the sauce is simmering, make the polenta layers. First dampen your foil trays or roasting tins by letting some water from the cold tap splash them a bit.

♥ Make up the polenta in a pan according to the packet instructions, but first dissolve some chicken stock concentrate or a cube in the specified amount of water.

♥ Stir as instructed with your wooden spoon, and when the polenta has thickened add, beating as you go, the tablespoon of butter and one of the tubs of Parmesan. Taste to see if you want any more chicken stock, easier if you're using concentrate rather than a cube. Or just add salt to taste. Once the polenta is thick and coming away from the sides of the pan, quickly divide it between the damp foil trays, spreading each one to an even as possible layer using a rubber spatula you've passed under a cold tap. It will set almost instantly. You can put aside these polenta layers and your meat sauce for now.



♥ When you are ready to assemble the lasagne preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6. Using 1 polenta-lined foil tray or roasting tin as your dish, spoon half of the meat sauce over the polenta.

♥ Deftly tip out (it's not hard) one of the other polenta layers and place this over the meat sauce in the tray you're working on and then add the last half of meat sauce.



♥ Top with the final layer of polenta from the third tray/tin, then sprinkle the second tub of Parmesan cheese over the top.

♥ Bake for 1 hour if your meat sauce was cold and about 45 minutes if it was still warm. The cheese should have melted and become slightly golden and the lasagne must be piping hot right through.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The lasagne can be made and assembled 2 days ahead. Cover the foil tray tightly with clingfilm or foil and refrigerate. Bake as directed in the recipe, however the fridge-cold lasagne may need extra 10–20 minutes' cooking time and check the lasagne is piping hot in the centre.

FREEZE NOTE

The assembled lasagne can be frozen, wrapped in double layer of clingfilm and a layer of foil, for up to 3 months. Defrost for 24 hours in fridge then bake as above.



Sweet potato supper

This is one of those creations that came into being simply because, while trolling around the supermarket one evening, I was overwhelmed with desire for sweet potatoes and then lured by some asparagus tips, only to come home to find a packet of lardons, that French cubed bacon, winking at me from the fridge. It had to be. I've now made it quite a few times, on those evenings when I'm too tired to be paying an awful lot of attention – or busy with other duties – and yet not in any particular hurry to eat (as I so often am) five minutes ago.

Obviously, you can fiddle as you wish, but I am very, very happy with its beautiful and earthy intensity, as it is. Still, I like to add a little fire on eating, by having a bottle of mango chilli sauce on the table alongside. Tabasco would be fine, too. And if you want to gussy it up a little, arrange the potatoes on 2 plates lined with fancy salad on serving.

Serves 2

2 sweet potatoes (washed and dried but not peeled), each cut into quarters

200g smoked lardons

200g asparagus tips

6 cloves garlic, unpeeled

a few sprigs fresh thyme or 1 teaspoon dried thyme

3 x 15ml tablespoons cold-pressed rapeseed oil (see [Kitchen Confidential](#))

sea salt flakes, to taste

salad leaves, to serve (optional)

chilli sauce, to serve (optional)

1 x large round roasting tin approx. 30cm diameter or any regular roasting tin

- ♥ Preheat the oven to 220°C/gas mark 7, and get out a roasting tin for all the ingredients – I use one like a giant tarte tatin tin, but a regular smaller tin would be fine, too.
- ♥ Arrange the sweet potato chunks in the tin and then drop in most of the lardons, followed by the asparagus tips and garlic cloves and, finally, the remaining lardons.
- ♥ Sprinkle with the thyme, pour the oil over, then bake in the oven for 30 minutes, before turning the sweet potatoes over and baking for a further 30 minutes.
- ♥ Let everything cool just a little – you’ll only burn your tongue otherwise – before dividing between 2 plates, strewn (or not, to choice) with salad leaves, and sprinkling with some sea salt flakes or chilli sauce, or both, as mood dictates.





Homestyle jerk chicken

with rice and peas

I should start by saying that my home version of Jerk Chicken is different from the street-food, hot and crisp, that I've eaten in Jamaica straight out of what looks like a metal barrel on its side. Well, it would be different, wouldn't it? It's not that I haven't tried to replicate the recipe, using whole quarters of chicken, with the bone in and the skin on, but it hasn't felt right. A domestic oven just doesn't get hot enough, and although the spiced chilli crust gets gratifyingly crisp, the skin doesn't – it can't – and flabby skin is not to be countenanced. Thus, although the vinegary, limey, rum and spiced marinade makes the meat lusciously tender, you have to jettison its outer casing entirely. This seems too much of a waste to me.

Now, you will rarely find me suggesting breast meat, let alone a breast fillet, so you have to believe me when I say that the heat of the marinade, and the meat's edible carapace work best when offset by the meltingly tender white meat within. And, in turn, I must say that I have never managed to make, or find, white meat that turns out so luscious and succulent. It's a miracle all round. I'm stunned, but grateful. I have nothing to add, save the suggestion that you could consider working the same magic with some lean pork tenderloin, too.

Don't cook this, though, unless you like it hot. And I mean hot. There's no point choosing to make this and then trying to find a way to tame it, say by taking out the seeds from the chilli (though you could, if you must). Besides, although it packs a major punch, the sweet, creamy, coconutty rice that just has to be served with it, offers the perfect counterbalancing salve. In the same spirit, I suggest the [No-Churn Piña Colada Ice Cream](#) to follow.

Serves 6, *with the Rice and peas that follow*

6 chicken breasts (without skin or bone) or chicken supreme joints with the peg bones still attached

2 teaspoons ground allspice

2 teaspoons dried thyme

2 teaspoons cayenne pepper

2 teaspoons ground ginger

2 teaspoons ground nutmeg

2 teaspoons ground cinnamon

2 cloves garlic, peeled

1 x 4cm piece ginger, peeled and cut into chunks

2 x 15ml tablespoons dark muscovado sugar

60ml dark rum

60ml lime juice

60ml soy sauce

125ml cider vinegar

2 fresh red chillies, whole

1 onion, peeled and quartered

♥ Slash the chicken breasts, 3 slashes a breast, each cut about 2cm deep on the diagonal. Put in an oblong dish, slashed-side down.

♥ Put all the other ingredients in the processor and blitz to a dark, earthy paste, then pour and spread over the chicken pieces and leave to marinate out of the fridge for 2–4 hours or in the fridge, covered, overnight.

♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6. Double-line a shallow roasting tin with foil. Tip into it the chicken with its marinade, slashed-side up and roast for 30 minutes.

♥ Take the tin out of the oven, to pour off excess watery juices. Use a pastry brush and spoon to place any paste back on the chicken, then return it to the oven and cook for a further 30

minutes, by which time it will be cooked through and tender with a thick fiery crust. You could get started on the Rice and Peas once the chicken's back in the oven for its final stint.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Jerk paste can be made 1 day ahead. Transfer to non-metallic bowl and press a piece of clingfilm onto the surface. Cover bowl tightly with second layer of clingfilm and refrigerate. The chicken can be marinated up to 24 hours in advance. Cover dish tightly with clingfilm and store in the fridge.

FREEZE NOTE

The chicken in its marinade can be frozen, in a resealable bag, for up to 1 month. Defrost overnight in the fridge – put the bag in a bowl to catch any leaks.

Rice and peas

Although this Caribbean staple is called Rice and Peas it is, in fact, rice and beans. Traditionally gungo peas – also called gunga peas, Congo peas, no-eye peas or, most familiarly, pigeon peas – are used, but don't make it a sticking point. I've often used black-eyed peas and, once or twice, borlotti or kidney beans. The truth is, as the song almost has it, any bean will do.



Serves 6

1 x 400g can gungo peas

1 x 15ml tablespoon vegetable or groundnut oil

1 onion, peeled and finely chopped

1 red chilli, de-seeded and finely chopped

2 cloves garlic, peeled and finely chopped

400g long grain rice

1 x 400ml can coconut milk

600ml chicken or vegetable stock

1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme leaves

salt, to taste

♥ Drain and rinse the gungo peas, and heat the oil in a heavy-based pan that has a lid.

♥ Fry the onion for about 5 minutes, stirring every now and again, letting it soften and brown a little. Then add the chopped chilli and garlic, and give everything a good stir around.

♥ Now stir in the rice, making sure it is all slicked with oil, then pour in the coconut milk and chicken or vegetable stock, and stir in the drained gungo peas.

♥ Bring to a bubble, clamp on the lid, turn down the heat to very low and let it cook gently for 15 minutes.

♥ Check the rice is cooked through and the liquid is all absorbed – give the rice another 5 minutes if need be. Sprinkle with the freshly chopped thyme, and season with salt if desired, forking it through.

♥ Pile up each dinner plate with coconutty rice and sit a piece of hot-crust chicken proudly on top.

Making leftovers right

Coconutty rice soup

Should you have leftovers – and don't count on it if you are 6 round the table – refrigerate as soon as cooled and within 1–2 days you can simply snip some chicken into the rice and reheat

*until piping hot. However, I love this in a new form: a thick, **coconutty soup** punctured by fiery bursts of tender meat. Add some coconut milk and chicken stock to the leftover rice, along with some freshly grated ginger and a spritz of lime juice, and heat up, adding the chicken, cut into strips or small chunks, once it starts bubbling. When the meat's piping hot, season to taste then pour your soup into a bowl (or bowls) and scatter with freshly chopped coriander and slurp gratefully.*

San Francisco fish stew

As a European, I find the flash and glint of the New World alluringly exotic, but the truth is this robust fish stew is, originally, a Continental concoction. Think of it as a bi-coastal offering, one that started in Genoa and has flourished in San Francisco. Its real name is *cioppino* – pronounced *chopeeno* – and this is rather a chop-chopeeno, since what I have produced is a slightly speeded-up version.

You can find this cooked with white wine or red, and I go for the latter, not least because it makes a change (as does the inclusion of tomatoes) from the way I'm used to cooking fish, but also because I love the rich gutsiness of the dish it produces. It makes sense to use a Californian red and, believe me, that is no hardship. At my last supper, I hope to have a glorious vintage of Ridge Geyserville to wash everything down.

For me, at home, whatever they do in restaurants, this is very much a main-course stew not a first-course soup and, as such, I sometimes put a bowl of baby new potatoes on the table, too, for people to spear and dip into the wine-dark seafood as they go. If you feel like it, you can make garlicky croutes to go alongside, instead: just get a baguette, cut it into long thin diagonals; put 3 tablespoons olive oil into a dish and mince or grate in a clove of garlic and then brush the thin slices of bread with this, before baking on a grill pan in an oven preheated to 200°C/gas mark 6 for about 10 minutes. But, you know, just a couple of plain baguettes pulled apart at the table or – more in the San Franciscan vernacular – a loaf of sourdough cut into squat slices is accompaniment enough.

Its Genoese origins explain the final and customary addition of basil; I mention this below, but have forgone it myself. Sometimes, I add a leaf or two to each bowl at the end, but as often find that I am happy without that final flourish. If

the basil on offer isn't fragrantly inviting, don't bother, but perhaps consider using some basil-infused oil to fry the onion in upfront.



Serves 4–6

1 x 15ml tablespoon olive or basil oil

1 red onion, peeled and chopped

1 bulb fennel, quartered and sliced thinly across

1 long red chilli, de-seeded and chopped

2 cloves garlic, peeled and chopped

3 x 15ml tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

sea salt flakes, to taste

500ml good red wine

1 x 400g can chopped tomatoes

150g cherry tomatoes, halved

500g mussels

500g clams

8 large raw prawns (shell on), 300g total, defrosted if frozen

375g gurnard fillet or monkfish, or any available hearty fish, cut into chunks

a few basil leaves (optional)

♥ Heat the oil in a heavy-based pan, that comes with a lid, and cook the chopped onion and fennel for about 5 minutes. Then add the chilli, garlic, chopped parsley and a sprinkling of salt, cooking for another 5 minutes.

♥ Add the red wine, canned tomatoes and halved cherry tomatoes. Bring to a boil and then simmer for 10 minutes with the lid on.

♥ In a sink filled with cold water, soak, clean and sort through the mussels and clams, pulling the beards off the mussels. You must discard any mussel or clam shells that are cracked or that remain open after soaking – tap any open shells on the side of the sink and, if they stay open, throw them away.

♥ Add the whole prawns and the chunks of fish to the pan, then let it come back to the boil with the lid on and simmer for about another 5 minutes.

♥ Drain the mussels and clams and tip them into the stew, give it a quick stir, then clamp on the lid and let it cook on a medium to high heat for 5 minutes or until the mussels and clams have opened.

♥ Let it stand for a moment, for any grit that might have been in the shellfish to sink to the bottom, then ladle the fish stew into warmed bowls and, if you feel like it, sprinkle a few basil leaves on top as you serve with garlicky croutes or sourdough slices alongside. Don't force open or eat any mussels or clams that have not opened during cooking or that have damaged shells – these should be discarded.



THE SOLACE OF STIRRING

[Saffron risotto](#)

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It may not be a ground-breaking claim to say that risotto must, surely, be the ultimate comfort food, but perhaps lack of originality here serves only to make the case: the low murmur of universal agreement on the subject is entirely the appropriate response. We all know, too, just what makes it so comforting: the carb-kiss of all that starchy rice brings with it a dreamy kind of calm that all-too-often eludes us. On top of that, there is the fact that every mouthful you eat is exactly the same as the one that precedes it and the one that follows. In some moods that crucial lack of challenge, as well as the soporific, baby-feeding repetition of taking spoon from dish to mouth and back again, unthinkingly, can be soothing in itself. You don't focus, you just feed: this is bowl food at its becalming best.

But what no one seems to say, or even to realize, is that the actual process of making risotto is the first essential de-stressing step. The best place, often, to soothe the savage breast is stoveside but making risotto is, I've found, more than anything else a way to heal and help a busy head. In yoga, that frenzied buzzing and constant internal chatter is known as monkey-brain: if you've got it, you'll know it, and believe me, a spot of risotto-making is the nearest cure I'll ever get to simian cerebellum syndrome.

I find any simple form of cooking calming in itself, but risotto-making (like baking) relies on the ritual of unchallenging but repeated actions. Unlike baking, the rewards

are all-but instant. Twenty minutes after you've tipped the rice into your pan, you've decompressed and dinner's on the table. But the principle of mindless repetitive activity holds; more, it's intensified. When you cook risotto, it's not just that you are required to stir, but that you are required to do nothing but stir. You can't leave the pan and tend to anything else, you just have to stand there and stir, stir, stir. There's something so mesmeric, so absorbing about this constant stirring that I begin to understand the Buddhist notion of becoming one with what you're doing. After a while, I all but hypnotize myself, staring into the pan as I stir, watching as the rice absorbs the stock, adding more stock and watching that, too, being absorbed; after a while, I am not aware of anything other than the stirring. This is as near to meditation as I'll ever come.

Of course, I know that I make life easier for myself: were I to make my own stock for each risotto, I'd be having to fuff about for days before the actual event. I believe in emergency measures, underwritten by quality control. I buy cartons of organic stock from the chill-cabinet of the supermarket, though I am never without the back-up of a little broth or stock concentrate from a jar or a cube. But then, I have nothing against making life easier; neither should you.

And that is, indeed, the very point: risotto isn't just comfort food but, most crucially, comfort cooking.



Saffron risotto

This is my version of a proper risotto alla Milanese, and not so very different from the way I learnt to cook it when I was young and lived in Italy. I have dispensed, regretfully, with the luscious *midollo* to start it off with, but please, I implore you, if you wish to proceed with all due respect, beg a friendly butcher for some bone marrow and add it along with the butter at the beginning, though maybe reduce the butter a bit.

At the point at which the wine is thrown over the rice, the Milanese would, as a rule here, go for red wine; most often, I'd go for white wine or dry white vermouth in a risotto, but here my choice is for dry marsala. I love its throaty richness, and moreover its oaky tinge seems more in keeping with the gold of the risotto.

Serves 2 as a main course (with some left over) or 4 as a starter or side dish

1 litre chicken or vegetable stock (ready-made, concentrate or cube is fine), preferably organic

1 x 0.4g packet saffron threads (about 1 teaspoon)

50g butter, plus 1 tablespoon (15g)

1 x 15ml tablespoon regular olive oil

50g shallots, finely chopped, or ½ onion, finely chopped

250g risotto rice

125ml dry marsala

4 x 15ml tablespoons (approx. 25g) grated Parmesan cheese, plus extra to serve

salt and pepper, to taste

♥ Heat the stock in a saucepan, add the saffron threads and put over the lowest heat just to keep it warm.

- ♥ Melt the 50g butter and 1 tablespoon oil in a wide, shallow, heavy-based saucepan over a low to medium heat, add the chopped shallots (or onion) and cook for a couple of minutes or so, stirring frequently with a wooden spoon, until softened.
- ♥ Add the risotto rice and keep stirring for a minute or so, then turn up the heat and add the marsala – which will bubble up excitedly – stirring until it is absorbed.
- ♥ Start ladling in the hot, golden, saffron-infused stock, letting each ladleful become absorbed as you stir before even thinking of adding the next.
- ♥ Stir and ladle until the rice is cooked but with still a slight bite to it – about 18 minutes, maybe a little before – by which time you will probably have finished all your stock. However, if you find the rice is cooked to the texture you like before the stock's run out, do not finish it.
- ♥ Turn off the heat, stirring still, and beat in the remaining tablespoon butter and the Parmesan, then season to taste. Serve immediately, by straightaway spooning this soft, gloopy, gloom-banishing mixture into warmed shallow bowls or plates, with some grated Parmesan on the table.



Making Leftovers Right

Saffron rice cakes with bacon

*Much as I love arancini, which I think of as the Italian version of Scotch eggs, that's to say a ball of leftover risotto, stuffed with mozzarella or ham or both, or whatever the cook chooses, then covered in breadcrumbs and deep-fried, I would no more cook one than I would a Scotch egg. Well, there's part of me that is fascinated to have a go, but calm good sense intervenes before I can give in to the madness. The **saffron rice cakes with bacon** that I make with leftover risotto are perhaps even more delicious – and certainly easier both to make and digest. But note that the cooked rice, to be kept, must be refrigerated as soon as cooled or within 1 hour and used within 2 days.*

I'm working on the premise that you might have about 200g (approx. 1 cup in US measures) of risotto left. Heat a heavy-based pan and cook 4 rashers of American-style bacon, that's to say immensely thin-cut streaky, until crisp, and

remove these to a piece of foil and make a package out of that to keep them warm. Now spoon into the pan little mounds of risotto to land in patty-shapes about 6cm in diameter (you should get 4 little cakes) and fry the patties in the bacon fat, giving them 2 minutes a side, until piping hot all the way through, before transferring to plates and topping each golden patty with a piece of bacon.

You know it makes sense.



Risotto Bolognese

There's no denying that this recipe involves a fair bit of fiddle-faddling, but so soothing is the process, so welcoming and enveloping the savoury smells emanating from stove and oven as it cooks, so ambrosial the taste, so universally rewarding the experience, that the labour involved can be embraced gladly. If you don't appreciate this, then you don't deserve it.

This is really a meat sauce risotto, but that makes it sound too sloppy, too unspecial. This is no run-of-the-mill meat sauce, not least because it contains veal stock. I buy jars of good-quality veal stock to have on standby, as I know I'd make this much less often were I to have to go shopping especially. However, I'd make it even less if I had to make my own veal stock. And if it seems unorthodox to be cooking the meat sauce in the oven, I agree, it is. You can ignore me, and just cook everything on the hob. But putting the pot in the oven and leaving it there to cook is hardly what football managers would call a Big Ask. Besides, the method is vastly superior: flavour is intensified, texture is more melting and tender. If I have the time, this is now my ragù route of choice.

The meat sauce here, that ragù which for us is always Bolognese, is runnier than you would make if this were dressing pasta, and pointedly so: it is all these meaty juices with which the rice will become so delectably swollen later.

A final note: I have marked the anchovies "optional" simply because I know that some people have a thing about them. As a general rule, I would advise you to pay no heed to such faddiness, not least because good anchovies just melt into the sauce, bringing their salty resonance with them. However, if you are feeding children with laser detectors in place of palates and who cannot cope with fish of any sort, give up now. As a point of fact, children just do have more taste buds than us, and to them food tastes so much more vehemently of

itself; when they say they cannot, *just cannot*, eat broccoli (though thank goodness, it's about the one vegetable my children would eat), it's because that brassic tinny-ness we taste is magnified enormously in their uncorrupted little mouths. And when old people say that food doesn't taste as it used to, it is probably their taste buds which have deteriorated rather more than the food – sometimes, however, it's undeniably both.

Serves 6–8

1 onion, peeled and quartered

1 carrot, peeled and halved

1 stick celery, halved

1 small clove garlic, peeled

handful fresh parsley

75g rindless streaky bacon

4 anchovy fillets (optional)

50g unsalted butter, plus 1 x 15ml tablespoon (15g)

½ teaspoon regular olive oil

250g minced beef, preferably organic

80ml marsala

1 x 400g can chopped tomatoes

1 x 15ml tablespoon tomato purée

2 x 15ml tablespoons full-fat milk

2 litres veal stock (500ml plus 1.5 litres), preferably organic

2 bay leaves

500g risotto rice

6 x 15ml tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese, plus extra to serve

salt and pepper, to taste

♥ Preheat the oven to 150°C/gas mark 2. Put the onion, carrot, celery, garlic, parsley, bacon and anchovy into a processor and whiz to a fine mush.

♥ Heat the 50g butter and ½ teaspoon oil in a deep, heavy ovenproof casserole with a lid. Tip in the contents of the processor and cook for about 5 minutes until softened.

♥ Add the meat and let it brown a little, breaking it up in the pan, then add the marsala. Process the tomatoes until smooth, and add to the meat.

♥ Stir the tomato purée into the milk and then add this mixture to the pan, along with 500ml veal stock and the bay leaves.

♥ Bring to the boil on the hob, then clamp on the lid and transfer the casserole to the oven for 1 hour.

♥ Once the meat sauce is out of the oven, fish out the bay leaves. Heat the remaining 1.5 litres veal stock in another saucepan and keep that warm over a very low heat, then put the meat sauce on a low heat next to it.

♥ Stir the rice into the meat sauce, and then add a ladleful of the hot stock. Stir until the rice and sauce become thick again and then add another hot ladleful of stock.

♥ Continue to add the stock as needed, though only a small ladleful at a time, stirring all the time as you go. Check to see if the rice is cooked after about 18 minutes – you may not need all the stock before this happens.

♥ When it's ready, turn off the heat and stir or beat in, with your wooden spoon, the cheese and the extra tablespoon of butter before seasoning to taste and doling out into shallow warmed bowls. Serve with extra Parmesan, if you like.



MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The meat sauce can be cooked up to 2 days ahead. Transfer to non-metallic bowl to cool then cover and refrigerate as soon as possible. Return to the casserole and reheat gently, stirring occasionally, until piping hot, then add the rice and continue as directed in recipe.

FREEZE NOTE

The cooled meat sauce can be frozen in airtight container for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.

Making leftovers right

Bolognese patties

*I could keep eating the risotto **Bolognese** forever – it's only incredible self-control that makes me stop, and so that I can make these gorgeous risotto burgers with the leftovers. (And note that rice leftovers should be refrigerated as soon as cooled or within 1 hour, and used within 2 days.) Really, these are patties topped with a slice of melting cheese, but risotto burgers are what my children called them the first time they had them, and now that they are teenagers, I cling to their sweet little ways of now-distant memory.*

Working on the presumption that you have 1½ breakfast cupfuls (300g should you care to weigh it) of leftover risotto, make into 3 patties about a handful-sized each, measuring roughly, when formed, 8cm in diameter. Put these in the fridge for 1 hour, then preheat the oven to 200°C/ gas mark 6.

When the patties have had their time in the fridge, get out a cast iron pan or frying pan that will also go in the oven, and put a little oil in it. Fry the patties for 5 minutes then, using 2 spatulas, flip them over to cook for 3 minutes on the other side. Don't worry if they break up a bit, as you can push them back into shape in the pan.

Transfer the pan of patties to the oven to cook for 10 minutes, topping them with thinly sliced cheese of choice after 5 minutes, and make sure they are piping hot right through before serving, perhaps with peas.



Squink risotto

I notice that I have said I usually use white wine or dry white vermouth in a risotto, but must concede that the recipes here don't appear to bear this out. I've got an excuse with this one, too: the whole point of this risotto is that it's black, tinted by the squid ink (the squink of my title) and I had no desire to lessen its impact with some pallid white wine. But it's not just a question of colour: the squid ink is so richly, headily flavoured that nothing less than a robust red would stand up to it.



As strange as it might sound for so exotic a dish, this may even pass muster as a storecupboard standby. The rice, the stock and the squid ink (it comes in sachets, from a good fishmonger or Italian deli or online stockist) can be kept easily. I have marked the squid-ring topping as optional, but even that can live in the deep-freeze for a few months.

While I am more than happy to eat it plain black, I can't help feeling cheered by the jaunty *tricolore* adornment provided by the squid rings, red chilli pepper and parsley. Not

that I'm sure being cheered is altogether the point of such a beautiful, sombre dish, the perfect date meal for Goths.



Serves 2 as main course, or 4 as starter

250g (cleaned weight) baby squid (optional)

1 litre vegetable stock (ready-made, concentrate or cube is fine), preferably organic

2 x 15ml tablespoons regular olive oil, plus 2 teaspoons

6 spring onions, finely sliced

1 clove garlic, peeled

250g risotto rice

125ml red wine

2 sachets squid ink

1 fresh red chilli, de-seeded and finely chopped

**small handful chopped fresh parsley (approx. 2 x 15ml
tablespoons)**

pepper, to taste

♥ Cut the squid (if using) into fine rings and set aside while you get on with the risotto.

♥ Heat the stock or make up the concentrate/cube with boiling water, and keep the stock warm in a saucepan on the lowest heat.

♥ Warm the 2 tablespoons oil in a large, heavy-based saucepan and soften the sliced spring onions for 2 minutes on a low heat. Keep stirring and don't let them burn.

♥ Grate in the garlic and turn up the heat. Toss in the rice and turn it in the oil so it is slicked and shiny.

♥ Pour in the red wine and let it bubble up over the rice.

♥ Wearing CSI – disposable vinyl – gloves, snip in the squid ink and carefully dunk the squeezed-out sachets into the separate pan of hot stock to get out any remaining ink.

♥ Then add and keep adding ladlefuls of hot stock to the rice, letting one ladleful be absorbed before adding the next, stirring all the while.

♥ When the rice has had 15 minutes, you can be less assiduous on the stirring front and get on with the squid, if you're using this.

♥ In a frying pan, heat the remaining 2 teaspoons olive oil and the chilli until sizzling, then add the squid rings and cook, stirring or shaking the pan a little, for 3 minutes. Season with ground pepper, to taste.

♥ By this time, the black risotto should be ready, so divide it between warmed shallow bowls or plates, top with chilli and squid, if using, and scatter with parsley.

THE BONE COLLECTION

Patara lamb shanks

Ham hocks in cider *with leeks in white sauce*

Cidery ham stock

Ham and leek pies

Ham and leek “Welsh” pasties

Cidery pea soup

Ham hock and soya bean salad

Beer-braised pork knuckles *with caraway, garlic, apples and potatoes*

Asian braised shin of beef *with hot and sour shredded salad*

Tangy parsnip and potato mash

Fiery potato cakes with fried eggs

Roast duck legs and potatoes

Greek lamb chops with lemon and potatoes

Conker-shiny spare ribs with pineapple and molasses

Shoulder of lamb with garlic, thyme, black olives and rosé wine

Minetta marrow bones

Roast rib of beef *with wild mushrooms and Red Leicester mash*

Thai tomato salad

The never the boon the swetter is the flesshe, as John Trevisa’s fourteenth-century translation of Bartholomew’s *On the Properties of Things* has it or, less euphoniously (especially when you consider that Trevisa must have had a Cornish accent) and according to current versions of this age-old

adage, the nearer the bone the sweeter the meat. There's something about the ecstatic appetite evoked, along with a certain sibilant, tongue-flickering menace of the earlier construction that particularly appeals to me, or perhaps that I read into it. By contrast, the contemporary version, with its jaunty assonance, seems to imply a brisk, look-on-the-bright-side cheerfulness in the face of rationing and insufficiency, whether imposed by war or want. But, any which way, the saying holds deliciously true: ask any butcher or committed carnivore. The lean, boneless cuts may be more fashionably desirable (and expensive) but for sheer, exuberant flavour and meat that truly earns the cliché "melt-in-the-mouth", you need to sink your gnashers into one of the cheaper, fattier joints on the bone.

Being a brutalist, I relish a trotter or a knuckle and the whole cartilaginous variety of supermarket-unfriendly joints. My motivation is not the loutish, supremacist leanings of the lager-and-vindaloo crowd; I just love the particular sweet denseness of the meat that cleaves close to the bone, and the silkiness you get only from a fat-stippled cut. But there's more to it than that: it's also the repudiation of waste I appreciate. The Italians insist that they eat every part of the pig except the squeal. Ours, a more squeamish society, blanches at eating any cut of meat that resembles the part of the animal it once was. It's not a crime to be so disposed, though if you are, then much of this chapter is not for you. But don't turn away just yet. Even those (vegetarians aside, of course) who cannot contemplate chowing down on a knuckle or shin, or sucking out the gloopy essence from a marrow bone may yet take pleasure in a succulent shoulder or shank of lamb, deep-flavoured duck legs perched upon the cubes of golden potatoes they're roasted with, a platter of sticky, sauce-shiny spare ribs and a magisterial joint of beef on the bone.

There are two decisive factors – quite apart from the food – in cooking: one is time, the other cost. What you save on one, you generally have to spend on the other. While it's not a failsafe rule, it's a very useful rule of thumb. To wit,

many of the cuts below are gratifyingly cost-cutting but rely on the low and slow approach in the kitchen. If it seems as if these recipes sit at the opposite end of the culinary spectrum from the “express” approach, that’s only partly true. When speed is of the essence, well, maybe a ham hock isn’t the supper to choose, but for ease, it’s hard to beat. Food that’s a long time a-cookin’ isn’t necessarily a lot of fuss to fix. The recipes that follow are a kitchen-friendly case in point.



Patara lamb shanks

Lamb shanks have been a gastro-pub and modish favourite for a while, and with reason. I've done my round of North African flavoured braises and honey-sweetened stews, and even tried out a plain roast version or two myself, but this, the Lamb Shank Panaeng I had at Patara, my local Thai restaurant, was a revelation. Now, it would be much more complicated if you were making the panang paste yourself, but the chef assured me that the option of using a bought paste was respectable, and recommended in particular the Mae Ploy brand. I was happy to comply, and now have a stash of their panang curry paste in the fridge at all times. (The spelling, in English, can vary from panang and panaeng to penang, I've found, but it is only ever going to be a transliteration, so variations are to be expected.) My change in name for the recipe is a mark of gratitude to the restaurant who provided it. I should state, though, that I have, with humility and respect (along with a deal of laziness and some housewifely concerns for wastage), made a modest change from their original.

As with Thai curries generally, the overall consistency of the sauce is relatively runny; all the better, then, to be mopped up with copious quantities of plain, steamed rice.

If you're lucky, you will be able to find the recommended brand of paste at the supermarket but, failing that, any oriental food shop should stock it. And if you can't find the Thai basil (you will need a specialist stockist for this), you can substitute fresh coriander.

Serves 6

1 x 15ml tablespoon vegetable oil

6 lamb shanks

salt and pepper

3 x 400ml cans coconut milk

1 litre water

4 x 15ml tablespoons panang curry paste

3 x 15ml tablespoons fish sauce

1½ x 15ml tablespoons light brown sugar

spritz of lime juice, plus whole limes cut into wedges

small bunch Thai basil or fresh coriander

rice, to serve



♥ Preheat the oven to 170°C/gas mark 3. Heat the oil in a large wide casserole or ovenproof pan, and season the lamb shanks

with salt and pepper before browning them in the pan. You may need to do this in batches to get them properly coloured, removing them, as you go, to a large bowl.

♥ Get rid of the oil in the pan carefully, then put the shanks back in with the coconut milk and 1 litre water, which should just about cover the lamb. Cover tightly with a lid or foil and cook in the preheated oven for 2–2½ hours, until exquisitely tender.

♥ Once out of the oven, remove the shanks to a roasting dish, along with 1 litre of the coconutty stock they have been cooking in. Cover with foil and put back in the oven, turning it down to 150°C/gas mark 2. Leave the rest of the stock in your original casserole.

♥ Add the panang paste, fish sauce, sugar and spritz of lime to a bowl and whisk with a ladleful or so of the coconutty cooking liquid from your original casserole, then whisk this mixture back into the casserole. Take the roasting dish of shanks out of the oven, then the shanks out of their dish and add them back to the casserole. (You will just have to cope with throwing away the litre of coconut liquid from the oven dish. You *could* always let it get cold, remove the lamb fat, freeze and use the liquid for another curry, but I find I end up throwing it away at some future date.)

♥ Chop the Thai basil (or coriander) and add most of that, keeping some back for a final sprinkling at the end. Put the casserole over a medium heat and simmer the lamb for 5 minutes or so, making sure everything is heated through.

♥ Serve the lamb shanks in wide, shallow bowls with Thai scented rice or jasmine rice, giving each person a shank and a ladleful of sauce. Sprinkle some more Thai basil (or coriander) over each bowl, and serve with lime wedges.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Cook the lamb for 1 ¾ hours. Transfer to non-metallic bowl to cool, then cover and refrigerate. Can be kept in fridge for up to 2 days. When ready to use, put lamb and cooking liquid back into casserole dish, heat on the stove until just boiling then

cover and transfer to oven for 45 minutes to 1 hour, until the meat is piping hot. Continue with recipe as directed.

FREEZE NOTE

Cook and cool as above, then freeze for up to 3 months in airtight container. Defrost overnight in the fridge and reheat and finish as above.

Ham hocks in cider

with leeks in white sauce

I've played around with all sorts of cooking liquids for ham – and stand by my Coca-Cola, cherry coke, ginger ale and other fanciful yet foolproof versions – but my fallback choice for good, old-fashioned-tasting ham, the sort that emanated reassuringly from my mother's kitchen, is cider. The slightly sour, spiked apple juice sets off the saltiness of ham so well and at the same time brings its tender sweetness to the fore. I prefer a good, dry cider; but I can see the argument for using sweet cider (or, indeed, apple juice) – my only reservation being that I find the stock yielded by these too sweet to be ideal for leftover usage, and it seems a pity to lose out on a good pot of [Cidery Pea Soup](#) later. My stipulation of smoked ham, below, is simply an honest statement of my own preference: if you want to use “green” ham, please do; so much – so importantly – in cooking is just a matter of taste.

I don't peel my carrots here, since I tend to use organic ones which aren't sprayed, but if you feel safer doing so, then you should. I can never see the point of peeling onions when they're just going into a stockpot, though.

The partners to the ham have to be, for me, my mother's leeks in white sauce and a bowl of plain boiled or steamed potatoes. In fact, what I really like to do is steam the potatoes above the pan of cider-bubbling ham for the last hour or 45 minutes (depending on their size) of its cooking.



Serves 6, with the *Leeks in White Sauce*

2 smoked ham hocks/knuckles (just over 1.5kg each)

1 litre cider, preferably dry

2 sticks celery, halved

2 carrots, each cut into 2 or 3

4 small onions, halved

**stalks from fat bunch flat-leaf parsley, or whole small
supermarket bunch parsley**

1 x 15ml tablespoon black peppercorns

1 x 15ml tablespoon fennel seeds

3 cloves

1 x 15ml tablespoon dark muscovado sugar

♥ Soak the hocks overnight in cold water in a cool place, to de-salt them. Alternatively, just under an hour before you plan to cook them, put the hocks in a pan, cover with cold water, bring to the boil, drain and then proceed normally with the next step.

♥ Drain and rinse the hocks, then put them into a pan with all the other ingredients, add cold water to more or less cover the hocks, and bring to a boil.

♥ Simmer the hocks for about 2 hours, partially covered with a lid, by which time the meat should be tender and coming away from the bone. Take the hocks out of the stock and let them cool a little on a carving board before you slice or chunk up the meat, discarding fat, skin, cartilage and bones – although I admit I happily eat a bit of the detritus as I carve, no matter how much it spooks those around me. Leave the stock to cool in the pan while you eat.

♥ Strain the [cooking liquid](#) after you've eaten the ham – it's easier to do when it isn't piping hot – and set aside for future use.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Ham hocks can be cooked 1 hour ahead of serving. Once cooked, transfer pan to a cool place and leave, covered, for up to 1 hour. To reheat, put the pan back on the stove and bring up to a simmer before transferring hocks to a carving board.

FREEZE NOTE

Cooled stock should be transferred to airtight container and kept in fridge for 1–2 days or frozen for up to 3 months.

FURTHER NOTES

If wished, hocks can instead be braised in their liquid in a roasting tin, tented with foil. Bring to a bubble on hob before putting into a 170°C/gas mark 3 oven for 2 hours.

Chunked or sliced ham leftovers can be stored in fridge, tightly wrapped in foil, for up to 3 days. Leftovers can also be frozen for up to 2 months.



Leeks in white sauce

This is so much the taste of my childhood, that I've found it hard to turn it into a conventional recipe; I've always cooked it without weighing or measuring, and somehow feel inhibited about cooking it in any way other than on autopilot (as though by concentrating I can't remember). But, luckily, I have one Hettie Potter as Boswell to my kitchen-bound Johnson, and together we have made a necessarily reliable blueprint.

For all that, I do have a few little muttering footnotes to the ingredients and method, and they are as follows:

Sometimes, I slice the leeks into much longer logs, cutting each large leek into 3 or 4; more commonly, though, I slice them relatively fine, which makes for something more approximating a vegetable-loaded sauce than a sauce-swathed vegetable. Either is good; but the latter is more comforting, and quicker to cook.

I often make this to accompany roast chicken, roast pork or sausages, in which case I splosh vermouth or white wine into the leek-water; when I'm cooking it with the Ham Hocks, it seems foolish not to use some of the cidery ham-cooking liquid instead.

Although I have given proper instructions to melt the butter before adding the flour when making the roux, I confess I usually do as my mother impatiently did and bung butter, flour and stock into the pan at the same time and stir all together as they melt.

My mother always put half of a crumbled chicken stock cube in her white sauce and I instinctively follow her lead, although I use a relatively new-fangled liquid stock concentrate in its place. However, in times of forgetful housekeeping, when I've found myself with no stock concentrate, I've discovered that a touch of English mustard can similarly spice up the white sauce. The rule is taste as you go, and if you think you want more stock or more mustard or a little of both, then add ...

Serves 6 amply with the hocks

4 trimmed leeks, cut into approx. 3cm chunks

60ml vermouth (or 60ml ham stock from [Ham Hocks](#))

2 teaspoons sea salt flakes or 1 teaspoon pouring salt (half these quantities if using ham stock)

for the white sauce:

75g soft unsalted butter

75g plain flour

¼ teaspoon English mustard powder or ½ teaspoon made English mustard or 1 teaspoon chicken stock concentrate

250ml full-fat milk

250ml leek water, plus 60ml

generous splodge double cream (optional)

freshly ground white pepper, to taste

♥ Put the chunked leeks into a pan, add the vermouth (or ham stock) then enough water just to cover them. Add the salt (halve the amount if you're using ham stock rather than vermouth), bring to a boil, and let bubble for 10 minutes, uncovered.

♥ Meanwhile, melt the butter in a heavy-based pan, whisk in the flour and the mustard or stock concentrate, and cook this, your seasoned roux, for a couple of minutes, whisking all the while, until you have a bubbly, yellow paste.

♥ Drain the leeks over a measuring jug and reserve the liquid.

♥ Whisk the milk a little at a time into the roux, and keep whisking until the sauce looks as if it might come away from the sides of the pan. Now whisk in 250ml of the leek water, then change to a wooden spoon and simmer the sauce for about 10 minutes, stirring patiently.

♥ Taste, and season the sauce with salt or a little more chicken stock concentrate if you prefer.

♥ Add the leeks to the sauce, stir gently with your wooden spoon and add 60ml, give or take, of the leek water, as needed.

♥ Taste again, and add a tablespoon or so of cream, if you feel so inclined, turn out into a warmed bowl and grind some white pepper over before serving.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The leeks can be made 2 days ahead. Transfer cooked leeks and sauce to a bowl. Press a piece of clingfilm or greaseproof paper on to the surface to prevent a skin from forming, and

cool. Cover and refrigerate. Reheat very gently in a saucepan, stirring frequently to prevent the sauce from burning. Add a splash of extra milk if the sauce is too thick. Not recommended to use reheated leeks in sauce for [pies](#) or [pasties](#).



Making leftovers right

Cidery ham stock

The first thing to do – shortly after cooking the Ham Hocks – is to taste the ham and cider liquid, or [cidery ham stock](#) (however you like to think of it), to see whether its life is worth preserving. Be strict with yourself: I have at times talked myself into re-using a ham stock that is either too salty or too sweet (even when diluted), only to waste time making soups no one wants to eat. But let us presume the cider and ham broth you have, murky in colour though it will be, is ready for recycling; if you've followed the recipe for [Ham Hocks in Cider](#), it certainly should be, though feel free to dilute with water to taste.

If you think you won't get round to using it up in the next day or so – and you may well not be in the mood to revisit the flavours of meals just gone by – be sure to freeze the stock (as soon as it's cooled), well strained and in batches of 250ml. Otherwise, you will probably do as I do and keep it in large batter jugs in the fridge only to have to throw it away, wastefully, after a couple of days. (As the child of parents who

were themselves children in the Second World War, I'm still made to shudder at the thought of committing the crime of waste.) Anyway, with the stock in the deep-freeze, you know you have flavourful liquid to hand to add to a **meat sauce** – even, yes, one made of minced beef – or to a **deeper-toned béchamel**. You can use it to **poach chicken**, or in place of water in pretty well any stew (though be mindful that those eating such chicken or beef stews, must be pork eaters), or to add – however unItalian this may be – to certain **risotti** and to make fabulous **soup**. I often rejig the Chick Pea and Pasta Soup from How to Eat by sloshing in some ham stock (though here saltiness is particularly to be guarded against, as you don't want the chick peas to toughen as they cook, so I wouldn't use only ham broth to make up the liquid), and it makes a fantastic base for a sweet potato and squash soup.

Cidery pea soup

But probably the soup I make most often is my **Cidery Pea Soup**; indeed, any time I've had the ham one weekend, I know the soup will be my children's tea or supper (and mine) early in the week that follows. And slurped with much appreciation – sometimes cruelly unfamiliar to a mother – it is. To bulk it up, on lazy days I add a plain, but nonetheless prized sandwich made with leftover ham, or a toasted cheese sandwich if the ham has all been eaten up.

Ham and leek pies

For a bit more of a treat, should there be ham as well some leeks in white sauce left, I make easy **Ham and Leek Pies**. For these, I do no more than shred the ham, stir it into the leeks in white sauce and put it in bowls or ramekins (depending on how much, obviously, has been left over), then dampen the edges of my chosen receptacle with a little cold water, before topping with some cut-out circles of ready-rolled, all-butter puff pastry. It's not obligatory, but you could cut out a strip of puff pastry first to edge the rim of the bowl and help the lid stick. Either way, press down to crimp the edges and decorate as desired – you may want to be more tasteful than me and my lot – or not at all, before brushing with a little beaten egg.

Then 15–20 minutes in a 220°C/ gas mark 7 oven should be long enough to make sure the ham and leeks are safely bubbling away and the top is enticingly puffy and golden. If you're at all worried about whether the underneath will be cooked through, pierce the pastry with a sharp knife or skewer, plunge it into the filling, then touch the skewer (cautiously please) where it has touched the filling, and if it's piping hot, so will your pie be.

Ham and leek “Welsh” pasties

*I concede it will be more effort (though still not difficult), but if you feel like making up some easily pickupable, greedily eaten **pasties** – and just the presence of the cider seems to invite it – then preheat your oven to 200°C/gas mark 6, and make a dough by mixing together 250g plain flour, 1½ teaspoons baking powder and ½ teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda with 125g cold, cubed lard, before binding this with just enough iced water (and a spritz of lemon juice) to make the mixture hold together. (You don't have to use lard if you're coming over faint at the very idea; you could use vegetable shortening, but don't congratulate yourself for your pernickitiness – any fat that occurs naturally is healthier than a fat that has been treated to make it stay, unnaturally, solid at room temperature.)*

With your dough made – and this is enough for 4 pasties, each of which in turn is enough to encase about 1 breakfast cupful of leftover sauce-bound leeks and of shredded/chopped ham, mixed together – form it into 4 fat discs and then, on a lightly floured surface, roll out each disc into a circle, roughly speaking. And I do mean roughly speaking: my circles bear no relation to a circle as understood by a geometrist; a circle as hastily rolled out by me at teatime has rather more resemblance to a map of Australia.

When you have your 4 circlish shapes in front of you, put a quarter of the ham and leek filling in one half of one circle, brush a little beaten egg around the edge and fold over, so you have a bulging semi-circular pasty in front of you. Curl the edge of the round side over, and crimp this rimmed edge,

just by pinching together with your fingers, and proceed similarly with the remaining circles and filling. Put them on a lined baking sheet, brush with beaten egg, bake in your preheated oven for 20 minutes, and eat as they are or alongside the [Cidery Pea Soup](#). You can't make up the pasties in advance, though you could certainly make up the dough ahead of time. Simply cover the 4 initial discs with clingfilm and put them in the fridge, making sure you take them out in time to soften enough to be rolled out later.



Perhaps it was unfair to suggest the above merely as preambles to the soup: certainly the pies demand no further

addition, though some cooked peas stirred into the ham and leek sauce just before pastry-topping and baking would certainly be delicious. Indeed, it is really only the pasties I automatically bracket with the pea soup. But even then, you can always unbracket them, which gives you another meal.

Cidery pea soup

*Whatever, the **Cidery Pea Soup** is easy perfection. Bring 1.5 litres of your strained leftover stock to the boil and add a 900g packet of frozen petits pois or peas along with the juice of 1 lime (about 30ml or 2 x 15ml tablespoons), then bring back to the boil, and cook the peas until they are tender enough to be easily liquidized, about 7 minutes. It's probably wise to let the cooked peas cool a little bit before blending, in small batches, and then taste to see whether you want to add the juice of another lime or some seasoning. If you are making this up ahead (whether to be left in fridge or freezer), you will probably need to add more liquid, whether more ham stock or water, on reheating. The above soup should give you enough for 4 hearty eaters at a proper mealtime, and would easily stretch to feed 6 as a first course or lighter supper.*



Pies

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The pies can be assembled 1 day ahead then tightly wrapped in clingfilm and refrigerated. Glaze with egg and bake as directed.

FREEZE NOTE

The assembled pies can be frozen, tightly wrapped in clingfilm, for up to 1 month. Defrost overnight in the fridge and glaze and bake as directed.

Pasties

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The pastry can be made up to 2 days ahead. Wrap in clingfilm and refrigerate.

FREEZE NOTE

The pastry can be made and frozen, tightly wrapped in clingfilm, for up to 1 month. Defrost overnight in the fridge before using.

Soup

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The soup can be made and blended then transferred to resealable container to cool and refrigerated as soon as possible. It will keep in fridge for 1 day. Reheat gently in saucepan until piping hot.

FREEZE NOTE

The cooled soup can be frozen for up to 2 months but only if the stock has not been previously frozen. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.

Making leftovers right

Ham hock and soya bean salad

*There are so many things to love about this **salad**: the contrast of the cat's-tongue pink of the ham against the greens of the beans and leaves. The peppery rasp of the leaves, the tenderness of the beans and that sweet-tinged saltiness of the shredded soft meat.*

“The restaurant chef starts with fresh ingredients, the home cook with leftovers,” I was told when young, and it’s not simply that this is an adage I’ve never forgotten, but more that it remains a truth I relearn daily. I have nothing against frequent or opportunistic food-shopping – on the contrary – but it’s when I’m left to forage in the fridge, that I feel most giddy with excitement. That sounds like affectation or gush, but I mean it. What gives an edge to the feeling of liberated joy I get from cooking with whatever I can find is that slight prickle of anxiety that I won’t come up with anything.

Not that this dish requires great creativity or culinary brilliance: parsleyed ham hock and broad bean salad is pretty much a French stalwart in general and was one of my mother’s favourites in particular. But that’s reassurance not resignation talking: novelty is nearly always to be avoided in the kitchen. If ingredients haven’t been put together before, there’s probably – this much time into human civilization – a pretty good reason for it.

The only fiddling I’ve done is not fad-driven, but rather a feature of my freezer contents at the time of cooking, and that’s to add soya beans – relatively newly available to me – in place of broad beans. If it’s not long into broad bean season, and you have access to them freshly picked, then broad beans you should be using. If, like me, your supplies are coming from the deep-freeze, then either bean is good, except that I find the soya bean softer-skinned when cooked from frozen as instructed on the pack; with frozen broad beans, I prefer to let them thaw, then pop the green kidney-shaped beans out of their fibrous outer skins and merely blanch them instead. If you’re looking for work, then by all means do as the Japanese do with their edamame, and remove the second skins to provide only the tender, bright green, inner beans.

I’ve given weights below – rather than volumes as I have done with some of the other leftover recipes – simply because when I cooked this I worked on a weight ratio: i.e., double the weight of beans to ham. That way, you can weigh whatever amount of ham you have left, and proceed

accordingly. You should know that one ham hock yields about 400g of ham, once the flabby outer casing and other detritus have been removed from the picture. I never really see the point of cooking fewer than 2 ham hocks at the same time – they're cheap, and the meat sweetly delicious – so I would hope to have at least the wherewithal to make this salad, even if it's just in half quantities for my own greedy self. And it's so good that it's worth getting a ham hock or two to make this from scratch as a fantastic starter or part of a piece-meal, so to speak, for a busy kitchen-tableful any time.

Serves 2

250g frozen soya beans (or broad beans, fresh or frozen)

125g shredded cold ham

handful (or small bunch) mizuna or wild rocket

handful or small bunch parsley, finely chopped

½ teaspoon English mustard, from a jar

2 teaspoons white wine vinegar or muscat vinegar

2 x 15ml tablespoons cold-pressed rapeseed oil (see [Kitchen Confidential](#)) or extra-virgin olive oil

pinch salt, or to taste

♥ Cook the soya beans (or the frozen broad beans) in a pan of boiling, salted water according to packet instructions. Or cook the fresh beans in salted water until tender. Drain and rinse with cold water to stop them continuing to cook, then leave them in a fresh bowl of cold water so they cool quickly.

♥ Put the shredded ham hock meat into a bowl with the cooked, cooled and drained beans. Add the mizuna or rocket leaves to the beans and ham, and work through with your hands (or salad servers), then add half the finely chopped parsley and mix again.

♥ Whisk the mustard, vinegar, oil and salt to blend, or just shake together in a small jam jar. (Or use an English mustard jar that has a tiny bit left in it, add the other ingredients, put

the lid on and shake.) Pour this dressing over the salad and then toss again, taste for seasoning and pile mounds on a couple of plates, or keep in the same bowl if you prefer, before sprinkling with the remaining half of your chopped parsley.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The soya beans can be prepared up to 1 day ahead. Drain well and transfer to non-metallic bowl. Cover with lightly dampened piece of kitchen roll, wrap bowl tightly with clingfilm and refrigerate.



Beer-braised pork knuckles *with caraway, garlic, apples and potatoes*

I once appeared on a German TV chat show, filmed in Baden-Baden, I seem to remember, and with a set tricked out like a surreal Bierstube. I was thrilled to be there, for all sorts of reasons. Not that things got off to a good start. Did I not realize, my interviewer began with comic aplomb, that English cooking did not exactly have a fine reputation? Oh, how they all laughed, the members of the audience dotted around the George Grosz set. Oh, how I wish I had, too. Instead, I replied with some gracelessness that as far as the rest of the world was concerned, German cooking wasn't accorded much respect, either. The slight silence that followed didn't embarrass me quite as much at the time as it ought to have done. For this was unforgivable behaviour, and not just because it ill-behove me as a guest to respond with such brutal, teen-snarky honesty. No, also because the underlying truth (more important than mere honesty), is that I have always felt the cooking of Northern Europe to be egregiously undervalued, and not least by all of us. I hope I went on to say that and, if I didn't, I hereby wish to make amends and full restitution.

For I have – and this is the point – a particular fondness for German food. Actually, I am more than fond: I adore it, every maligned bit of it. There is so much more to the cooking of Germany than wurst and sauerkraut, delicious though both are. You may – or may not, more likely – know of a cake by the name of *Bienenstich* (or “bee sting”) that is quite simply confectionery of the gods. And, frankly, I'd go there any time for the bread alone. Then there are the potatoes ... Now, I am ready to accept that there has been some small vogue over the years and the world for hot dogs and hamburgers, but in modish food circles this carb-heavy cuisine is never going to find much favour. Well, more fool them.



The following recipe is inspired by the *Schweinshaxe*, or pork knuckle, I ate when I was last in Germany, a couple of years ago. It's not just the knuckle I loved, but the whole Germanic experience of it, and not least that language's word for it. For me, the joy of German – one of the most poetic, swishingly euphonious and liberating languages of the world – lies not just in the sound, but in its very formulation, most significantly the word structure that demands a mixture of independent, off-the-leash creativity and thunderous literal-mindedness, captivating in itself. I'm afraid my off-piste attitude towards, and sometimes clunky coinage of, compound-nouns along with my compulsive comma-usage, may be blamed on the many formative years spent immersed in German prose!

Rather evocatively, one of the traditional names for German pork knuckle is *Eisbein*, or “ice bone”, which, it is said, refers to the fact that the knuckle or hock (different words for the same cut) used to be recycled, once all *Fleisch* had been eaten and the bone cleaned, as ice skates. You'll understand this more graphically if you wash the bone yourself and look at the shape it makes.

I hope that doesn't put you off, but then I have learnt that eating the ankles of animals is not for the squeamish. The rest of us need not bother ourselves with such fastidiousness. Talking of which, even I – shamelessly unrestrained at the table – was outfaced by my pork knuckle in Bavaria: there, a knuckle was one person's portion; here, as with the [ham hock](#) recipe, I presume one joint alone would feed two or three; and

what with all the potatoes and apples alongside, and that glorious, fatty crackling on top, I feel the brace below could happily feed six, without anyone going hungry. You may as well go all-out first time round, and whatever is left over could be reheated.



What's important here is that the knuckle, with its pungent rub of garlic and caraway, is uncured or unpickled pig – in other words, pork, not ham – that you ask the butcher to score the rind for you, and that you do bother to braise-baste with beer. I happen to glory in the way that, when sliced and left to cook with the fat of the pork dripping on to them, the apples caramelize and the potatoes grow rich before they crisp up, but you could play it otherwise. Think, perhaps, of serving the knuckles with sauerkraut for tang (with or without some grated or chopped apple thrown in), or with roughly puréed peas for salving sweetness; both are traditional accompaniments, as would be a heaping bowl of plain boiled potatoes. One final must: whereas on all other eating

occasions, I reach unquestioningly for the Colman's, here I insist, for absolute gratification, on ordinary German mustard, not deli stuff but my *Tafelsenf* that comes so winningly in a dimpled mini beer mug.

Serves 6, or 4 with healthy Teutonic appetites

2 teaspoons sea salt flakes or 1 teaspoon pouring salt

1 teaspoon caraway seeds

2 garlic cloves

2 pork knuckles/hocks, their rind scored

2 onions

2 eating apples, cored and quartered

4 baking potatoes, or just under 1kg other maincrop potatoes, cut into quarters lengthwise

1 x 50cl (500ml) bottle good amber or dark beer (not stout)

500ml boiling water

♥ Preheat the oven to 220°C/gas mark 7. Put the salt and caraway seeds into a bowl, mince or grate in the garlic, mix everything together and rub the pork hocks with this mixture, getting well into the slits in the scored rind.

♥ Peel the onions, slice into rounds and make a bed or platform of them in a roasting tin. Sit the hocks on this onion layer and cook them in the hot oven for ½ hour.

♥ Take the tin out of the oven and quickly arrange the apples and potatoes around the hocks, then carefully pour half the beer (250ml) over, aiming for the hocks so they are basted as the liquid pours into the tin. Put back in the oven, turning this down to 170°C/ gas mark 3 and leave to cook at this lower temperature for 2 hours.

♥ Turn the oven up again to 220°C/gas mark 7, baste the hocks with the rest of the beer, and leave to cook at the higher temperature for another 30 minutes.

♥ Take the tin out of the oven and transfer the apples and potatoes to a warmed dish. Lift the hocks onto a carving board, leaving the onion and juices in the tin.

♥ Now put the tin on the hob over a medium heat and add 500ml boiling water, stirring to de-glaze the pan to make a gravy.

♥ Take the crackling off the pork and break into pieces, pull apart or carve the meat and serve with the apples, potatoes, gravy and some German mustard.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The pork and onions can be put in roasting tin up to 1 day ahead. Cover with clingfilm and refrigerate. Just before cooking, rub with the salt, caraway and garlic and cook as directed.

Making leftovers right

Leftover pork can be stored in the fridge, tightly wrapped in foil, for up to 3 days. Eat it cold or reheat gently in a saucepan with leftover gravy, until piping hot. You should store any leftover gravy in a separate airtight container in the fridge for 1–2 days. Leftover pork can be frozen for up to 2 months, tightly wrapped in foil, then defrosted overnight in the fridge. Even if you have an amount too small to be useful by itself (a likely outcome), simply bag and mark it up and freeze it for future use in the [Pantry Paella](#).



Asian braised shin of beef

with hot and sour shredded salad

The point of a stew, it should go without saying, is its flavour rather than its form. So, while the crunchy salad strips of carrot, spring onion and pepper do bring colour and beauty to this otherwise brown study, at the same time their texture and Asian-flavoured bite provide the perfect partner for the rich, aromatic spiciness of the soft-braised stew beneath.

Cooking the shin on the bone gives me a certain primitive pleasure, and the meat even more melting tenderness, but you can buy cubed shin of beef off the bone (or other stewing steak, if you must), in which case, you won't need as much in weight (see ingredients list).

Along with the stew and its crunchy, hot and sour topping, I serve a gingery parsnip and [potato mash](#), the ginger offering a muted echo of the South East Asian tones. While a plain bowl of rice would be a fine alternative, know that the aromatic mash makes for fantastic, [fiery potato cakes](#) the day or so after.





Serves 6

2 onions

1 x 5cm piece fresh ginger

4 garlic cloves

2 teaspoons ground coriander

3 x 15ml tablespoons vegetable oil

250ml Chinese cooking wine, or dry sherry

4 x 15ml tablespoons soy sauce

4 x 15ml tablespoons dark brown sugar

2 litres beef stock, preferably organic

2 x 15ml tablespoons oyster sauce

4 x 15ml tablespoons rice wine vinegar

2 cinnamon sticks

2 star anise

3.5kg beef shin on the bone, cut by the butcher into thick slices (or 1kg beef shin off the bone or other stewing steak, cut into large cubes)

♥ Preheat the oven to 150°C/gas mark 2. Quarter and peel the onions, peel and roughly slice the ginger, peel the garlic cloves, and put all these into the processor with the coriander.

♥ Blitz until finely chopped, then heat the oil in a large casserole and fry this mixture gently, until soft and beginning to catch in the pan; this should take about 10 minutes, over a medium heat and with regular stirring.

♥ Pour in the Chinese wine (or sherry) and let it bubble up. Add the soy sauce, brown sugar, stock, oyster sauce and vinegar. Bring to a boil, then drop in the cinnamon sticks and star anise.

♥ Add the pieces of shin and let everything come up to a bubble again, then clamp on a lid and put into the oven for 2 hours (regular stewing steak may take longer).

♥ Take the casserole carefully out of the oven and, using a slotted spatula, remove the beef to an ovenproof dish, cover with foil and keep warm in the oven, while you vigorously boil the sauce in the casserole on the hob, without a lid, until it has reduced by about half.

♥ Arrange the beef on a serving platter and pour the reduced sauce over the meat, then dress the top with the hot and sour shredded salad below. If you are using cubes of stewing steak, rather than slices of shin, you'd probably do better to use a deeper dish.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Cook the beef for 1 ¾ hours then transfer to a bowl to cool. Cover, refrigerate and store in fridge for up to 2 days. When ready to use, return the beef to casserole dish and heat gently until sauce is just boiling. Cover and return to oven for 30 minutes, or until the beef is piping hot. Transfer meat to an ovenproof dish and finish sauce as directed.

FREEZE NOTE

Cook and cool as above then freeze for up to 3 months in airtight container. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat and finish as above.

Hot and sour shredded salad

Although I do pick at this salad straight from the fridge if I'm lucky enough to have any left over, I advise you to make it at the last minute, once the sauce for the Asian Braised Shin of Beef above is reduced, and you're about to plate up. You could use half the salad to cover the serving dish of stew, and let people strew more on their plates as they eat.

Serves 6 with the Asian Braised Shin of Beef

3 carrots

4 spring onions

1 long red chilli

1 long green chilli

20g/small bunch coriander

for the dressing:

juice of 1 lime

4 x 15ml tablespoons Thai fish sauce

1 teaspoon caster sugar

♥ Peel the carrots, cut into long slices and then julienne them (i.e. cut into matchstick-like strips).

♥ Trim and halve the spring onions and julienne as well.

♥ De-seed the chillies and cut into juliennes, then finely chop the coriander.

♥ Combine all the julienned vegetables and the chopped coriander in a bowl. In another bowl mix the lime juice, fish sauce and caster sugar, and dress the vegetables with this, then top the Asian Braised Shin of Beef with your salad.



Tangy parsnip and potato mash

to go with the Asian Braised Shin of Beef and to make hangover-friendly potato cakes

I've already mentioned the ginger, but the buttermilk, for all its connotations of homespun Americana, is essential here. For one, I find those connotations crucially comforting; for another, it provides necessary tartness, much to be savoured against the sweet denseness of the ginger-heated mash.

Serves 6–8

1.25kg potatoes

650g parsnips

1 x 150g piece fresh ginger, cut in half lengthwise

4 teaspoons sea salt flakes or 2 teaspoons pouring salt

2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil

2 x 15ml tablespoons cold-pressed rapeseed oil (see [Kitchen Confidential](#)) or regular olive oil

80ml buttermilk

♥ Peel the vegetables, and chop the potatoes into 4 and the parsnips into 3 pieces. Remove the parsnip core if it is very fibrous. The parsnips should be cut bigger than the potatoes as they will cook more quickly.

♥ Put the potatoes into a saucepan with the parsnips on top of them, cover with cold water and add the salt. Drop in the ginger pieces, bring to a boil, turn down to a robust simmer, and cook for about 20 minutes or until potatoes and parsnips are tender and cooked through. Then drain, and discard the ginger pieces.

♥ Put the potatoes and parsnips back in the warm pan and start mashing together, then add the sesame and rapeseed oils and the buttermilk and give another good mash, before beating vigorously with a wooden spoon. Taste to check seasoning, adding more salt if needed.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The mash can be made up to 1 hour ahead. Cover with a splash of milk to keep it from drying and clamp on a lid. Reheat gently, beating vigorously.

Making leftovers right

Fiery potato cakes with fried eggs

*My weakness is for overcatering. But although I call it a weakness, it is not something I am ashamed of; indeed, I feel out of sorts when I don't have food left over. In this particular case, generosity with portion size is a smart move. A mounding clump of aromatic mash left in the bowl (if you can manage not to eat it while clearing up) makes for utterly more-ish **potato cakes** later. With their spiking of spring onion, chilli and extra ginger, they are the perfect hungover breakfast, or a bolstering supper, eaten maybe with a fried egg on top.*

The potato cakes below are made with a fairly small quantity of mash – think about the amount that would come up to the 500ml mark if clumped into a measuring jug, or enough to fill a breakfast cereal bowl.

Makes 6 or 7, depending on size of potato cakes

approx. 400g or 2 cups leftover mash

1 egg, beaten

2 spring onions, finely sliced

1 red chilli, de-seeded and chopped

1 teaspoon grated fresh ginger

1 x 15ml tablespoon flour, for dusting

1 teaspoon garlic oil

1 egg per person, for frying

♥ Mix the mash with the beaten egg, finely sliced spring onions and chopped chilli and grated ginger.

♥ Once combined, wet a 50–60ml or quarter-cup measure and scoop out individual amounts or just shape the mixture with wet hands into patties or flat rounds, and then dust lightly with flour.

♥ Heat the garlic oil in a frying pan, and fry the potato cakes for 3–4 minutes a side. Top with fried egg or dollop with a spicy sauce, as needed.



Roast duck legs and potatoes

Like the [lamb chop recipe](#), this is one of those leave 'em and love 'em meals. For all the ease of express-style food, there is a lot to be said for simply stashing something in the oven for an hour or two when stuck in too-tired-to-cook mode. True, one needs a little patience, which might make this more of a lazy weekend supper than the answer to your everyday exhaustion issues. You don't need much alongside, perhaps a fennel salad dressed with a spritz or two of orange juice and a squeeze of lime, or some bitter green salad leaves.

When you're in a hurry, a duck breast can seem like the solution, but the leg, cheaper yet richer, is more of a treat for those who like to eat. Of course, it's fattier than the appropriately named and leaner *magret*: that's what makes the leg taste better. And, please – enough with the supposed health concerns. I mean, it's not as though the obesity epidemic were caused by overconsumption of duck legs. Besides, as the late great American foodwriter James Beard sniffily wrote: “A gourmet” – and that's him, not me, I'm just greedy – “who looks at calories is like a tart who looks at her watch.”

Serves 2

2 duck legs

2 baking potatoes or 500g other maincrop potatoes

few sprigs fresh thyme

sea salt flakes and pepper

♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6. On the hob, heat a small roasting tin (I use one like a slightly oversized tarte tatin dish) and sear the duck legs, skin-side down over medium heat until the skin turns golden and gives out some oil.

♥ Turn the legs over, and take the tin off the heat while you cut the potatoes into 2cm slices across, then cut each slice into 4.

Arrange these potato pieces around the duck legs, then let a few sprigs of thyme fall over the duck and potatoes, and season with salt and pepper, before putting into the preheated oven.

♥ Cook for 2 hours, occasionally turning the potatoes, for optimal outcome, which is tender duck legs and crispy potatoes, though both will be ready to eat after 1½ hours.

Making leftovers right

If you have even a small amount of meat left, you could bag and mark it up and store it in the deep-freeze (for up to 2 months) for future use in a [Mixed Meat Pilaff](#). Defrost it overnight in the fridge.



Greek lamb chops with lemon and potatoes

Fish or fowl, meat and veg, there is very little that isn't made glorious when sprinkled with dried mint, dried chilli, lemon juice and oil and baked in a low oven. The particular joy of the lamb chops and potato wedges here is that the lamb fat adds depth and an almost caramelly crispness, while the lemon juice gives that requisite sharp edge.

I love the sort of lunch that needs no more than one pan and takes care of itself as it cooks. I used to make this dish routinely with ordinary lamb chops, but more recently have taken to using some rather fantastically square-cut shoulder chops I found at my local supermarket. I cook either for so much longer than you'd think necessary. If you have a very fierce electric oven, you may want to spear a potato after only 1 hour's cooking to check it (and it may be wise to slide a baking sheet on to a lower shelf to shield any base element from roasting tin splashes) but you would do better just to cook this in a cooler oven from the off. It's the long cooking that makes lamb, lemon, potato, cool mint and hot chilli, come together. And the juice that so slowly drips off everything, leaving a sticky brown salty syrup in its wake, is best savoured by cleaning your plate – or giving the pan a stolen wipe – with a cracked-open piece of baguette, thickly-cut sourdough or, frankly, any other bread going.



Serves 6–8

**12 chunkily cut lamb shoulder chops (about 1.25kg total)
or 12 lamb loin chops or cutlets**

3 baking potatoes or 650g other maincrop potatoes

3 x 15ml tablespoons garlic oil

2 teaspoons dried mint

1 teaspoon dried chilli flakes

2 teaspoons sea salt flakes or 1 teaspoon pouring salt

2 lemons

**small handful chopped parsley or generous sprinkling dill
fronds, or mixture (optional)**

♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6. Put the lamb chops or cutlets into a shallow roasting tin.

♥ Wash but do not peel the potatoes, then cut them into 2.5cm dice and tumble them about the lamb.

♥ Drizzle the oil over the lamb and potatoes, and sprinkle with the dried mint, chilli flakes and salt.

♥ Zest 1 lemon over the roasting tin, then juice both lemons and pour in the juice.

♥ Cook in the oven for 1 hour, not bothering to turn anything over, and feel free to leave in for 1½ hours, if the chops look as though they can take it.

♥ Serve sprinkled with chopped parsley or dill – for (optional) extra Greekish effect – and with a green or tomato salad alongside, should you feel like it, but consider, if you please, bread obligatory.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Potatoes can be cut up to 1 day ahead. Submerge in a bowl of cold water and store in the fridge. Drain and pat dry before using.



Conker-shiny spare ribs with pineapple and molasses

I'm sure my dentist would prefer it otherwise, but I am a sucker for a plate of spare ribs. The thing is, I am not happy merely to use my gnashers to tug meat and gristle from the bones, I eat dem bones, too. One of my party tricks in Chinese restaurants is to order a plate of spare ribs and then to send the plate back empty; I can do the same with a plate of grilled sardines. But to brag about this is as inelegant as the activity itself and, in any case, the bones beneath the sticky, succulent morsels of flesh in this recipe aren't cooked quite long enough to be palatable. Besides, some Health & Safety Officer would be on my case pronto were I to advise you other than to content yourself with chewing, gnawing and sucking as you will, so long as you don't eat the bones.



Serves 4–6, depending on greed of guests and what else is on the table

16 pork spare ribs

for the marinade:

juice and zest 1 lime

3 x 15ml tablespoons soy sauce

3 red chillies, de-seeded and chopped

1 x 5cm piece fresh ginger, peeled and cut into thin slices

2 x 15ml tablespoons groundnut oil

**2 x 15ml tablespoons molasses, plus 2 x 15ml tablespoons
for the sauce**

2 star anise

**1 cinnamon stick, broken into barky shards, or 1 teaspoon
ground cinnamon**

1 onion, peeled and cut into eighths

125ml pineapple juice, from a carton

♥ Put the ribs into a large plastic bag; then stir the marinade ingredients together in a jug, and pour them into the bag.

♥ Tie a knot in the bag and squidge everything around well before leaving in the fridge overnight, or for at least a couple of hours in a cool place in the kitchen.

♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6. Let the marinated ribs come to room temperature, then pour the whole contents of the bag into a roasting tin and put in the oven for 1 hour, turning the ribs over about halfway through the cooking time.

♥ Take the ribs out of the oven and carefully pour the liquid contents of the tin into a medium-sized saucepan, then put the tin of dryish ribs back in the oven.

♥ Add the remaining 2 tablespoons of molasses to the saucepan, whisk to combine, then bring to a boil. Keep at a simmer for about 8–10 minutes, until it becomes foamy then syrupy, watching all the while.

♥ Take the ribs out of the oven and pour the dark sticky sauce over, turning the ribs to give them all a thick coating. Turn out

on to a large flat plate – or just leave in the darkly slicked tin – and dig in.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Ribs can be put into the marinade a day ahead and refrigerated.

FREEZE NOTE

Uncooked ribs can be frozen in the marinade for up to 1 month. Defrost overnight in fridge in a bowl or on a plate to catch drips, and cook as directed.





Shoulder of lamb with garlic, thyme, black olives and rosé wine

When I was a child, shoulder of lamb was a monthly staple of my paternal grandparents' Sunday lunches. These were the days before lamb routinely came rare – though my mother's garlicky gigot definitely had a bohemian pinkish tinge – and the now unfashionably fatty joint was cooked for long enough for the fat to melt into the meat, imbuing it with a richness that belied the drab and mournful hue.

I cook a shoulder regularly still and am no less happy than my grandmother – indeed either of my grandmothers – to add a meagre amount of garlic to the meat when it goes into the oven, and serve redcurrant and mint sauces when it gets to the table. And, following my mother's habit, more often than not there's an onion sauce, as well. Perhaps I want to make up now for how little I appreciated the food of my childhood when I was young. Or maybe it's just that it tastes so good, the comfort and reassurance it offers are merely secondary. Certainly, much as I feel warmed by the thought – or rather, the re-enacted memory, which my cooking so often is – of a traditional English roast, I also purr at the prospect of borrowing the inherited rituals of others. I love a shoulder of lamb just as dearly when it is cooked not exactly according to the cuisine of my *grandmère*. I am more than ready to cook *à la française* and slow-roast a shoulder over some finely sliced potatoes or jade green haricot beans.



The lamb here is, I like to think, a springtime or early summer take on the wintry-rich beef with red wine and anchovies in *How to Eat*. The scent of thyme and garlic while the lamb cooks, along with the upbeat petal-fresh pink of the wine, are for me, Provence without the clichés.

Raw in its tin, the lamb glows with an almost Martian-skied red; like my grandmother's, however, once cooked it loses much of its rosy charm. But that's only when you're looking at it. This is food that convinces, compels, where it truly matters, when you eat it.



Depending on the weather, time of day, my mood or what I might be eating after, I serve either a lemony-dressed, almost retro frisée salad and a baguette or two, or a warm bowl of buttery green beans, cut in sliver-thin diagonals, and plain, steamed new potatoes.

Serves 4–6

**1 x 2kg approx. shoulder of lamb, bone in
salt and pepper**

1 head garlic, preferably French rosé garlic, in cloves

14 anchovy fillets

1 x 110g jar pitted dry black olives

500ml good rosé wine

small bunch fresh thyme

♥ Preheat the oven to 150°C/gas mark 2. Heat a roasting tin on the hob and seal the lamb, skin-side down, seasoning the exposed meat with a little salt and a generous amount of freshly ground pepper. Turn the shoulder over and cook for another minute just to seal the underside, seasoning the just-browned top as you wait.

♥ Take out the lamb and leave on a board, while you tumble your garlic cloves into the hot tin and strew with the anchovies and olives. Give everything a good stir.

♥ Pour the wine into the tin and tear over nearly half the thyme, then bring the juices to a boil. Put the lamb back in the tin, skin-side up, pour any meat juices that may have collected on the board into the tin; and, once it's boiling again, add most of the remaining sprigs of thyme (leaving some to adorn your serving plate). Turn off the heat and cover with foil.

♥ Put in the oven and cook for 2½ hours. When the lamb is ready, take it out of the tin onto a carving board, and as you carve the meat put the slices back into the tin with all the winey juices.

Making leftovers right

If you're lucky enough to have any leftover fragrant juices in which to reheat the cold meat, proceed gently but accordingly. In the more likely event that every last drop of juice will have been mopped up, reheat the lamb over a low heat in a pan into which you have poured a little wine, diluted in equal parts with water, and have tumbled a few capers. Heat the meat through till piping hot, then remove the cooked lamb from the liquid, stir in a small spoonful of Dijon mustard and pour a small amount of this juice over the lamb on your plate. With any luck, you might have some reheated new potatoes to eat alongside. My best advice though, is to eat up everything at

the lamb's first, blessed outing. (Leftover lamb can be stored in the fridge, tightly wrapped in foil, for up to 3 days. Store leftover gravy in a separate airtight container in the fridge for 1–2 days. Leftover lamb can also be frozen for up to 2 months, tightly wrapped in foil.)



Minetta marrow bones

I've spoken elsewhere of my capacity for insistent, non-stop nagging when it comes to getting my hands on a recipe I want. It's not often that such a recipe emanates from a restaurant kitchen, but for this one I give grateful, greedy thanks to Keith McNally at whose Minetta Tavern I first ate these marrow bones, and to one of his chefs, Riad Nasr, who emailed me the recipe.

Now, it sounds odd to speak of my first having marrow bones at a New York restaurant, and that's not quite what I meant; but what they do at Minetta, and is so obvious I don't know why everyone doesn't, is to serve the shin bone – the shaft it's called in the butchery trade – cut lengthways rather than across. It's just so much easier to eat this way.

But here's where I part company with my benefactors. For the chefs at the Minetta Tavern suggest soaking the bones in salted water for 36 hours, with a change of water (and salt, of course) every 8 hours. You know, there's only so far one can go ... To be fair I did try this, and while I can see that the white, bleached-out look is better and more *refined* for restaurants, at home I prefer the full-throated flavour, and don't care about the look of the unsoaked, unbleached bone.

My idea of a heavenly dinner would be a tableful of greedy friends, a plateful of bones and sourdough toast. We'd need, surely, nothing else. The Minetta Tavern suggests 2 marrow bones (that's to say 1, split) per person, and though I could easily double this, I should point out that at the Minetta they're offered as a starter.

So, consider what follows as instructions for feeding 2 people who will be going on to something else, or just you when you want nothing more than a solo feast – a kind of Bone Alone.



Serves 1–2, as the occasion demands

2 veal shin bones cut by the butcher into troughs rather than pipes, thus exposing the marrow, and giving you 4 bones in total

2 generous slices sourdough bread

sea salt flakes or fleur de sel

freshly ground pepper

1 clove garlic, peeled and cut in half lengthwise

2 x 15ml tablespoons finely chopped fresh parsley

2 x 15ml tablespoons finely chopped thyme leaves

2 generous slices sourdough bread to serve

♥ Preheat the oven to 220°C/gas mark 7, then sit the bones, cut-side up, in a shallow roasting tin and sprinkle generously with salt and pepper.

♥ Cook for 15–20 minutes, or until the marrow has puffed up slightly and is hot and cooked through.

♥ Slice the bread and either toast it or grill it on a ridged griddle. Rub one side of the toast with the cut sides of the garlic clove.

♥ Take the marrow bones out of the oven, transfer to a plate or plates, sprinkle with more salt flakes, as well as the chopped parsley and thyme, and put on the table with the garlicky toast. Spoon out the marrow onto your garlic-rubbed toast as you wolf this down.



Roast rib of beef

with wild mushrooms and Red Leicester mash

I tried to stop myself from including a roast rib of beef here, and not simply because I gave this kingly cut, complete with Port and Stilton Gravy, its due in my Christmas book. I felt that, bone notwithstanding, the extravagance of the joint was at odds with the old-school thriftiness of the less showy cuts included elsewhere in this chapter. But we are allowed to feast on occasion. When celebration is due, I'd rather relish my luck or the opportunity and not persecute myself in a frenzy of right-minded, wrongful piety.

Now about this bone: it matters. Without it, you'll never get the sweet and tender flavour this roast just oozes. To make carving easier, however, ask the butcher to cut between bone and meat and to sit the meat back on the bone and tie it securely.

My 2-hour cooking stipulation ensures the joint is cooked the way I like it – quiveringly underdone – but you must add more time if you want it less rare. However you like it cooked, the beef must be at room temperature before it goes in the oven, and after an initial 15 minutes for all tastes, work on the principle of giving a joint 33 minutes per kilo (15 minutes per lb in old money) for rare, 44 minutes per kilo (20 minutes per lb) for medium and 66 minutes per kilo (30 minutes per lb) for well done. Although, as ovens vary so much, you might be wise to invest (no major outlay incurred) in a meat thermometer: that way, you can be sure the meat is cooked to your taste. As a rule of thumb, when the thermometer – plunged into the fleshy centre – reads 60°C, your beef is rare, when it's 71°C, it's medium, and at 82°C, well, you've pretty well – in my book – got shoe leather. But if that's what floats your beefy boat, enjoy – and hope your

guests do, too. (If you're leaving the beef to "rest" for 20–30 minutes after cooking – you might want to take 3–5°C off these temperatures because the meat will carry on cooking as it sits.)

The woody smell of the truffle oil, a fittingly luxurious anointment for the beef, is in turn a smart partner for the autumnal collection of mushrooms that accompany it, making gravy superfluous here. (If you want to, though, you could forgo the truffle oil and increase the garlic oil and rub with porcini powder, if it can be found.) When you get the mushrooms, you'll see which ones must have their fibrous stalks removed, but don't throw these away: just add them to the beef's roasting tin before you stick it in the oven.

[The Red Leicester Mash](#) is a family favourite – that's to say, this is the cheese to which my children are addicted – and you should feel entirely free to substitute any cheese of your choice. Cheesy mash may not be chic (thank goodness) but I love this element: it brings back to the beef the feel of a cosy Sunday lunch, despite the recondite fungi collection. Perhaps, with certain sorts of men and children present, you might, I rather fear, have to consider replacing the mushrooms with peas and [gravy](#). For the rest of us, the beef with mash and mush' will do beautifully, thank you.



Serves 8–10

**1 x 4-rib joint of Scotch or Black Welsh beef, approx.
3.75kg total**

3 teaspoons English mustard powder

1 teaspoon sea salt flakes or ½ teaspoon pouring salt

1 teaspoon truffle oil

1 teaspoon garlic oil

1 leek

4 teaspoons marsala

♥ Take your beef out of the fridge in time for it to come to room temperature, which might – given the size of this beautiful beast – take up to 1 hour, and take off any wrapping. Preheat your oven to 220°C/gas mark 7.

♥ Put the English mustard powder, salt, truffle and garlic oils in a small cup or bowl and make a paste, then massage this over the beef.

♥ Cut the leek in half lengthwise then across and drop the green strips into the centre of a large roasting tin, pour over the marsala and sit the beef on top. Toss any discarded mushroom stalks you may have ([see next recipe](#)) into the roasting tin, too.

♥ Put the beef in its roasting tin into the oven and let cook for 2 hours for rare meat or more, according to choice ([see here](#) for precise instructions). When the meat's had the heat-treatment it deserves, take the tin out of the oven and remove the beef to a carving board, tent it with foil and leave it to sit out of any draught for about ½ hour.

♥ Let the tin stand for a while, as you'll want the juices (so long as there are no vegetarians coming) to pour into the mushrooms ([see next recipe](#)) before serving. The juices that collect from the beef as it stands will be similarly needed.



Wild mushrooms with leek and marsala

Serves 8–10, as sauce for the beef

**1kg wild mushrooms (including porcini, chanterelles,
oyster mushrooms, whatever the fields yield)**

1 leek, washed and trimmed

100g soft unsalted butter

2 teaspoons garlic oil

2 teaspoons dried thyme

250ml marsala

few drops white truffle oil (optional)

salt and pepper

small handful freshly chopped parsley, to serve

♥ Prepare your mushrooms. Don't wash them. (Mushrooms should never be washed.) Wipe off any earth or dust with a bit of kitchen roll and remove woody or too fibrous stalks but do not throw them away: keep them to throw in the roasting tin as the beef cooks ([see here](#)). Don't cut the mushrooms: simply leave small ones as they are and tear larger ones into pieces.

♥ Quarter the leek lengthwise, then slice it finely into beautiful, variegated green confetti.

♥ Put about a third of the butter, along with the garlic oil, into a large heavy-based pan over a low heat and, when it's melted, turn up the heat to a bold medium and cook the leek pieces, stirring frequently. But be patient, you want the leek to cook properly and it could need a good 10 minutes, maybe 15, before it softens.

♥ Add the rest of the butter and the dried thyme and stir to help it all melt, then toss in the prepared mushrooms and stir gently but – again – patiently, so all mushrooms, give or take, come into contact with the heat. Put a lid on and let cook for 5 minutes.

♥ Remove the lid and give the mushrooms a good stir before replacing the lid and giving them another 5 minutes.

♥ Remove the lid again, add salt and pepper and half the marsala. Cook, stirring, for 30 seconds then put the lid back on and cook for 5 minutes more.

♥ Remove the lid yet again, add the remaining marsala and cook with the lid off, stirring occasionally, for a few minutes or until the mushrooms are hot and most of the liquid is absorbed. This is when you could add the juices from the roasting tin and carving board. Season to taste, adding a dribble of truffle oil if it feels like the right thing to do, decant to a warmed serving dish, sprinkle with chopped parsley and serve with the beef.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The mushrooms can be cooked 1 day ahead up to the end of the 6th step above. Cool and transfer to airtight container and store in fridge. Reheat gently in saucepan, then finish cooking as directed.



Red Leicester mash

Serves 8–10, with the beef

2kg floury potatoes

250ml full-fat milk

250g Red Leicester cheese, grated

salt and pepper, to taste

♥ Peel the potatoes (unless you have a ricer to mash them, as I do), cut them in half and drop them in a large pan of cold water.

♥ Lumber comically over to the stove with your giant pan, put the potatoes on a high heat and when the water comes to a boil, salt them and turn down the heat to keep things at a resolute simmer for approx. 40 minutes until the potatoes are tender and feel ready to be mashed when pierced with a fork.

♥ Carefully now, drain the potatoes, pour the milk into the emptied out but still hot pan and let the milk warm up, putting the pan over a low heat if need be.

♥ Turn off the heat and mash the potatoes with a potato ricer over the pan and into the milk – every now and again you will have to use the point of a sharp knife to help you remove the potato skins from the ricer. (Or you can just put the peeled and cooked potatoes with the milk in the pan and mash by hand.)

♥ When all the potatoes have been mashed, put the pan over a low to medium heat and beat well with a wooden spoon until hot again.

♥ Add the grated cheese in 2 batches, beating well with your wooden spoon in between each addition.

♥ Season to taste, and serve piping hot.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The mash can be made up to 1 hour ahead. Cover with a splash of milk to keep it from drying and clamp on a lid. Reheat gently, beating vigorously.

Making leftovers right

My children don't want me to do anything with the mash except reheat it, which I do with a little milk, stirring, in a saucepan, or they do in a non-metallic bowl in the microwave.

The mushrooms (not that I can count on leftovers) I'm content to reheat gently with a little marsala, but the beef ... The beef deserves star treatment. That's to say, do nothing. Eat it cold, sliced in sandwiches, or with a hot baked potato and some mustard and pickles to make a meal. Horseradish comes into the equation now, too, though I don't feel it goes with the beef when it's hot and accompanied by the mush' and mash.

*But there is another way of serving up cold, rare roast beef (or roast beeth as my late sister, Thomasina, used to say when she was little) and that's with the **Thai Tomato Salad** that follows. It lends the beef a divine and utterly different taste, which is exciting, but also useful given the size of the joint – and I just love it. What allows me to feel that this has all not been too hideously extravagant is that from the first feast come so many others. (Leftover sliced cooked beef can be stored in the fridge, tightly wrapped in foil, for up to 3 days and can be frozen for up to 2 months, tightly wrapped in foil.)*

Thai tomato salad

I used to have the good fortune to live near a Thai restaurant that did an excellent takeaway. Along with whatever else I ordered, I always, always had the som tam, that hot, sour salad-cum-relish of shredded green pawpaw and halved cherry tomatoes. Now, green pawpaw is hard to come by, but cherry tomatoes? So this is my non-authentic adaptation, in the sense that it's a pawpaw salad without the pawpaw. The gist is the same, in that the fantastically spicy heat is still provided by chilli, garlic, lime and fish sauce; crushed unsalted peanuts, as per the original, give that sourness-counteracting earthy rubble; and I cannot resist adding those beautiful, tiny dried shrimp. It's true they are no easier to come by than the green pawpaw, but they keep. Whenever I stock up on unfamiliarly alluring produce from the Far East, I get a bag of these teeny-tiny buff-striped coral creatures. Don't feel for one instant that you have to use them here, though: I know that some people are put off by these strange, almost other-worldly dried fish. When I last bought my shrimp, I had to buy a packet of watchful-eyed, silver streaks of dried anchovy, too, so beautiful did I find them, but everyone else in my house screams when they see them in the fridge.



Since I make this up as a quickly assembled salad, I don't put in anything I have to cook, but if you were to make more of a big deal of the salad, some trimmed, long fine green beans – just-cooked, drained, refreshed and drained again, so neither their crunch nor vivid greenness is lost – would be just fine and dandy added along with the spring onions. And talking of which, if you have more of a taste for the rasp of raw onion, do replace those milder green shreds with some finely chopped shallots or half-mooned red onion.

Serves 4

500g cherry tomatoes

3 x 15ml tablespoons (about 40g) natural peanuts

1 x Thai green chilli, de-seeded and finely chopped

2 x 15ml tablespoons (15g) dried shrimp (optional)

1 clove garlic, minced

4 x 15ml tablespoons lime juice (2–3 limes)

1 x 15ml tablespoon light muscovado or palm sugar

3 x 15ml tablespoons Thai fish sauce

3 spring onions

3 x 15ml tablespoons chopped coriander

- ♥ Halve the tomatoes and put them into a serving bowl.
- ♥ Put the peanuts into a freezer bag and bash with a rolling pin to crush them into small rubble.
- ♥ In another (smaller) bowl, combine the crushed peanuts with the chopped chilli and dried miniature shrimp (if using) and the minced garlic. Add the lime juice, sugar and fish sauce. Whisk this mixture together.
- ♥ Pour this dressing over the halved tomatoes and toss them about to mix.
- ♥ Cut the spring onions into 3 across, and then snip each third – carefully, so as not to cut yourself – into thin strips and toss these micro-matchsticks over the dressed tomatoes. Finally, sprinkle the chopped coriander over and serve with the cold roast beef or, indeed, whatever takes your fancy.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The dressing, minus the peanuts, can be made 1 day ahead. Store in jam jar in fridge. Add peanuts and shake well before using.

KITCHEN PICKINGS

Home-made pork scratchings *with apple and mustard sauce*

Dragon chicken

Wholegrain mustard and ginger cocktail sausages

Spicy sausage patties with lettuce wraps

Pigs in blankets *with mustard dipping sauce*

Coconutty crab cakes

Sherry-glazed chorizo

Thai roast scallops

Avocado quesadillas

Peanut butter hummus

Churros *with chocolate dipping sauce*

Black Velvet

Baby Guinness

Lagarita

Bloody Maria

Prosecco Sporco

Americano

Pink Margarita

French Martini

Raspberry Cooler

Petunia

Grashopper

After Eight

Chocolate Martini

Giddy Geisha

Sake and Tonic

Elderflower Spritzer

Elderflower Gimlet

Much as I enjoy cooking, when I have friends over I don't always want to make a meal of it. I'm not looking to cut corners, but the opposite: I want everyone to laze expansively – a freeform fiesta – greedily grazing from bits and bites covering the kitchen table.

I enjoy indoor-picnicking, and sometimes the most relaxing way to have company is in a kick-your-heels-back kind of way. Just leave it all out there for people to enjoy, along with some attentively poured wine or a tinkling, glass-chinking cocktail or three.

Now what may seem like easy pickings at the table doesn't always guarantee a low-effort enterprise for the cook. But relax: nothing here is canapé-complicated. I prefer to leave it to professional caterers to puff and stuff a hundred choux buns, or fashion twiddly miniatures which seem to draw as much on crocheting techniques and origami as on time-consuming, if not superhuman, kitchen skills. No, the truth is a home cook need produce nothing more than a tray of plumply gleaming cocktail sausages to keep hospitality honour intact. Still, just because you don't need to do any more doesn't mean you won't want to. I take huge pleasure – real, heartswelling joy – from a table loaded with foodstuffs, so one of my motivations whenever I cook for others is my own blissful gratification. I have to try to keep everything in proportion: I remember my son answering me reprovably, although he can't have been much more than three, when, after taking in the pleasing panorama of a plate-covered table before any guests arrived, I asked, "Is there anything more lovely than a tableful of food?" "Yes," he replied, "a tableful of people."

This is something we would all do well to remember when entertaining – even with a resolutely small "e" – as too

many frenzied offerings pushed pleadingly under people's noses can create an atmosphere not of welcoming abundance but of fussing desperation. And that doesn't get the party started.

Now, it doesn't much matter whether the recipes that follow comprise a mezzestyle mix-and-match meal, or whether they are produced singly or in modest pairs to accompany pre-meal drinks and keep everyone occupied while you do some last-minute stirring, or, indeed, whether they are, in whatever combination, the edible elements of a drinks party. The important thing is that they won't take so much out of you that you're exhausted before your guests show up.

Most times, I am more than happy to be rustling up these recipes as people are arriving – no trouble – but there are other occasions when I just know that answering the doorbell, taking orders for drinks and producing food at the same time might leave me, even among close friends, feeling a little flustered. With that in mind, I have added, to appropriate recipes, short pointers as to how best to prepare these ahead of time, even if only a little ahead.

Mood trumps food every time, and I say that as a greedy person. But here there's no conflict, and every reason, in the words of that Eighties' pop classic "why you'll always find me in the kitchen at parties".



Home-made pork scratchings *with apple and mustard sauce*

I love crackling; I love pork scratchings, even in their junk-food-packaged over-salted incarnation, too: this, here, is perhaps the best of both worlds. In fact, these make me so suffused with greedy pleasure, I do grasp why, for some, gluttony is considered a sin. For me, though, it is a blessing. Occasions of joy in life should be greeted with gratitude, not with guilt. A degree of caution is warranted, but only for practical – rather than spiritual – reasons. I'm assuming you won't be eating these, anyway, if you have concerns about fat or salt; but also, as it says on the packets of pork scratchings I buy, these are "only recommended for people with strong, healthy teeth". Ever since I came a cropper on a bit of toffee last Christmas, I have become a little more responsible about indulging in potentially dangerous eating-opportunities. Nothing as yet has happened to mar my blissful enjoyment of these, but since I regularly crunch the cartilage off chicken bones, and (as I've confessed earlier) leave nothing on my plate after ordering a plate of spare ribs or sardines in a restaurant, my teeth are kept as sharp as a dog's.

You need to go to a butcher to get the pork rind, so you may as well ask for it to be scored at the same time, to help it crisp up nicely in the oven. Your only responsibility where the rind is concerned, is to store it well. Plastic wrap of any sort will make it soggy, so either put it on the bottom shelf of the fridge still in the butcher's "peach" paper, or wrapped loosely in greaseproof paper or baking parchment, or just leave it open, in a roasting tin, on the bottom shelf of the fridge and away from other foods.

While these are gorgeous to crunch on with nothing more alongside than a cold beer or glass of wine, I can see no convincing argument for dispensing with the [Apple and](#)

[mustard sauce](#). And if you are like-minded, turn now to the sauce ([see here](#)), as this needs to be cooked and cooled before you address yourself to the scratchings.

Makes 25 *pork scratchings*

500g pork rind, in 2 scored slabs

sea salt flakes, to taste

♥ Preheat the oven to 220°C/gas mark 7. Cut the pork rind into 25 pieces (each approx. 2 x 4cm) with a sharp pair of kitchen scissors.

♥ Put the pieces of rind on a low-lipped baking tray or slotted top of a grill pan, rind-side up. Slide this onto a rack at the top of the hot oven for 25 minutes, and then turn the pieces over for a final 5 minutes.

♥ Once out of the oven, sprinkle generously with sea salt, and remove carefully to a plate lined with a sheet of kitchen roll for a moment to drain and cool a little, before serving on a few plates, alongside the mustardy apple sauce or just by themselves if you wish.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The rind can be cut up 1 day ahead. Store as [directed](#). The scratchings can be cooked up to 1 hour ahead of serving, and should be eaten within 2 hours of cooking. Leave to stand in cool, dry place and pop back into hot oven for 5 minutes to reheat before serving.



Apple and mustard sauce

I love the contrast between warm scratchings and cold, grainy sauce. If you want a simple no-cook option – not that making apple sauce can be described as complicated – you could simply get out a jar of horseradish. But for me, it's the sharp apple that helps make these scratchings such compulsive eating. I just dip one shard at a time into the sauce – warning: no double-dipping! – and crunch down.

The mustard not only gives piquancy to the apple sauce, but also infuses it with a gorgeously golden hue. And do bear this sauce in mind to accompany any roast pork or even just some plain grilled sausages.

3 large Granny Smith apples, approx. 500g total

4 teaspoons English mustard powder, plus more to taste

4 x 15ml tablespoons maple syrup

½ teaspoon sea salt flakes or ¼ teaspoon pouring salt

juice ½ lemon

1 spring onion, trimmed and left whole

♥ Peel and core the apples, and roughly chop them into pieces.

♥ Put the apples into a saucepan with the mustard, maple syrup, salt, lemon juice and spring onion (left whole just to give flavour).

♥ Put the lid on the pan and bring to a bubbling boil, then turn the heat down to a simmer and cook for 10–15 minutes, until the apples are soft, stirring once or twice.

♥ Remove the onion and discard, then mash the sauce a little with the back of a spoon if necessary.

♥ Taste the sauce; if you fancy it a little hotter, add some more mustard, though it may be wiser to leave final seasoning till you've tasted the sauce cold.

♥ Serve, cold, though not fridge-cold, with the pork scratchings, above.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The sauce can be made up to 2 days ahead. Transfer to non-metallic bowl to cool, then cover and refrigerate as soon as possible. Remove from fridge about 30 minutes to 1 hour before serving, to serve cold but not chilled.

FREEZE NOTE

The cooled sauce can be frozen in airtight container for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge and serve as above.

Dragon chicken

Every time I write a recipe for chicken wings it gets a little hotter, and this one – as its name suggests – positively breathes fire. If you want to reduce the heat, simply use fewer chillies, but I can promise you, while this, as written, certainly has zing and fiery flavour, that you don't need to be someone who always orders the hottest curry in the house at Indian restaurants to be able to eat it.

I like this quite as much the next day, to help get over the drinks, as I do on the evening itself to munch while drinking.



Makes 20 chicken wings, Serves 8–10

5 long red chillies, de-seeded and halved
1 red pepper, de-seeded and core removed
2 x 8cm pieces fresh ginger (approx. 90g total), peeled and cut into small chunks
2 x 15ml tablespoons sea salt flakes or 1 tablespoon pouring salt
2 teaspoons rice vinegar
80ml garlic oil
80ml vegetable oil
20 chicken wings, whole
approx. 3 x 15ml tablespoons chopped fresh coriander, for serving

♥ Preheat the oven to 220°C/gas mark 7. Process the chillies, red pepper, ginger, salt, vinegar and the 2 oils in a food processor and whiz until smooth.

♥ You can at this point leave your chicken wings to marinate in a freezer bag coated in the chilli sauce for up to 24 hours if you want – or for 2 days if you omit the salt and add this later. Otherwise tip out the sauce over the chicken wings onto a shallow-sided foil-lined roasting tray or lipped baking sheet – don't use a high-sided tin, or the wings will braise rather than roast.

♥ Make sure all the wings are coated in the chilli-flecked sauce, and then roast for 40 minutes.

♥ Transfer the wings to a serving platter and sprinkle with some coriander.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Marinate wings in a bag in fridge for up to 1 day – put bag in bowl or on plate in case of leakage. (You can marinate 2 days ahead if you omit the salt from the marinade, and sprinkle with salt before roasting.) Cook as directed in recipe.

FREEZE NOTE

The wings can be frozen in the bag of marinade, omitting the salt, for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge – put bag in bowl or on plate in case of leakage. Sprinkle with salt before roasting. Cook as directed in recipe.



Wholegrain mustard and ginger cocktail sausages

I can never resist a cocktail sausage and, as I know I have told you before, couldn't quite contemplate a party without them. I also have a bit of a thing about ginger jam or conserve, and adore its rich, almost pungent heat, which wraps itself, along with the sharper hit of the grain mustard, like an aromatic blanket around the little sausages.

Please believe me when I say that the sausages and some sticks to pick them up with are quite enough as they are. I find it hard to explain what got into me as these little beauties were having their photograph taken, but I found myself compelled to fashion a storage vessel out of a loaf of bread and place the sausages inside. It's so not me, and yet I was unable to resist the lure: it was as if I were suddenly possessed by the spirit of a 1980s' chalet girl. Still, no reason to fight it, as I cannot tell you how deeply glorious the emptied-out sausage-sodden bread bowl is to rip into once your guests have left. (And you can freeze the scooped-out bread as breadcrumbs for future use.)

If you can't find ginger conserve, you can substitute thin-cut marmalade with 1 teaspoon ground ginger and 2 teaspoons fresh grated ginger stirred into it.

Makes 50

100g ginger conserve

100g wholegrain mustard

1 x 15ml tablespoon garlic oil

1 x 15ml tablespoon soy sauce

50 cocktail sausages

1 round (approx. 23cm diameter) thick-crust sourdough or rye bread loaf, for serving (optional)

- ♥ Preheat the oven to 180°C/gas mark 4. In a bowl, whisk together the ginger conserve, mustard, garlic oil and soy sauce.
- ♥ Turn the sausages in the mustardy mix and then arrange them on either a large, shallow-sided tin or 2 smaller tins. The height of the tin's sides will determine how quickly the sausages colour and cook.
- ♥ If you are using high-sided tins, they will need about 45 minutes in the oven; cooked on a shallower tray, 30 minutes should be fine. And do line with foil or use throwaway foil trays, or washing-up will be a nightmare.
- ♥ To serve the sausages in their bread bowl, cut a circle around the top of the bread to take off a "lid". Put this lid on one side for a moment, and tear and pull out the doughy filling with your hands, leaving the crust intact so that you have a hollow bowl.



♥ Fill this emptied-out loaf with as many sausages as you can – you may have to top up with a few as you go – and then you can balance the lid at a jaunty angle for maximum effect and your guests’ amusement. Serve with a small pot of cocktail sticks to spear the sausages, but if you’re skipping the bread bowl option, let the hot sausages cool slightly before handing them out.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

Put coating mixture in a resealable bag, add sausages and refrigerate for up to 2 days – put bag in bowl or on plate in case of leakage. Cook as directed in recipe.

FREEZE NOTE

The sausages can be frozen in bag with coating for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge – put bag in bowl or on plate in case of leakage. Cook as directed in recipe.



Spicy sausage patties with lettuce wraps

When I was therapeutically rolling the little patties into shape for my [Toad in the Hole](#) one Sunday evening, it occurred to me how good they could be, spiced and spruced up, as little picky things to go alongside a drink. And that they are. There is nothing to stop you just popping each plumpious patty into your mouth just as it is, but I like to wrap mine in a piece of lettuce, like a juicily edible parcel. This also turns them into a fantastic starter for a supper or dinner party, as it happens. And if you wanted to make more of a meal out of them, you could use tortillas or the thinner, more pliable lavash-style bread to wrap them; the [Peanut Butter Hummus](#) would serve as delectable glue, and I would – having lined my wrap with this – then place a piece of lettuce on the hummus before tucking in the patty and bundling it all up. Consider going the peking-duck-inspired route, too, by adding to the bulging package some strips of spring onion and cucumber.

Makes 16 patties

400g (6) good-quality sausages or sausage meat

1 teaspoon grated fresh ginger

1 green chilli, de-seeded and chopped

1 red chilli, de-seeded and chopped

2 teaspoons English mustard

1 garlic clove, peeled and grated

zest 1 lemon, finely grated

2 thin or 1 fat spring onion, finely chopped

2 teaspoons chopped fresh coriander

1 x 15ml tablespoon vegetable oil

to serve:

**leaves from 1 escarole or iceberg lettuce, or 2 Little Gems,
to wrap the sausage patties**

pitta breads or flat breads, warmed

2–3 limes, cut into wedges

♥ Cut a nick in the sausage skins and gently squeeze the sausage meat out of the casings into a bowl, or simply put the sausage meat in a bowl, then add the ginger, chillis, mustard, garlic, lemon zest, spring onion and coriander.

♥ Mix everything together thoroughly, and then make patties by using a cook's tablespoon (15ml) measure for each one or just go by eye and feel, as you pull out roughly a walnutsized amount (or a tiny bit less) at a time and shape it into a fat, little disc.

♥ Heat the oil in a frying pan and cook the patties over a medium heat for about 3 minutes a side. Watch they don't catch too much; you want them to look temptingly scorched on the outside, but not until you know they're properly cooked through.



♥ Transfer to a serving platter and arrange the lettuce leaves and breads to wrap the patties in on another plate. Put some of the lime wedges alongside, too, and anything else you want to eat with them.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The uncooked patties can be prepared 1 day ahead. Cover and refrigerate until needed, then cook as directed in recipe.

FREEZE NOTE

The uncooked patties can be frozen for up to 3 months. Put patties on baking sheet lined with clingfilm or baking parchment, cover with layer of clingfilm and freeze until solid

then transfer to resealable bag. To defrost, transfer patties to baking sheet lined with clingfilm, cover with clingfilm and defrost overnight in fridge. Cook as directed in recipe, dusting with a little plain flour before cooking if the surface of the patties is slightly moist.





Pigs in blankets

with mustard dipping sauce

I am afraid I disgraced myself – or would have if I had any shame – when I came across these at a 4th July party at the Hamptons given by my friend and agent, Ed Victor, and his wife Carol Ryan. I all but held the waiter hostage, frankly. I ate them throughout the party, and once everyone else had gone home, I settled down on a sofa to finish those that were left.

And then, back home, what pangs I had at not being able to eat any more! So, I badgered the caterer for the recipe, and here it is. I know it may sound not particularly appetizing to wrap frankfurters in puff pastry but these pigs in blankets (or franks in blanks, as we call them in *casa mia*) along with their tangy dipping sauce provide an eating experience that is nothing short of rapturous. My gratitude to Jean Mackenzie and her Four Seasons catering company in Southampton NY, is unbounded, as is my appetite for these little treasures.

Different brands of puff pastry can be rolled out to varying sizes, so what you have to know is that each frankfurter needs a pastry blanket to fit snugly. Each frankfurter will give you 4 little pigs.

Makes 72

**1 x approx. 425g packet ready-rolled puff-pastry sheets
(gives 2 sheets, each approx. 28 x 21cm), defrosted if
frozen**

1 egg

**2 x 350g packet frankfurters (gives 20, but you only need
16)**

for the mustard dipping sauce:

100g wholegrain mustard

100g Dijon mustard

2 x 15ml tablespoons sour cream

♥ Preheat the oven to 220°C/gas mark 7. Roll out one of the rectangular puff-pastry sheets to make it just a little bit thinner, stretching the long side rather than the short side as you roll. Cut the rectangle into quarters, then cut each rectangle in half lengthwise, to give 8 small pastry strips in total. (Stay with me!)

♥ Beat the egg in a small bowl and paint each pastry section with the egg wash. Sit a frankfurter horizontally on the left-hand side of one of the pieces of pastry and roll it up until it just seals. Then do the same with the remaining 7 small pastry strips.

♥ Cut each rolled frank into 4 small pieces, pressing the pastry back around the sausage if it comes loose. Then place on a baking-parchment-lined baking sheet with the sealed bit down to prevent it springing open.

♥ Paint the franks in blankets with the egg wash, and put them in the oven for 15–20 minutes. The pastry should have puffed up a little and turned golden. You can get on with the other sheet of pastry while the first lot of franks are cooking and repeat the process with the remaining franks.

♥ Mix together the mustards and sour cream and put in little bowls.

♥ Put the cooked franks in blanks onto a plate and serve warm with the dipping sauce in the little bowls (for ease of eating and passing) on the side.



MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The frankfurters in their pastry can be assembled 1 day in advance. Put cut-up pigs in blankets on lined baking sheets but do not glaze the outside. Cover with clingfilm and refrigerate until needed; store egg wash in a separate, covered container in fridge. Glaze and bake, following directions in recipe.

FREEZE NOTE

Only freeze if using fresh puff pastry from chilled section of supermarket – do not re-freeze defrosted pastry. The assembled but unglazed pigs in blankets can be frozen for up to 2 months. Put assembled “pigs” on lined baking sheets and cover with clingfilm. Freeze until solid then transfer to resealable bag. Glaze with fresh egg wash and bake direct from frozen following directions in recipe, but adding 4–5 minutes to cooking time. Make sure they are piping hot and cooked right through before serving.

Coconutty crab cakes

Food obsession has its uses, not least that I am always thinking about how I could put any ingredients in the house to good service. I often put breadcrumbs in crab cakes, but it occurred to me one day that desiccated coconut might well do the same job, absorbing moisture and helping the cakes to set. It does, and rather better than the breadcrumbs: I like the faint tropical hint, like the memory of a Caribbean sky, and the less heavy, tender texture it lends the little patties.

You could serve lime wedges to squeeze over these crab cakes as you eat, and it certainly would look prettier, but for me, rice vinegar has the edge, to undercut the faint sweetness of the (albeit unsweetened) coconut.



Makes 14, enough to serve 6–8

200g picked white crab meat

3 x 15ml tablespoons plain flour

3 x 15ml tablespoons desiccated coconut

**1 x 15ml tablespoon chopped red jalapeño chilli peppers
(drained from a jar)**

1 x 15ml tablespoon chopped fresh coriander

2 teaspoons rice vinegar, plus more for serving

oil, for frying

♥ Put the crab meat in a bowl and check for any bits of stray shell which should be removed, then mix the crab meat, flour and desiccated coconut in a bowl.

♥ Add the jalapeño chilli, coriander and 2 teaspoons rice vinegar and mix well, patting down in the bowl to form a compact layer at the bottom.

♥ Cover and leave in the fridge to set for 1 hour.

♥ Heat enough oil in a frying pan to cover the bottom of the pan in a shallow layer.

♥ Take the crab mixture out of the fridge and scoop out tablespoonfuls – using a cook’s tablespoon (15ml) measure with a rounded bowl shape – pressing the mixture into the measure and then easing out the mound into the hot oil.

♥ You will only be able to make 4 or 5 at a time comfortably, however big your pan, as the first crab cake to go down will need to be turned over just about the time you’ve added the fourth or fifth. Remember that the crab is already cooked, so really you’re just cooking until the cakes are crisp and golden on the outside and heated right through inside. About 1 minute a side should be fine.

♥ Remove them to some sheets – double-thickness – of kitchen roll (lining a board, a baking tray or plate) and blot them as you go. To keep the cooked crab cakes warm, carefully transfer them to a wire rack, put the rack over a baking sheet and hold them in an oven preheated to 125°C/gas mark ½ for up to 20 minutes.

♥ Serve with a little more rice vinegar sprinkled on as you eat.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The crab mixture can be made up to 1 day ahead. Keep covered in fridge until needed then cook as instructed in recipe.

FREEZE NOTE

The crab cakes can be frozen for up to 1 month but only if the crab meat has not been previously frozen (check with fishmonger or supermarket if you are not sure). Do not re-freeze previously frozen crabmeat. Spoon dollops of crab mixture onto baking sheet lined with clingfilm and flatten slightly. Cover with layer of clingfilm and freeze until solid then transfer to airtight container. Fry directly from frozen, in about 1cm depth oil, over medium heat and allowing 1–2 extra minutes' cooking time per side. Reduce heat if crab cakes are browning too quickly, and check they are hot right through. Blot and transfer to wire rack and keep warm as directed in recipe.

Sherry-glazed chorizo

Chorizo cooked in red wine is a tapas-bar staple in Spain, but I don't feel too disrespectful using sherry in place of the wine; its provenance is, after all, the same as the chorizo. Any good sherry would do, but I always keep a bottle of amontillado in the house to splash into soups and stir-frys (as well as for drinking), though cream sherry, actually, works well, too.

This is great when you want to make a little something to go with drinks, but have not much time to prepare. You can serve the chorizo alone, or add some Spanish marcona almonds, a choice of olives and some Manchego cheese, broken up into rough chunks (or any local sharp hard cheese of your choice) to create, and quickly, an easily-got-together tapas table at home.



Serves 2 by itself, or 4 with other picky bits

300g chorizo, sliced into 1cm-thick coins

3 x 15ml tablespoons amontillado or cream sherry

**Spanish almonds, olives, Manchego cheese, to serve
(optional)**

♥ Heat a frying pan and cook the chorizo for a minute or so, until the slices colour a little more deeply even, and their vibrant orange oil starts to collect in the pan.

♥ Pour in the sherry, let it bubble down for another minute or so, stirring all the while, until it is sticking to the coins of chorizo glossily. Transfer to a warmed plate, and serve.

Thai roast scallops

There is something so beautiful about a scallop in its shell. It's true that you won't tend to find them at the supermarket, but a fishmonger will be able to supply them, remove them from their shells, and then give them to you speedily cleaned and ready to go. They pretty well cook themselves, and yet to have them there, on the table, bronzed by the oven, makes everyone feel they are in for a treat. And they are. Being diver-caught, good scallops are also costly. But they really do feel like a precious accompaniment to a celebratory drink.

I've played around with [Thai flavours and scallops](#) elsewhere and love the contrast between the sweet, bouncy flesh and sharp heat of the curry paste whichever way it comes. But if you can only get scallops in less majestic form, that's to say without their corals or their shells, you can still proceed here: double the number of scallops, since they will be smaller, toss them in the spice mixture below and roast them – just their juicy near-naked selves – in the oven on a foil-lined tray.

Serves 4–6

1 x 15ml tablespoon red Thai curry paste

3 x 15ml tablespoons lime juice

1 x 15ml tablespoon fish sauce

**12 scallops with corals and shells, or 24 smaller ones
without, preferably diver-caught**

♥ Preheat your oven to 220°C/gas mark 7.

♥ Whisk together the Thai curry paste, lime juice and fish sauce and pour into a wide, shallow dish.

♥ Put the scallops (with their corals, if you have them) into this mixture and swish the scallops about to cover them in the red paste. Leave for about 5 minutes.

♥ Set the scallop shells (if you are lucky enough to be using these) on a baking tray. Then put the scallops (and their corals, if using) back in their shells – or if shell-less, straight onto the baking tray – keeping the scallops heavily coated in the marinade. When they are all on, drizzle over them any marinade that’s left in the bowl.

♥ Roast the scallops in the oven for 15 minutes, until just cooked through, and serve in the shell; if you have shell-less scallops, 10 minutes should be fine. When cooked, the scallops will be just opaque in the centre.





Avocado quesadillas

While I have no desire to be a short order chef, I rather like standing comfortably by my stove, a-griddling quesadillas, and handing out hot, seared tortillas, oozing with melted cheese, as I go. Since I buy the tortillas rather than make them myself (though I have plans in that direction), these are no harder to make than a toasted sandwich, which is, in effect, what they are.

If you want the griddle marks to come through super-clearly, it will help if you weight the quesadilla down as it cooks; I used to use a pan with many tinned things balanced on it, but my lovely builder, Ken, kindly and unquestioningly gave me, at my request, a brick covered in tin foil, which does the trick perfectly. But for some reason, I seem to have lost my brick and don't dare ask for another, so I have resigned myself quite happily to cooking quesadillas freestyle, with no heavy weight to press them down.

Makes 24 slices/wedges

4 soft flour or corn tortillas

100g Manchego cheese, sliced, or other cheese of your choice that melts well

1 avocado, pitted, skin-removed and cut into chunks

50g (drained weight) jalapeño chilli peppers, or approx. 16 jalapeño rings, from a jar (or more, to taste)

♥ Get out 1 tortilla and lay it flat in front of you, then put about 25g thinly sliced cheese on one half – not too near the edge, though, as you don't want the cheese to spill out as it cooks.

♥ Top the cheese with $\frac{1}{4}$ avocado, sliced in chunks, followed by about 4 jalapeño rings, or more to taste. Fold over the

uncovered half of the tortilla, so you have a bulging semi-circle in front of you.

♥ Heat your griddle – or use a dry frying pan if you don't have a griddle – and slide the uncooked quesadilla on it. Squish down with a weight, or just press down briefly with a fish slice or similar, and cook for 1 minute, then flip the quesadilla and griddle it for 1 minute on the other side.

♥ Tip the hot quesadilla out onto a board and slice each folded semi-circle into 6 wedges, serving straightaway, and continue likewise with the remaining 3 tortillas.

Peanut butter hummus

Peanut butter hummus doesn't have an elegant ring to it, but elegant is exactly what this is. Rather than using tahini, which is in effect sesame butter, I use peanut butter. Is it dreadful to say I prefer this? It is gorgeously filling, but without the slight claginess that tahini can give. I mean, in the right mood I adore the palate-thickening clay of tahini, but a little definitely goes a long way. Although I think this version possesses a certain manilla-tinted chic (despite the kindergarten-appeal of its title) that makes me happy to bring it out to eat with drinks when I have people over, I am even happier to have a batch in the fridge to pick at, spreading it over spelt crispbread or a piece of rye toast, when the mood takes me.

Makes enough for a party of 10

2 x 400g cans chickpeas

1 garlic clove, peeled

3–5 x 15ml tablespoons regular olive oil

6 x 15ml tablespoons (90g) smooth peanut butter

3 x 15ml tablespoons lemon juice, or more as needed

2 teaspoons sea salt flakes or 1 teaspoons pouring salt, or to taste

2 teaspoons ground cumin

4–6 x 15ml tablespoons Greek yogurt

2 x 15ml tablespoons peanuts, finely chopped, to serve (optional)

1 teaspoon smoked paprika, to serve (optional)

bread sticks, mini pittas, crackers, tortilla chips, to serve (optional)

- ♥ Drain and rinse the chickpeas. Put the garlic clove, chickpeas, 3 tablespoons oil, peanut butter, lemon juice, salt and cumin into a food processor and blitz to a knobbly purée.
- ♥ Add 4 tablespoons of the Greek yogurt and process again; if the hummus is still very thick add another 1–2 tablespoons yogurt and the same of oil. (This will often depend on the chickpeas, as different sorts make the hummus thicker or not.)
- ♥ Taste for seasoning, adding more lemon juice and salt if you feel it needs it.
- ♥ On serving, mix the chopped peanuts with the paprika and sprinkle on top if you wish, and put an array of bits and pieces to eat with or dip in, as you see fit.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The hummus can be made 1–2 days ahead. Transfer to non-metallic container, cover and refrigerate until needed. Should be consumed within 2 days of making.





Churros

with chocolate dipping sauce

I have been desperate to find a churros recipe I can happily live with and after much research and many churros – though overeating sugar-coated Spanish doughnuts is not in itself a hardship – I have found The One, in Thomasina Miers' *Mexican Food Made Simple*, a book of enormous charm and possessing that essential ingredient: it both induces and rewards greedy curiosity. This, my version of her churros, is slightly different; but then, we all, when we cook, tend to fiddle a bit.

I have never – sadly – been to Mexico, but I've eaten churros in Spain, grabbed from a bakery as I pass, in the morning or late at night, with a cup of sauce-thick hot chocolate on the side. At home, they are a sudden afternoon treat, an indulgent, late-morning weekend breakfast, or a gratifying finale to a meal of tapas-style offerings. The chocolate sauce that you dip each sugar-and-cinnamon-coated doughnut into is luscious and thick, and if it looks at first to be too much for the amount of churros you've made, bear in mind that it makes sense to give each person their own little bowl of chocolate sauce.

Enough: now get frying. I use a small saucepan, not just because it makes sense to do just 3 or 4 per batch, but because deep-frying in the kind of pan you'd boil an egg in is so much less daunting (in fact, not daunting at all) than having a great big bubbling vat of oil in front of you at the stove.

In Spain, and indeed in Ms Miers' Mexican version, the churros are like long spindly ridged batter worms: mine are squatter, chunkier, altogether shorter and fatter, like pointy-corrugated puffs of doughnut, all the better for dipping and dunking.

Makes 16 churros, which should be enough for 4–6, but ...

for the churros:

50g caster sugar

2 teaspoons ground cinnamon

125g plain flour

1 teaspoon baking powder

1 x 15ml tablespoon olive oil

250ml freshly boiled water

approx. 500ml corn (or vegetable) oil, for deep-frying

for the thick chocolate sauce:

100g good-quality dark chocolate

25g milk chocolate

1 x 15ml tablespoon golden syrup

150ml double cream

♥ Mix the sugar and cinnamon for the churros in a wide, shallow dish: this is for shaking the cooked churros about in, to coat them later.

♥ Melt all the chocolate sauce ingredients in a heavy-based saucepan, really gently, and once the chocolate starts to melt, stir everything together and take off the heat and leave in a warm place.

♥ To make the churros, put the flour into a bowl and stir in the baking powder then beat in the olive oil and 250ml freshly boiled water from a kettle. Keep mixing until you have a warm, sticky dough, and leave to rest for about 10 minutes or for as long as it takes for the corn (or vegetable) oil to heat up.

♥ Heat the oil for frying in a smallish saucepan; it should come about a third of the way up the sides of the pan. When you think it's hot enough, toss in a cube of bread and if it sizzles and browns in about 30 seconds, the oil's hot enough; or if you're using an electric deep-fat fryer or otherwise have

the means to check the temperature, it should be at 170°C. Keep a watchful eye on your hot oil pan at all times.

♥ When you are ready, load up a piping bag with a large star-shaped nozzle (8mm) and fill with the churros dough. Squeeze short lengths (approx. 4–5cm) of dough into the hot oil, snipping them off with a pair of scissors as you go. I love the squidgy feel of this.

♥ Cook about 3 or 4 at a time and, once they turn a rich golden brown, fish them out of the oil with a slotted spoon or spatula or with tongs onto a baking sheet lined with some kitchen roll. To keep the cooked churros warm while you fry the remaining dough, transfer them, after blotting with kitchen roll, to a parchment-lined baking sheet and hold in a low oven (100°C/gas mark 1/4). Even if you let them sit out of the oven, they do need 5–10 minutes to rest before you eat them, to allow them to set inside.

♥ Toss all the hot churros into the sugar and cinnamon and shake them about to get a good covering, just before serving.

♥ Once you have finished making the churros, pour the chocolate sauce into individual pots (to avoid the double-dipping dilemma) and dip'n'dunk away.



AND TO WASH IT ALL DOWN ...

Note: 1 shot measure is 25ml though I often use 2 x 15ml tablespoons on the premise that more is more.

While there is a part of me that is bursting to clink around in camp cocktail mode, drinks-wise I tend to be more of a pourer than a shaker. When I'm cooking and talking to friends in the kitchen, fixing up barman-style beverages is not always possible, however desirable it may feel. I make exceptions: when there's a small group, or even just for a solitary snifter, I

don't mind branching out, but on the whole I stick to the sort of drink you can mix splashingly in a jug or a glass.

I have written before about my déclassé drinks cabinet; if anyone has a weakness for a kitsch tippie (more for the joy of the label than to drink, frankly) it's me. Still, any quickly thrown together party or even languorously planned kitchen gathering has to rely on a relatively restrained stock of bottles; a list of cocktails that calls upon a full bar is never going to make sense.

When it comes to drinks-fixing, I take as my starting point, unsurprisingly, the bottles I keep in hand for general kitchen use. Well, it makes sense – to me, at any rate. Thus, as I keep some stout in store so that I can bake up a [Guinness Gingerbread](#) or a welcoming batch of [Irish Oaten Rolls](#), I know I have half the makings of a weekend brunch pitcher of **Black Velvet**. I love this drink, but it is much misunderstood. That's to say, everyone falls for the drink-me glamour of the name, but it's – usually – impossible to sip without wincing. I'll tell you why. When the drink was invented (1861, so the saga goes, concocted by a steward at Brooks's Club to honour the passing of Victoria's Prince Consort) it was fashionable to drink sweet champagne.

These days, sweet champagne is thought of as ultimately naff, and so Black Velvet is made up with equal quantities of dry champagne and stout, and is just as bitter as you'd think it would be. Make it instead by mixing 1 x 75cl bottle of sweet fizzy wine (I use Asti Spumante without embarrassment) with 750ml Guinness or dark stout and you'll have a drink that is (a) considerably cheaper than the chic champagne mix and (b) fantastically quaffable, making about 6–8 glasses. What's more, you could do worse than serve a dark, alluring pitcher with the oaten rolls that share its gorgeously bitter ingredient and with a plate of good smoked salmon. And if you do, consider goat's curd or cream cheese – or else just regular Philly – to spread on the manilla-toned rolls before topping with the salmon. A small tangle of pickled red cabbage and a

frond or two of fresh dill (as per my regular Christmas no-cook canapé) might be considered as a final, tangy flourish.

This brings me to the **Baby Guinness**. This has nothing to do with the stout in question, but is an after-dinner drink that ends up looking exactly as the name suggests. You take a small shot glass (and I've got some that do look like teeny-tiny miniature beer glasses) and fill it almost to the top with coffee liqueur. I use Kahlúa in preference to Tia Maria here as it has more viscosity and therefore is fit for purpose, or Illy Espresso liqueur since it's a bit less sweet, which I like. Either way, into the nearly full shot glass of dark coffee liqueur, pour some Baileys over the humped back of a teaspoon (just to break its fall) so that you have a creamy white layer on top, to resemble the head on a glass of stout. Good though this is to drink at the end of dinner, you could also consider serving a shot glass each for **pudding** to throw over a small bowl of vanilla ice cream. Or you could mix the coffee liqueur in equal parts with some Frangelico hazelnut liqueur (if you've made the [tiramisu](#) you should have some over).

Frangelico is also good added to coffee or **hot chocolate**: you can make a very superior hot chocolate if you melt 100g good dark chocolate, finely chopped, in 500ml full-fat milk with a shot or two of Frangelico, over a medium heat. Pour into a couple of mugs and top, if you like, with squirry cream and some chopped toasted hazelnuts. And I often make a **Frangelico Cream** just by softly whipping some double cream with a shot or so of Frangelico: 250ml of double cream along with 1–3 x 15ml tablespoons (or to taste), of Frangelico, should be enough to make a glorious accompaniment to any chocolate cake, turning it from teatime treat to dinner party dessert.

This is, in effect, along the lines of the Margarita Cream that accompanies my [Flourless Chocolate Lime Cake](#) and it is these ingredients that have given birth to a drink I am almost hysterically proud of.

Inspiration for this came in the wee small hours: truly this is sweet compensation, for insomnia. Folks, I bring you

the **Lagarita**, a thirst-quenching lager splashed with the makings of a Margarita plus some, or a kind of embellished lager'n'lime. So: take 1 x 33cl chilled bottle Mexican beer, add 30ml or 2 x 15ml tablespoons or 1 shot (whichever way is easiest for you to measure) each of tequila, Cointreau (or triple sec) and Rose's lime juice cordial, then squeeze in fresh lime juice, to taste. Now, the lager doesn't absolutely have to be Mexican, but it does have to be (as always, in my book) so cold it hurts. This is just the drink you want to wash down a [quesadilla](#) or a fiery plate of [Dragon Chicken](#) and much else besides.



This leads me to another contender for quesadilla-accompaniment which, in turn, suggests brunch (and I wouldn't say no to the [Coconutty Crab Cakes](#) alongside, either) and that's a **Bloody Maria**. I told my friend Maria that this was a drink I'd created for her, but I'm afraid I was lying like a cheap rug. A Bloody Maria is regular barman's terminology for a Bloody Mary made with tequila in place of vodka. My recipe, such as it is, goes as follows: to 1 litre tomato juice, add 250ml tequila, 2 x 15ml tablespoons amontillado sherry, 1 x 15ml tablespoon fresh lime juice (or more to taste, and you could serve a lime wedge per person after spritzing the mother-pitcher) plus 1 teaspoon Tabasco (or

to taste). I also salt generously, tasting after each stirred-in sprinkle.



The previous are serious drink-drinks, but I am a great believer in offering, on the other hand, the sort of stuff that can be knocked back without justified hesitation. I think I have told you before that – due to its mood-enhancing properties – prosecco is known *chez moi* as prozacco. Unsurprisingly, this is a drink that forms the foundation of my liquid entertaining. My favourite of all is a drink introduced to me by Anna Del Conte, called **Prosecco Sporco**, which involves pouring a glass of prosecco and then adding a dash or two of Campari. *Prosecco sporco* literally means “dirty prosecco” but somehow “Filthy Fizz” sounds better to me. I find it unutterably chic and absolutely gorgeous into the bargain. The bitterness of Campari is not to everyone’s taste (though the bitterer the better, as far as I’m concerned), so if you are wanting to turn this into a cocktail for the sweeter toothed, I suggest a dash of Chambord black raspberry liqueur, instead, if you happen to have that in your drinks cupboard.

However, while we’re on the Campari – that you also, notionally, have in your cupboard – a Campari and soda says summer to me, but possibly one of the greatest cocktails of all time is an **Americano**. For that you need a squat, chunky

tumbler which you cram with ice, before adding 2 shots each (or use an American quarter cup/60ml measure) or just go by eye, of Campari and sweet red vermouth. Top with a little fizzy water (serving more on the side to be added as wished) and garnish with a slice or twist of orange. This is both rich and refreshing at the same time, and is a fantastically fiery red, as if terracotta had been turned into a stained glass window. It may interest you to know, if you don't already, that in the first of Ian Fleming's Bond books, *Casino Royale*, this was 007's drink of choice, before he moved into the martini, shaken not stirred, etc.

Another possible use for your Campari is a **Pink Margarita**. To make one of these, you need to shake together with ice, 1½ shots or 3 x 15ml tablespoons tequila (which may already be in your drinks cabinet, see above) with 1 teaspoon Campari and 1 x 15ml tablespoon each (or about ½ shot) fresh lime juice and sugar syrup. (**Sugar syrup** is not hard to make – mix 250ml water with 250g sugar and boil them together carefully until the sugar has dissolved, and then leave to cool – but it's a bore, so I buy it in a bottle: the easiest one to find is French and labelled “*gomme*”.)

Now, it strikes me that if you've taken the Chambord route to your Filthy Fizz, you could also use the Chambord in place of Campari in your Pink Margarita, maybe upping the quantity a little, and doing without the sugar syrup.

I don't go for sweet, sticky drinks, much, but I have a lot of time for Chambord. This may be in large part due to the prettiness of the bottle, which looks as though it were designed by Vivienne Westwood for Marie Antoinette; certainly, it looks as though it belongs more in the boudoir than the drinks cabinet (especially in the smaller bottles). But its intense dark raspberry taste is worthy of attention, aesthetic considerations aside. As well as mixing it with fizz or adding it to tequila as above, you can make a classic cocktail and favourite of the knock-it-back nineties, a **French Martini**. Shake together with some ice (or mix in a more pedestrian way) 1½ shots or 3 x 15ml tablespoons of vodka with ½ shot or 1 x 15ml tablespoon

Chambord and 1½ shots (or 3 x 15ml tablespoons) pineapple juice. This is the drink to bear in mind when you're serving [spare ribs](#), since you'll be getting the pineapple juice in for those.

There's one last use I have for Chambord which is in a **Raspberry Cooler**, another drink of my own wayward creation: in a long glass, I chuck in 1 shot each of raspberry vodka and Chambord, cram in ice and then pour over some San Pellegrino limonata. I fear this is veering into the world of alcopops, as it doesn't taste nearly as alcoholic as something with vodka and liqueur should, but it is delicious and refreshing. As they are obliged to say on bottles and ads these days, enjoy responsibly ...

If after everything we've downed since I first mentioned the Largarita, you can still remember the ingredients, you will know that we had some Cointreau (or triple sec) in store ... This can be added to a bottle of prosecco and some pink grapefruit juice to make a great party drink, a **Petunia**, so-called (by me) because it is a summery counterpart to my Christmas tippie, the Poinsettia. To make 8–9 glasses, pour 1 x 75cl bottle of dry white fizzy wine into a large pitcher and add 125ml Cointreau (or triple sec) and 500ml pink grapefruit juice – and because of the latter, you could also call this a **Florida Fizz**. When Barbara Castle, Labour's late great Red Queen, was asked whether she wanted to be called Chairman, Chairwoman or Chair, she is said to have replied, "I don't care what I'm called so long as I'm in charge." Similarly, I don't care what you call this party piece, so long as you give it a go.

Now, as for crèmes de menthe and de cacao: I am more than aware that even a moderately well-stocked home drinks cabinet could contain neither, but I've prevailed upon you already to think about buying both for the delectable [Grasshopper Pie](#) so feel our joint attention should be turned to them now. It's not a pretty prospect, I know. For, whereas I love the pie, I would gladly give the **Grasshopper** cocktail a miss. But we're here, the bottles are already opened and you may as well give it a go; you may like it more than I do. In

which case, shake 1 shot each of green crème de menthe, white crème de cacao, double cream and full-fat milk over ice before straining into a martini glass. Armed with this pair of liqueurs, I'd prefer an **After Eight**, which requires you to shake ½ shot each of vodka, green crème de menthe and the white crème de cacao over ice before pouring into a chilled shooter.

Still, a wise move might well be to unbracket the two drinks in your mind: 2 shots vodka, 1 each of white crème de cacao and dry vermouth shaken over ice make for a **Chocolate Martini**, and if you're feeling in fancy bartender mode, then dip the martini glass first in a splash of crème de cacao and then in a little sieved cocoa to provide a richly dusted rim. On the whole, though, I'd suggest the crème de cacao rather as I do the Frangelico: splosh it in hot chocolate, hot milk or coffee to sweeten and strengthen, or use it in place of rum, where appropriate, in cooking – for example in the **Chocolate Chip Bread Pudding**.

But one last dash back to grab that crème de menthe. The best way of drinking this, and it has a retro pleasure all of its own for me, is simply poured over crushed ice, as in **crème de menthe frappé**. This was (I should be embarrassed but I'm just not) a favourite drink of mine when I was about fifteen, and I love, too, the lines it makes me remember from Harry Graham's *Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Homes*:

“When Baby's cries grew hard to bear / I popped him in the Frigidaire. I never would have done so if / I'd known that he'd be frozen stiff. / My wife said 'George, I'm so unhappy! / Our darling's now completely frappé!’”

But back to the real world: I couldn't cook without some sake in the kitchen, and I felt it made sense to try and make a pourable drink out of it – the sake I keep on hand isn't generally high-toned or expensive enough to savour just as it is. I turn it into a drink known in my kitchen as a **Giddy Geisha**, though you might feel happier just calling it a **Sake and Tonic**. So, proceed as if you were making a G&T, but use sake in place of the gin, and add a dash of elderflower cordial

at the end. If you're in garnishing mode, add a thin long tongue of cucumber. This is a fantastic refresher and Friday afternoon booster. (I'm particularly keen on some low-sugar, but aspartame-free, tonic water I've recently found.) I rather fancy ginger beer or ginger ale would be good with the sake, too, in which case dispense with the elderflower cordial.

For my own part, I could never dispense with elderflower. I have the cordial on hand for my [Gooseberry and Elderflower Crumble](#) and use it often to sweeten apples when I cook, too. An **Elderflower Spritzer** is a fabulously aromatic non-alcoholic drink to offer, so even if you don't plan to cook with it, it's worth having a bottle of the cordial in the house. Just dilute the elderflower cordial in a ratio of 1:4 or 1:5 with fizzy water (but some cordials are more concentrated, so check the instructions on the bottle). A sprig of mint in each glass is a good touch, too.

And I end with the elderflower because it makes for one of my favourite drinks, and what I mix myself when I need refreshment, succour or Dutch courage. I call it an **Elderflower Gimlet** but that's what my children might call a random appellation, given that a gimlet has gin and Rose's lime juice cordial in it and this has vodka and elderflower cordial. But I know what I mean. I don't bother to shake or any of that fandango. I just put ice in a small martini glass and add 1½–2 shots each of very good vodka and elderflower cordial. I had a dream recently in which I invented a beautifully clear cocktail called **Tears of a Clown** (don't ask). I do remember that at the very end, a tiny dot of rice vinegar was added. If you feel brave enough, do. But I am happy with my Elderflower Gimlet as it is. Bottoms up!



THE COOK'S CURE FOR SUNDAY-NIGHT-ITIS

Soup made with garlic and love *and pumpkin scones*

Toad in the Hole

Onion gravy

Smoked haddock my mother's way

Ed's mother's meatloaf

Quick BBQ gravy

Meatloaf sandwich

Pork and apple hotpot

Slow roast pork belly

Texas brisket

Warm brisket sandwich

Italian tomato and pasta soup

It's all very straightforward really: I cook to suit my life; I write about the food I cook. There is certainly a Kitchen Constant in my life (and it seems right, come to think of it, that in physics the symbol for 'constant' is indeed k) and I don't believe the way I cook has essentially changed over the years. But life evolves, and so do recipes. How we cook, or how we eat, grows out of how we live.

This translates in my life into a whole new eating-entity: Sunday supper. When my children were little, I suddenly realized that there existed such a thing as the weekend lunch. I should rephrase this, for it was not just about lunch: when my children were little, I realized that clearing up one meal was nothing but a precursor to getting started on the next. Now that I have teenagers, rather than toddlers, the demands on the kitchen are different. For one thing, they're not up in time at

the weekend to give lunch serious consideration and when they are up they seem to have some urgent but mysterious place to go to, called simply “out”.

With Sunday lunch ruled out as a constant, I now concentrate my endeavours on Sunday supper. I am the most ineffectual of mothers, but even I can make a convincing argument as to why Sunday night is home time. I know that eating heavily in the evening is not on the dieticians to-do list, but this is the time when I feel we all need bolstering. There is a certain gloom that threatens to descend, a dread, however unjustified, of the white-knuckle-ride of the week ahead: this my mother (who never really got over her own school-phobia) called Sunday-night-itis.

It’s obviously important that your efforts to ease in the week don’t ruin your weekend. But a little pottering in the kitchen gives me that feeling I find so crucial, of being in a fixed, familiar place in a whirling world. I do mean a little: while most of the recipes here may need a long time in the oven, that is what makes them easy – you are absolutely freed up while they cook. These are soothing suppers for the cook as well as the eaters.

And I don’t think this particular cook is alone in deriving comfort from a sense of continuity. I have no attachment to my past other than in the kitchen, but here it matters deeply. All sentiment aside (it’s my stomach not my soul speaking), I relish this unfancy and old-fashioned food that endures and helps you endure, that’s passed down through the years and down the generations. It is my most cherished legacy. But I’m still happy to tweak a recipe here and there – we’re talking cooking not conservation, after all. And that’s the evolution of eating: often a recipe has to adapt to survive. So here it is, from my kitchen to yours: cosy, cocooning food to fend off that Sunday-night feeling no matter what the day of the week.



Soup made with garlic and love *and pumpkin scones*

Most of the recipes in this section come, if not from my childhood, then from someone else's and have consequently formed a part of my children's. This recipe, however, has an entirely literary provenance: the minute I read about Ezra's hopes for the restaurant in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, his plan for a soup made with garlic and love, I knew I had to eat it. Which meant, first, I had to come up with a recipe and cook it. I am not trying to replicate the recipe that the character had in mind, not that I could; but no matter, for this is the sort of soup that came into my head as I read. (I've spared you the gizzards – his dream not mine – because I couldn't, in any case, get them past the home front.) With any other writer, there might be a danger of the title's being cloying or sentimental, but how – really – is that possible in an Anne Tyler novel? Your soul gets flayed on every page: I don't think any writer has managed to be so piercing and unrelentingly intense and plain downbeat at the same time.

There's not a sentence of hers I don't love, but after reading any of her books, a soup like this is what I need. I can't help feeling that this makes it perfect fodder for the low-energy, high-tension mood of a Monday-evening supper. I add the pumpkin scones, just because they go so well with it, and I like to have something to do as I wait for the soup, but you could just as easily make the [Irish Oaten Rolls](#) or buy any bread you like to go with.

This kind of unflashy peasant soup does – there are no two ways about it – rather resemble dishwater, but it is delicious dishwater. Besides, it's exactly this sort of home food, the food that belongs in the kitchen, that I love and need.



Serves 4

1 bulb garlic

1 leek, cleaned and trimmed

3 x 15ml tablespoons regular olive oil

1 heaped tablespoon chopped fresh thyme

2 baking potatoes, approx. 400g total

1.5 litres chicken stock, preferably organic

salt and pepper, to taste

few spoonfuls chopped fresh parsley, to serve

- ♥ Free each clove from the bulb of garlic, then peel and slice them as thinly as possible.
- ♥ Halve the leek and also slice thinly. Heat the oil in a heavy-based pan which comes with a lid, and cook the leek gently for about 5 minutes with the lid off, stirring every now and again, until soft.
- ♥ Add the thyme leaves and sliced garlic and cook gently for another 5 minutes, as above.
- ♥ Cut the potatoes (with skin on) into small dice, then add them to the pan, giving a good stir with your wooden spoon.
- ♥ Add the stock and bring the pan to the boil. Simmer for 20 minutes partially covered, then season with salt and pepper, to taste. Turn off the heat and let it sit for a few minutes before serving, sprinkling with parsley as you hand out bowls.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The soup can be made up to 2 days ahead. Transfer to non-metallic bowl to cool, then cover and refrigerate as soon as possible. Reheat gently in a saucepan, stirring occasionally, until piping hot.

FREEZE NOTE

The cooled soup can be frozen, in airtight container, for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.

Pumpkin scones

I should confess up front that the pumpkin which plays such a key part in these scones comes out of a can. It is pretty much half a canful, and I suggest you freeze the remaining half in a freezer bag or airtight container (for up to 3 months) and bring it out the next time you want to charm with a batch of these beauties. Then again, you could just keep it in the fridge for up to 3 days (but take it out of the can) and use it as a sweet thickener in any meat sauce or vegetable soup or stir it into any stew you might have a-bubbling away at the time. I sometimes add it to the [Patara Lamb Shanks](#), for example.

But I love these scones: the sweetness of the pumpkin is well balanced by the saltiness of the Parmesan and the revving power of the chilli oil. While I think they are best just smeared with butter, and generously, so you're left with a gloriously melted pool at the very centre, I have to say they have an addictive draw for me when dabbed, too, with a spot of Vegemite: not so much that it darkens them, but enough to seep into the melted butter. Funnily enough, when I have them with this [garlic soup](#), I also adore them thickly spread with cream cheese. That tastes like Sunday evening to me.

They are gorgeous to make: the pumpkin gives them a supple and pliant texture that is lovely to work, and tints them with gusto: making them is like modelling with golden Play-Doh.



Makes 12 scones

175g canned pumpkin purée

50g grated Parmesan cheese

1 egg

1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

1 teaspoon sea salt flakes or ½ teaspoon pouring salt

good grinding white pepper

2 teaspoons chilli oil

250g plain flour, plus more for rolling

2½ teaspoons baking powder

½ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

a little milk to glaze

1 x baking sheet

1 x 5cm scone/cookie cutter

♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6. Put the pumpkin purée, Parmesan, egg, Worcestershire sauce, salt and pepper and chilli oil in a bowl. Beat well to mix.

♥ In another bowl, measure out the flour, baking powder and bicarb and mix together. Fold this into the pumpkin mixture and work it to form a dough.

♥ Flour your work surface, then tip the dough out of the bowl and pat down with your hands to make a slab about 5cm thick. There's no need to roll it.

♥ Cut the dough into scones, using a round 5cm fluted cutter (or a smooth-edged cutter would do) that you have first dipped in flour. Place the scones on a baking sheet, about 3cm apart.

♥ Re-form the dough so that you can keep cutting out rounds, and you should get 12 scones from this mixture.

♥ Brush the tops of the scones with milk to glaze them, and then bake for 15 minutes. Once out of the oven, allow them to cool a little and then eat warm or cold, though I think they're best warm. And you can always warm one up for yourself, should you want.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The scones are best the day they are made but day-old scones can be revived by warming in oven preheated to 150°C/Gas mark 2 for 5–10 minutes.

FREEZE NOTE

Baked scones can be frozen in airtight containers or resealable bags for up to 1 month. Defrost for 1 hour at room temperature and warm as above. Unbaked scones can be put on parchment-lined trays and frozen until solid. Transfer to resealable bags and freeze for up to 3 months. Bake direct from frozen, as directed in recipe, but allowing extra 2–3 minutes' baking time. (Unused pumpkin purée can be frozen in airtight container for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge. It can sometimes separate a bit, with a slight watery layer, on defrosting but is still fine to cook with.)

Toad in the Hole

This is the platonic ideal of the Sunday night supper: undemanding and safe-making, it bolsters as it comforts. But while I love its nursery charm, I have tweaked it a little, not least in that I don't leave the sausages whole, but squeeze them into little patties, which I fry on the hob before blanketing with batter and baking in a ferociously hot oven. I am not trying to create more work – not that squeezing sausages out of their skins is arduous (indeed, it is strangely satisfying) – but I really don't like the way that the sausages, when this is prepared in the traditional manner, go a spooky braised pink as they cook within the batter. Yes, you can give them a start in the hot oven so they sear first, but it never quite seems to do the trick, and this way one doesn't have to return to them. You just fry the little patties, pour the batter over them, chuck in the oven and leave them to it.



Serves 4–6

350ml full-fat milk

4 eggs

pinch salt

250g plain flour

400g good pork sausages (6 in number)

1 x 15ml tablespoon goose fat, vegetable shortening or oil

4 sprigs fresh thyme, plus more for serving if wished

1 x round roasting tin approx. 28cm diameter, or small rectangular roasting tin approx. 30 x 20cm

♥ Preheat the oven to 220°C/gas mark 7. Whisk the milk and eggs together with the salt, then whisk in the flour, beating to make a smooth batter. I find this way round makes for a lighter batter.

♥ Press the sausage meat out of its casing (you may need to nick the skin with a knife), half a sausage at a time, rolling it in your hands to form a ball and then squash gently to make a little, fat patty. You should get 12 patties from the 6 sausages.

♥ Heat the fat or oil in a heavy-based, flame-safe roasting tin on the hob and brown the patties for about 1 minute each side: you need do no more than make them look enticingly brown.

♥ With the patties and oil still hot, pour in the batter and quickly drop in the sprigs of thyme. Absolutely immediately put into the oven for about 40 minutes or until the edges of the batter have risen and turned golden, and the eggy middle has set.

♥ Serve immediately, scattered with a thyme sprig or two or just a few leaves and with gravy (either the onion one below, or the [BBQ](#) variant mooted) if you feel you can only properly enjoy Yorkshire pud when it's sauce-sogged.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The batter can be made 1 day ahead. Cover and refrigerate. The sausages can be formed into patties 1 day ahead. Cover and refrigerate until needed.

[Onion gravy](#)

*Warm 2 tablespoons fat or oil and then cook 2 **onions**, peeled, halved and very finely sliced, until soft (about 10 minutes). Add 2 teaspoons sugar, and let the onions cook, caramelizing a little, for another 3 or so minutes, before stirring in 4 teaspoons flour then 500ml meat stock. When thickened and hot, add a glug of marsala to taste.*



Smoked haddock my mother's way

My mother used to make this fairly often in my childhood, but mostly, I associate it with feeling under-the-weather: this is my idea – or rather my mother's – of hand-on-the-brow comfort food. My mother always put a tomato cut in half in the dish, but I once, unaccountably, found myself at home and tomato-less, so bunged in some peas from the deep-freeze, instead, and was very happy with the innovation. You could do either or both, as suits you; fresh bread, thickly sliced and buttered, is non-negotiable, however.

I put a fillet of smoked haddock in its own small ovenproof bowl or dish and pour milk over it, adding tomatoes or peas or both, most definitely an egg, and some tied parsley stalks if I have any around, and I give each person a bowl. So it makes sense to give quantities per bowl and you can increase these to suit the number of people you're feeding.

Note: The egg should be soft, so don't give this to anyone with a weak or compromised immune system, such as pregnant women, the elderly or infants.

Serves 1

3 x 15ml tablespoons frozen peas

butter, for greasing

1 small fillet smoked haddock

250ml full-fat milk

few parsley stalks or sprigs, tied

1 tomato, halved

1 egg

freshly ground white pepper

- ♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6. Put the frozen peas into a bowl and pour some freshly boiled water over them.
- ♥ Grease a small ovenproof dish with butter and sit the smoked haddock fillet in it.
- ♥ Pour the milk over, drop in the parsley stalks and put in the 2 tomato halves, then find a space to crack in the egg.
- ♥ Drain the peas, add them and give a good grinding of pepper before putting the dish into the oven. Cook for 10 minutes, if all your ingredients are at room temperature. If not, you may need 15–20 minutes. Do be careful, though, as you want the egg yolk to stay runny.





Ed's mother's meatloaf

I have a perfectly justifiable weakness for any recipe that comes to me having been passed on through someone else's family. This is not just sentimentality (I hope not *even* sentimentality, actually, since I'm somewhat contemptuously convinced that sentimentality is the refuge of those without genuine emotions). Yes, I do infer meaning from the food that has been passed down generations and then entrusted to me, but think about it: the recipes that last, do so for a reason.

And on top of all that, there is my entrancement with culinary Americana. I just hear the word meatloaf and feel the old-world, European irony and corruption seep from me, as I will myself into a Thomas Hart Benton painting. And then I take a bite: the dream is dispelled and I'm left with a mouthful of compacted, slab-shaped sawdust and major, major disappointment. So now you understand why I am so particularly excited about *this* recipe. It makes meatloaf taste like I always dreamt it should.

Even though this is, indeed, Ed's mother's meatloaf, the recipe as printed below is my adaptation. My father-in-law used to tell a story about asking his mother for instructions on making pickles. "How much vinegar do I need?" he asked. "Enough," she answered. Ed's mother's recipe takes a similar approach; I have added contemporary touches, such as being precise about measurements. But for all that, cooking can never be truly precise: bacon slices will weigh more or less, depending on how thickly or thinly the bacon is sliced, for example. And there are many other similar examples: no cookbook could ever be long enough to contain all possible variants for any one recipe. But what follows are reliable guidelines, you can be sure of that.

I do implore you, if you can, to get your meat for this from a butcher. I have made this recipe quite a few times,

comparing mince that comes from the butcher and mince that comes from various supermarkets and there is no getting round the fact that freshly minced butcher's meat is what makes the meatloaf melting (that, and the onions, but the onions alone can't do it). The difficulty with supermarket mince is not just the dryness as you eat, but the correlation, which is that the meatloaf has a crumblier texture, making it harder to slice.

Quick BBQ gravy

*As far as gravy goes, I am happy just to have the juices that drip from the meatloaf as it cooks, and not least because the whole point of this meatloaf for me is that I can count on a good half of it to eat cold in sandwiches for the rest of the week. (And you must be aware – it is my duty to make you aware – that a high-sided roasting tin makes for more juices than a shallow one.) But if you wanted to make enough gravy to cover the whole shebang hot, then either make an **onion gravy**, and pour the meat juices in at the end, or fashion a quick, stove-top **BBQ gravy**. By that, I mean get out a saucepan, put in it 50g dark muscovado sugar, 125ml beef stock, 4 tablespoons each of Dijon mustard, soy sauce, tomato paste or purée, and redcurrant jelly and 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar, to taste. Warm and whisk and pour into a jug to serve.*

Ed instructed me to eat kasha with this, which is I imagine how his mother served it, but I really feel that if you haven't grown up on kasha – a kind of buckwheat polenta – then you will all too easily fail to see its charm. I can't see any argument against mashed potato, save the lazy one, but I don't mind going cross-cultural and making up a panful of polenta; I use the instant kind, as I've admitted, but replacing the water that the packet instructions advise with chicken stock. And, as with the beef stock needed for the gravy suggested above, I am happy for this to be bought rather than home-made.



Serves 8–10, but feed fewer and have leftovers

4 eggs

4 onions, 500g total

5 x 15ml tablespoons duck fat or butter

1 teaspoon sea salt flakes or ½ teaspoon pouring salt

1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

900g beef mince, preferably organic

100g fresh breadcrumbs

225g thin-cut rindless streaky bacon, or 275g American-style bacon

1 x large roasting tin

- ♥ Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6. Bring a pan of water to a boil and then boil 3 of the eggs for 7 minutes. Refresh them in cold water.
- ♥ Peel and chop the onions, and heat the duck fat or butter in a thick-bottomed frying pan. Cook the onions gently, sprinkled with the salt, for about 20–25 minutes or until the onions are golden and catching in the fat. Remove to a bowl to cool.
- ♥ Put the Worcestershire sauce and beef mince into a bowl, and when the onion mixture is not hot to the touch, add it to the bowl and work everything together with your hands.
- ♥ Add the remaining raw egg and mix again before finally adding the breadcrumbs.
- ♥ Divide the mixture into 2, and in the tin make the bottom half of the meatloaf by patting half the mince mixture into a flattish ovoid shape approximately 23cm long. Peel and place the 3 hard-boiled eggs in a row down the middle of the meatloaf.
- ♥ Shape the remaining mound over the top of the eggs and pat into a solid bloomer-loaf shape. Compress the meatloaf to get rid of any holes, but don't overwork it.
- ♥ Cover the meatloaf with rashers of bacon, as if it were a terrine, tucking the bacon ends underneath the meatloaf as best you can to avoid its curling up as it cooks.
- ♥ Bake for 1 hour, till the juices run clear, and once it's out of the oven let the meatloaf rest for 15 minutes. This should make it easier to slice. When slicing, do it generously, so everyone gets some egg. Pour meat juices over as you serve, or do what you will, gravy-wise.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The meatloaf can be assembled, covered and kept in fridge for 1 day. Then bake as in recipe.

Making leftovers right

Meatloaf sandwich

Without doubt a *meatloaf sandwich* is one of the most fabulous things anyone can eat ever, ever, ever. I don't want to be too bossy about this, but for me a meatloaf sandwich needs to be slathered with a mixture of wholegrain mustard and mayo, whatever bread you're using – and the bread I'm using is an Eastern-European-style dark rye, scented and studded with caraway seeds. (You should use up the leftovers within 2–3 days.)





Pork and apple hotpot

My maternal grandmother used to make a pork and apple hotpot, though it was years before I thought of making one myself. Why did I wait so long? There are few suppers so comforting, both to eat and, actually, to make.

It is a fiddly recipe, that I don't deny, and if Sunday afternoon finds you flat-out exhausted and (as my grandmother also used to say) rather on the top note, then perhaps this isn't ideal. But I sometimes find chopping and stirring, a bit of calm kitchen process, can restore some sanity to my frazzled brain. Not that my children would necessarily agree, since they are regular witnesses to my Sunday-night stoveside meltdowns.

Someone helping, a child perhaps, could make it an easier process; then again, a solo stint in the kitchen could be more emotionally restorative. But why I find recipes like this so helpful at the weekend is that they take long enough to cook for you to have a properly usable tranche of time between preparation and consumption.

Although I've specified boneless chops, I regularly ignore myself. On the plus side, having no bones makes greedy guzzling easier; on the other plus side, bones intensify the flavour. Either will do. Gloriously, I have also to report an overwhelming desire to add a layer of sliced black pudding to the cooked hotpot and return it to the oven, turned up to 220°C/gas mark 7, for 10 or so uncovered minutes at the end.

I think the recipe that follows is pretty much traditional; my only failure in this regard is that I can't find my old-fashioned hotpot dish, the brown-glazed round pot that fans out at the top, which was exactly the same as the one my granny had. I did mind, and I still do, that I somehow have managed to lose it, though I have to report that the proper pot required a bit of fiddly covering with greaseproof and always

bubbled over; so, now that necessity has made me move towards a round cast-iron casserole with a lid, it's all been easier.

I could suggest you start off cooking everything in this pot, but it will mean you are layering up in a hot greasy pan and you may prefer to add to the washing-up but work in less of a danger zone.

Serves 4–6

3 x 15ml tablespoons oil

3 onions, peeled, halved and cut into half-moons

250g streaky bacon

50g plain flour

½ teaspoon ground cinnamon

¼ teaspoon ground cloves

seeds of 4 cardamom pods, crushed, or ¼ teaspoon ground cardamom

salt and pepper, to taste

6 boneless pork loin chops (175g–225g each)

4 Granny Smith apples

1 x 750ml bottle sharp, pressed apple juice

1 x ovenproof dish, approx. 20cm diameter x 13cm deep, or 24cm round casserole with lid

♥ Preheat the oven to 170°C/gas mark 3. Warm the oil in a wide, heavy-based pan, and fry the onion for about 10 minutes until soft, stirring occasionally. Remove to a bowl.

♥ Cut or scissor the bacon into small strips and fry in the oily onion pan for a few minutes; remove to the onion bowl and mix together.

♥ Put the flour, spices and seasoning into a freezer bag and add 3 of the chops. Roll them around, and then shake off the excess flour. Sear the chops in the oily pan and remove them

to a plate. Cook the other 3 chops in the same way, flouring and then searing.

♥ Peel and core the apples, cutting each one in half. Slice each half into fine segments and then arrange all the ingredients in the ovenproof dish or casserole, as follows: a layer of onions and bacon, 3 pork chops, a layer of apple slices, onions and bacon, another 3 pork chops, a layer of apple slices, onions and bacon and, finally, a layer of apple slices.

♥ Tip the remaining spiced flour into the oily pan and stir around before whisking in the apple juice. Bring to the boil, then pour into the layered dish, letting it filter slowly through to the bottom.

♥ If necessary, make a snug lid for the dish with greaseproof paper and foil, and sit it in the oven on a baking sheet, as it may leak. Otherwise, just pop the lid on your casserole. Cook in the oven for 3 hours, until the pork is cooked through and the apples are tender.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The hotpot can be assembled 1 day ahead, though the apples will turn a bit brown but you won't notice when they're cooked. Cover tightly and refrigerate until needed. Cook as directed in recipe.

Slow roast pork belly

There are a few meals I can say I'm making that will make my children excited (or pretend to be), and this is one of them. Alongside there must be Pie Insides (which is what my daughter has always called [leeks in white sauce](#)) and for ultimate gratification, [roast potatoes](#). Although I usually use goose fat for roast potatoes, I feel the pork belly allows, indeed encourages, the substitution of lard. I'm not convinced that with all that fabulous crackling you do need roasties as well, but I like to provide what makes people happy. I actually prefer noodles or a bowl of plain, steamed brown basmati rice, and urge you to consider either; and I love to sprinkle a little rice vinegar on my own plate of pork as I eat.

This is another of those recipes that you can get done in advance and then have the afternoon off, unworried. I have advised an overnight marinade, but if I'm making this (as I tend to) for Sunday supper, I often prepare it in the morning and leave it in the fridge loosely covered with baking parchment, or midday-ish and leave it uncovered in a cold place (but not the fridge) for a few hours.



Serves 6–8

1.75kg pork belly, rind scored

4 x 15ml tablespoons tahini

4 x 15ml tablespoons soy sauce

juice 1 lemon

juice 1 lime

♥ Get out a shallow dish in which the scored pork will fit snugly and in it whisk together the tahini, soy sauce, lemon and lime juice.

♥ Sit the pork on top, skin-side up. You should find the marinade covers the underside and most of the sides, but doesn't touch the rind: that's what you want.

♥ Leave the pork in the fridge to marinate overnight, covered with foil, and then take out to return to room temperature before it goes into the oven. Preheat the oven to 150°C/gas mark 2. Get out a shallow roasting tin and line with foil.

♥ Transfer the pork to the roasting tin and cook it uncovered for 3½ hours, then turn the oven up to 250°C/gas mark 9 and cook for a further ½ hour to let the skin crisp to crunchy burnished perfection.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The pork can be marinated for up to 1 day. Cover and store in refrigerator until needed.

Making leftovers right

Leftovers can be stored in the fridge, tightly wrapped in foil, for up to 3 days. If there's enough, I'd suggest cutting it into bite-sized pieces and reheating it in a mixture of soy sauce, sake and mirin and stirring it through some cooked rice with chopped fresh coriander and a few mixed seeds. However, I tend to find that not much gets left over, in which case I suggest you bag and mark it up, freeze it (for up to 2 months) and use it when needed in the [Pantry Paella](#).



Texas brisket

Brisket is one of those old-fashioned cuts, the very mention of which makes certain people dewy-eyed: this is the food of our grandmothers' grandmothers, cheap, flavoursome, substantial, in need of slow cooking and worthy of deep appreciation. Eating a plate of brisket, sliced and doused in its gravy is to know you are safe in the warm embrace of the kitchen. With this under your belt, you enter the week fortified.

The most important thing you should know, though, is to ask for the brisket to be fresh: what you don't want is salt-beef, which is how brisket most commonly ends up – and not a bad ending it is, either. I'd also recommend you ask for it off the bone (although the chances are this will be done, anyway) and, though it may be wise to ask for the *excess* fat to be trimmed, what you most definitely do not want is for all the fat to be removed: you need the fat to give the meat flavour and keep it meltingly tender. Well, that and the slow roasting helps, too.

I don't roll my brisket: I just get a tapering sheet of it (well, that's how it comes: thicker on one end), sit it skin-side up on a bed of sliced onions, and cover it first in liquid and then in foil. I know there's a lot of it, but I can't tell you how good it is reheated, and I also freeze 2-person portions of the meat sliced in its gravy for future dates when greed outweighs energy. And I make no adjustment to the liquid measurements or cooking time, even when the weight of meat is less. In fact, I recently cooked this as an 800g rolled joint, and the only changes I made were to put the rolled joint in the middle of a cast-iron casserole, the onions on one side of it, a carrot, halved lengthwise, on the other, the liquid, then the lid, on top and cooked it exactly as for the flatter, immensely bigger joint below.

Curious though the ingredients do sound for the liquid the beef is to be cooked in, I cannot tell you how straightforwardly glorious it tastes. I'd defy you or anyone to be able to tell that there is coffee in it, but it is so good that I am not tempted to take it out, even once, just to tell the difference. I have managed to find some liquid smoke – a wonderfully poetic notion – over here, and thrill to the legend on the label – “My life is in these bottles” – but I'm sure you could go ahead without. True, you'd miss that Texas barbecue flavour, but just double the amount of Worcestershire sauce and the tang factor would be kept as it should.

I stay nearer home for the accompaniments. To me this says mash, and the [potato and parsnip](#), buttermilk-mixed version (minus the ginger) makes a pretty fantastic partner, too. But there is no denying that some steamed potatoes, just cut up first and skins removed only after cooking, would be very much simpler and still do the essential job of absorbing the wonderful juices. Still, I have to say, I love this in a wide, low, shallow bowl with crunchy green beans and some bread for dipping, though the last of the juice I eat, like soup, with a spoon.

Serves approx. 12, or many fewer with copious leftovers (the most desirable state of affairs)

3 medium or 2 large onions

approx. 2.5kg fresh (not salted) beef brisket

4 x 15ml tablespoons cider vinegar

4 x 15ml tablespoons soy sauce

4 x 15ml tablespoons liquid smoke

4 x 15ml tablespoons Worcestershire sauce

4 x 15ml tablespoons steak sauce (such as A1 or HP)

**4 x 15ml tablespoons strong brewed black coffee or
approx. 1 double espresso**

♥ Preheat the oven to 150°C/gas mark 2 and get out a roasting tin that the oblong-shaped brisket will lie in snugly.

- ♥ Slice the onions, stripping away any skin that unwraps itself (it doesn't matter if the skin stays on) and arrange them largely in the centre of the pan, to create an onion-platform for the brisket to lie on.
- ♥ Duly place the brisket on top, fat-topped side uppermost.
- ♥ Whisk together the remaining ingredients and pour them over the brisket, then cover the pan with foil, sealing it tightly – make a double-layer if you want to feel secure – and place in the low oven for 3½ hours.
- ♥ Remove from the oven and transfer the meat to a board.
- ♥ Transfer the onions to a blender with a ladleful or two of the liquid from the pan and blend till smooth, then add back to the rest of the liquid in the pan and stir to mix.
- ♥ Slice the brisket in gentle diagonals across the grain and then, if you want, cut the slices in half across before plonking them into the onion-thickened gravy in the tin. I serve, happily and proudly, straight from the tin.

Making leftovers right

Warm brisket sandwich

*There is no wrong way to eat these leftovers, and all I really do is a reheating job, but it would be remiss of me not to add that a **warm brisket sandwich**, eaten messily and alone, is one of the truest pleasures available to mankind. The slices of beef can be stored in the fridge for up to 3 days: cover the surface with a thin layer of gravy and store on a plate covered tightly with clingfilm or in an airtight container. You should store the remaining gravy separately in the fridge. (Leftovers can be frozen for up to 2 months in an airtight container: defrost overnight in the fridge and reheat as below.) When you're ready, proceed as follows: reheat meat in gravy, in an ovenproof dish covered tightly with foil, either in an oven preheated to 180°C/gas mark 4, for 20–30 minutes, or in the microwave in a bowl covered with clingfilm, in 30-second bursts until piping hot; cut 2 thick slices of bread; dip 1 slice*

in gravy and sit wet-side up on plate; sit meat on top, then add dollop of horseradish sauce; using remaining piece of bread, wipe out gravy dish and sit the sopping slice of bread, wet-side down, on top of beef; lift up sandwich a little, crane forward so that you are hovering over plate and eat sandwich before it falls utterly and damply to pieces.



Italian tomato and pasta soup

Think of this as a heavenly Italian version of Heinz tomato soup, made to comfort and delight and assure the eater that all manner of things shall be well. I rather think this is something we all need to feel – whether rightly or, alas, wrongly – on a Sunday night when the past week's failures and the coming week's obligations weigh heavy in the air. Actually, I'd go further than that: I'd say that if you go to bed on Sunday with this in your tummy, Monday morning will be that bit more manageable.

You can add pasta or not, and blitz up or not, but my favourite way to eat this is the second option below: to pass the tomatoes and onions in their flavoursome liquid through a food mill and then cook the pasta in it. But the lovely thing about this soup, whichever way you eat it, is that it feels like something cosy on a tray that someone who loves you might bring you when you're down: the sort of comforting, undemanding food that cures whatever it is that ails you, from too much weekend carousing to the hysteria of undone homework.

Serves 4

6 large, ripe, fabulous tomatoes, approx. 575g

3 x 15ml tablespoons olive oil

2 garlic cloves, peeled

1 large onion, peeled and finely chopped

1.5 litres cold water

**1 teaspoon sea salt flakes or ½ teaspoon pouring salt
grind or two of pepper**

2 teaspoons caster sugar

150g ditalini or anelli rigati, or other soup pasta of your choice

sour cream, to serve (optional)

chopped fresh parsley, to serve (optional)

♥ Pour boiling water over the tomatoes in a bowl and leave to steep while you get on with a couple of other things.

♥ Namely: warm the oil in a thick-bottomed pan (one with a lid) and fry the garlic cloves until golden on both sides before discarding them and adding the chopped onion to the now garlicky oil. Stir a little and leave for a mo while you go back to the tomatoes.

♥ Drain the tomatoes and leave in the colander to cool slightly, before stripping off their skins. Halve the tomatoes – and get rid of seeds and white membrane – then roughly chop them and add to the onions in the pan. Stir well and leave to cook for 5 minutes or so, or until the onions have softened.

♥ Add the fresh cold water to the pan, let it come to a boil, adding salt, pepper and sugar, then turn down the heat, put the lid on and leave to simmer for **20 minutes**, if you want to eat the soup rough; **40 minutes** for smooth.

♥ **First option:** after 20 minutes remove the lid, bring back to the boil and add the pasta to cook till tender in the tomato and onion broth, then leave to stand for about 10 minutes before serving.

♥ **For the second, smooth option,** after the tomatoes and onions have had their 40-minute simmer, pass them through a vegetable mill, then pour back into the pan, bring to the boil, add the pasta and cook till it's tender, and let the soup stand for 10 minutes before serving.

♥ Sprinkle with chopped parsley to serve, as you like. If you wish to eat this without pasta, it will be runnier (the pasta starch thickens the soup) but still good, and you can add a retro squiggle of sour cream to each bowl on serving.

MAKE AHEAD NOTE

The soup can be made up to 2 days ahead. Transfer to non-metallic bowl to cool, then cover and refrigerate as quickly as possible. Best if made without pasta then, to reheat, bring to boil in saucepan, add pasta and cook as directed in recipe. If made with pasta, you may need to add extra splash of water on reheating.

FREEZE NOTE

The cooled soup can be frozen in airtight container for up to 3 months. Defrost overnight in fridge and reheat as above.



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KITCHEN

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