

FOR THE LOVE OF ERIC

A KITCHEN DEVIL

People over generations and centuries have handed down personal recipes to families and friends. Most dishes are familiar, but as with the telling of stories, each recipe reflects the character of the individual creating the dish. It might be an extra ingredient, a particular method or a slight tweaking in the preparation. I inherited such recipes from friends, and in particular Bessie Glover who had been a house-maid in Edwardian times. She used to help prepare banquets for big events. I came to know her long after her retirement. She had regularly helped out with catering at receptions given by Bishop Mervyn Stockwood in Stockwell, South London, while my partner Donald was his chaplain, which is how he knew her. She then came occasionally to the vicarage at St Peter's Morden, in South London, where Donald was vicar for about ten years, and prepared lunches for special parish events to which guests such as bishops, journalists, politicians or community leaders had been invited. Not experienced enough then to do this work, as I would later, I observed her admiringly and took notes. She arrived in the morning, only hours before the lunch, and in a whirlwind of pots, plates and utensils, turning the kitchen into a war-zone, she baked pies, assembled salads and whipped up desserts. I include her signature dessert, a mousse, in this book. She would prepare one with lemon and another with orange. By the time the guests arrived, the kitchen was spotless and all the dishes laid out neatly as though conjured out of the air, no preparation having been required. She stood by the empty sink and with calm demeanour look approvingly at the laden table. She then put on her hat and coat, accept payment and took her leave before the guests arrived. She observed my interest and presented me with a pile of school exercise

books filled with her recipes, all written in careful school-girl handwriting which covered every inch of the page from margin to margin.

My book shares a life-time of experience in the kitchen, like she did, adapting the recipes to my own particular taste. Friends who like my cooking often ask for recipes which I write out on scraps of paper. Here they are in book form, which is also a kind of autobiography because I include stories as to how they came about, the people and places they remind me of. I try to make things simple while explaining the preparation as clearly as possible, for those cookery beginners who are confused by recipes which often leave out essential helpful information about preparation, because such published recipes tend to assume knowledge of kitchen skills. After decades of cooking, I still am learning the basics. It is helpful to be reminded and guided.

GARDENS, FORAGING AND ERIC

There are three essentials in my kitchen: food from the garden, using free or cheap ingredients, and Eric.

Growing herbs and basic vegetables, fruit and salads, the bedrock of cooking, means that all my life I have wanted and insisted on a garden attached to where I live. It need not be a large garden, which is too much work anyway, but enough space to grow herbs and the kind of vegetables that give substantial harvests in a limited space, and are otherwise too costly or lacking in quality in shops. Rows of runner beans, spinach, purple sprouting broccoli and salads are easy to grow. The broccoli plants grow from seed; then need to be thinned out and transplanted to places in the garden which provide enough room for massively thickening stalks and wide spreading leaves in the autumn. The only care needed is protection from slugs in the early stages of growth, and dealing with white fly whenever it appears. The leaves can be cropped as cabbage substitute, trimming the plants but leaving enough greenery to nourish and protect the

spears when they appear in the early spring. If there is extra space in the garden, I plant courgettes, parsnips and turnips. Parsnips need to be thinned so they can swell in the soil. I have no success with carrots, but since, like onions and potatoes, it is relatively cheap to buy good quality and hardly worth the trouble to cultivate them. Beetroot is rewarding because apart from the root itself, the leaves can be cropped all summer. These provide a delicately flavoured and silky textured alternative to spinach.

In my eighth year we moved from a terraced house in Manchester's Victoria Park, a place of back to back houses, no greenery, to a semi-detached house in a village outside Bolton in Lancashire, where my father was appointed curate-in-charge. This meant having a garden for the first time. I had no idea about how to grow anything. The front had a tiny lawn around which I tried to create a flower bed, with no success. The seeds resolutely refused to grow, because I probably did not dig and feed the soil adequately. I just sowed the seeds and hoped for the best. The birds probably came and ate them. The back garden had a small lawn and then tapered to a stunted sycamore tree in the back corner. The tree's branches were shaped like a mournful question mark. A few raspberry canes grew bravely every year but gave only a minimum quantity of fruit. Generally raspberries need little attention, so I can only assume these plants were depressed. This garden still haunts my dreams: sad ones of trial and failure in which I attempt to grow things, and there is always disappointment. In these dreams I keep checking how the rows of plants are doing but those that bother to grow remain stunted.

The next home, on a steep mountainside in North Wales, had a garden so rocky that it would have required bulldozers to make the soil friable. However two wild damson trees clung to the inhospitable stony surface and gave unexpectedly good harvests of

intensely flavoured fruit. Short tufts of grass grew on the fields above, below and around the house. Sheep grazed, scattered droppings, and bleated incessantly throughout the year. I foraged. Puffball mushrooms grew in the hedgerows, their light-grey polished round surfaces concealed among clumps of wild thyme. In stead of gardening I crawled on all fours in the woods, finding only wild sorrel with its sharp lemony taste. I searched hungrily but in vain for more variety of herbs and anything edible, rather like Stephanie Audran in the film *Babette's Feast* who roams the windswept hillsides of Denmark to find anything that could add flavour to the bland daily fare of her hosts. However blackberries grew well in North Wales. The climate and terrain suited brambles, and nowhere else in the UK would I find berries as large and succulent, and in such abundance. Berries never keep, and there are always fresh ones to pick and eat, so I developed a recipe for a creamy dessert which has a colour as opulent as its flavour.

Blackberry Cream

For every pint of juice after cooking use 4oz sugar (more or less, to taste), a packet of gelatine and 1/4pint whipping cream.

Put blackberries in a pan with half a pint of water for every pound of fruit.

Bring slowly to the boil and simmer gently until the blackberries are soft.

While the berries are cooking sprinkle gelatine over a little cold water in a serving dish and leave to dissolve. Don't stir – the powder gathers the moisture and swells. A white serving dish sets off the sumptuous colour of the finished dessert.

Strain the blackberries over the gelatine, squeezing out as much juice as possible with the back of a table spoon, stirring and pressing. Pour the hot liquid over the dissolved gelatine. Add sugar and stir well together.

When cool, and as it starts to set, whip cream not too stiffly and fold into the jelly mixture. Chill in the fridge until set.

Then there is Eric.

Eric has a mysterious origin.

All kinds of people who led interesting lives visited my parents throughout my childhood. I don't know where my parents came across them: eccentrics, oddballs, mostly well-educated, some with arcane wisdom, all of them interesting, with some skill or ability to pass on. A tarot card specialist came and explained the images on the classic set. He did not give a reading or play at being a fortune-teller, but he interpreted the images from an historical and cultural perspective, touching on ancient mythology and imagery. These insights stayed with me, and to a certain extent influenced my painting and way of thinking. He explained the origins of the images. The death card is not to be taken literally, for instance, and far from being a premonition of final expiry it symbolizes change: a new path, even revolution. Falling off a tower, on the other hand, means catastrophe.

One day a middle-aged couple visited us and the wife handed over a small jar containing what she called a yoghurt plant. She may have told us where it came from, but I have forgotten. It might have been a foreign land, certainly not England. I never came across anything like it before or since, with its small rubbery white florets. She told us to feed it milk each day. The milk did not even need to be boiled. Every one or two days we were to strain the yoghurt through a sieve, squeezing the florets well. These then only required a thorough wash in plenty of running water, to clean the plant. Only when the water ran clear could we cover it in milk again: as simple as that. The plant doubled in size within days. Every few weeks the florets would gather in larger, flatter pieces, rather like rubbery coral; these were parts of the plant that had died. We were to throw these pieces away. To keep it in manageable quantity it could be divided, bits discarded or given away to other people. It turned out to be a most generously productive organism.

I took charge of the plant and it has been with me now for over fifty years.

On its fiftieth year I gave part of it to my friend Ari from Iraq who was enthralled by the plant. He appreciated the flavour of its yoghurt, and the simplicity of plant care. Originally a refugee from Saddam Hussain's regime, having escaped prison and walked across Europe to claim asylum in the UK, he worked for ten years and built up a small business, lost everything in the 2008 financial crash, then settled in London, working as a computer repair man, sending money to his family, a wife and two sons. His daughter had already married and lived with her husband's family in the relative safety of Irbil. Then Islamic State overran Ari's home-town near Irbil, murdering a cousin and the cousin's son. Ari's wife then fled to Irbil with their two sons for safety. But once the Kurds, with the help of American air-strikes, had retaken Ari's home-town, he had no choice but return to Iraq, be with his family and fight to reclaim their home. The last time I skyped with Ari he had joined the front line with Kurdish militia, and until he contacts me again I do not know if he is alive or dead.

The yoghurt plant freezes well, at times when it cannot be fed. So Ari put his portion in the freezer and carried it back to Iraq in its frozen state. The plant keeps for months in the freezer, only needing some milk to revive it, and can also survive without being fed for a day. Ari's brother, also enthralled by the plant, took charge of it and it is thriving.

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The yoghurt makes a fine soft cheese, smooth with a delicate flavour. Most of the acidity is in the whey which can also be used in cooking. Invest in a piece of muslin which can line a colander or strainer and allow the yoghurt to strain overnight, covered with a plate. Next day the cheese should come away easily from the muslin and stores for up to a week. The whey keeps for up to two weeks in the fridge.

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When I moved in with Donald, the plant came with me. Donald looked at it with great suspicion. ‘Whatever’s that?’ he asked, watching me strain and wash it. I explained its history, and having ascertained it was a living thing Donald insisted on a name for the creature: Eric.

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The main inspiration for the kind of garden I wished to create came from the poet Anne Ridler, mother to Ben my best friend at university. In fact, every garden that was attached to whatever house I occupied would be influenced by what she taught me. Her Oxford garden was for me a haven; a piece of paradise. At the same time Vivian Ridler, her husband and head printer to the Oxford University Press, introduced me to the art of cinema and reading serious film critiques in magazines like Monthly Film Bulletin, which would become Sight and Sound. My collection goes back over forty years. The Ridlers gave me my first commissions, and were generous and trusting enough to allow me to paint frescoes directly on their walls. Above the stairwell I paid tribute to the garden.

Anne Ridler’s garden was a constantly evolving work of art, like one of her poems, inspired by her favourite poet Keats who contained intense spiritual sensuality within a strong framework of rigorous technique. I try to recreate the particular atmosphere of her garden but, like personal recipes, no garden can or ought to be replicated. Each one reflects the character of the owner. Everything had its space in Anne Ridler’s garden: the herb corners, the rockeries, the vegetable patch in the centre of the lawn where there was no shade so she could grow asparagus, the fig tree against the back wall in full sun all day, and various apple trees and hazelnut bushes, always heavy with fruit and nuts in the autumn. Like a poem by Keats, her favourite poet, the garden intimated eternal rhythms. It expressed the passage of life: birth, growing to full potential in a blaze of colour, and then offering up a harvest before dying. The

melancholy of this life cycle which leads inevitably to death, even in sunny weather, was offset by delight: each season had its qualities, including winter when the whole garden lay asleep, and a dark torrent of naked apple boughs and twigs hung over the frosted lawn as in a Japanese woodcut by Hokusai. Anne Ridler planted in such a way that every corner of the garden enjoyed its moment. In late autumn, when it seemed all colour had drained away, the eye would be pleasantly surprised by a vivid splash of autumn crocus.

Moving in with Donald brought the added bonus of gardens ready for cultivation. I could begin to create Anne Ridler's haven, her piece of heaven, in my own way. Two large cherry trees dominated the first garden, in Morden, South London. Their branches exploded with snowy blossom in early spring, and hung heavy with luscious sweet fruit in the summer. They needed to be cropped before a storm cloud of starlings descended like vandals on a rampage, attacking the fruit clusters in a squall of loud tweeting and sticky showers of messy pecking. I dug my first vegetable patch and learnt about the vagaries of climate and pests. In an exceptionally hot summer, the one immortalised in Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden*, tomatoes provided a bumper outdoor crop, never to be repeated again in my life, though I plant them out in hope every summer. Given the traditionally cool wet English summers, these plants struggle and wilt, but at the same time beans and spinach do well. I learnt how flexible gardens can be. Whatever the weather, some plants thrive when others do not, which is a perpetually positive aspect of gardening. I always make the error of trying to grow too much. Plants like space, and I'm learning that lesson only slowly. In this first garden I also kept bees and chickens. The bees survived despite my poor management, because they found plenty of forage in the cherry trees above the hives and also in a grove of lime trees on the other side of the house. The chickens were not so lucky. Having too little space to peck and roam they attacked each other and lost

tail feathers. I put tar on their bottoms to inhibit this behaviour, and had I sprinkled sequins on the tar, they would have gone around looking stylish in a gothic way.

When it came to killing them, the less said about my inept slaughtering technique the better. I still have guilt nightmares about their unhappy fates, especially the one poor hen who rushed headless round the garden after I failed to chop its neck off properly. Suffice to say I learnt quickly that if anything or anyone, including myself, is to be killed, may the executioner be a seasoned professional who does it quickly and with skill. Typical of a hippie generation I assumed the hens would be more contented with a cock to give them pleasure: a foolish sexist error. The hens turned viciously against this lazy, unproductive and noisy intruder. Occasionally it chased a hen round the hutch, caught up and did its business, but most of the time the hens either paid no attention or chased the cock. When eventually we got rid of the cock, because his piercing crowing before sunrise every morning annoyed us and the neighbours, the hens settled down to their former routine, pecking in vain for seeds and grubs, and then each others' bums. All living things require space. Our present neighbour, the local vicar, has two hens, who together roam his garden which stretches well over an acre. They may one day be pounced on by a fox, but at least for the time being they lead a reasonably contented existence, and look healthy with every feather in place.

When we moved to Piccadilly, our now elderly hens were given to a local butcher who knew how to kill them swiftly and cleanly; but the bees came with us. The two hives stood on the flat roof of the rectory and the bees surprisingly found so much forage that they produced three hundred pounds of honey in the first summer. We assumed they had made their way to Buckingham Palace gardens. When I presented a jar of honey to the Queen Mother on her visit to the tercentenary celebrations of St James's Church in 1984, she commented, with her distinctive aristocratic modesty that implied she lived the ordinary life of a suburban housewife so one forget she

actually lived in a palace: ‘Ah yes, I have noticed more bees in our garden.’ Since then other people have taken to apiculture in Central London.

After five years of sleeping within a yard of Piccadilly, the buses and taxis passing all night and the underground rumbling below, despite the thrill of living in the middle of a great city I missed the living and dying elements of Anne Ridler’s garden. St James’s church overlooks a courtyard where a magnificent catalpa tree hands over a fountain, and a lawn surrounded by trees where local office workers come to eat lunchtime sandwiches in peace. However drug addicts make the garden dangerous to work in, because of the needles scattered among weeds and under shrubbery. Those five years for me were focused on arts festivals, encouraging new music, contemporary poetry, exhibitions, independent films and all kinds of cross-over activities. Though my ideas were appreciated, my administrative skills were woeful. Caring for other artists began to frustrate my own creativity so I moved to a small village by the River Evenlode in Oxfordshire to paint full time. In those days one could survive. I made a modest living selling flower paintings and living on savings. Now the cost of accommodation and living anywhere, let alone in that part of England soon to become prohibitively expensive let alone exclusive to what became known as the Cameron Set made up of media celebrities, makes such a way of life impossible. When I arrived there the region still had the bucolic feel of Laurie Lee’s *Cider with Rosie*, made up mostly of farmers, labourers, a smattering of horse-riding and hunting gentry, weekenders and oddballs like myself.

The ten years that followed allowed me the opportunity of continuing to learn by trial and error how to garden and be an artist, to test the limits of my skills. The flowers and trees became the chief inspiration for all my pictures. Ten years I devoted myself to painting and drawing. All this creativity culminated in two elaborate series: *Schubert’s Winterreise* and *The Sleeping Soldier*. The first is loosely based on the

song cycle, exploring the sentiments expressed in the young man's alienation from the world around him, a launch pad for my concerns. The ending of the song cycle is ambiguous: it could mean either death, mental breakdown or even the birth of hope in darkness. The second series continues the themes of violence and specifically man's relationship to the world and nature which I began in my riff on Schubert's *Winterreise*. Flowers from my garden scatter over all the paintings. They structure each one and link the figures, stories and different perspectives. They are melodies. When the narratives baffle then the eye can rest on roses, cosmos, daffodils, poppies, anemones, and whatever bloomed when I painted each particular painting. My flowers are balm and also reflect the perpetual cycle of life and death. My paintings attempt what Mahler once said of his symphonies: they describe all of life.

They do not intend to be inscrutable, however abstruse and metaphysical they may be. Apart from my imagination and the garden, the main inspirations behind the pictures are book illustrations, particularly illuminated manuscripts, and classic movie posters, in which a variety of perspectives tell the whole story like a trailer. My pictures are to be read. The flowers give the cerebral eye a rest.

I rounded off the two series with several large roundels which riff on fairy tales. The penultimate painting, *In the Forest*, is a meditation on the life of my godmother, a refugee from Germany before the Second World War. In that picture I finally achieved a kind of resolution. At its centre is an upright rectangular, like a window or a page from an illuminated manuscript. Two lovers embrace in the night under a starry sky. They are my godmother and godfather as they remember the days of their courtship, when inspired by DH Lawrence, they used to make love outside in nature. The couple could be Tristan and Isolde meeting illicitly, breaking rules, surrendering to passion. This ambiguous night scene is framed by bright day which constitutes the main substance of the painting. Portraits, scenes from life and history, their own, and

world events which determined their fates float around the nocturnal encounter with illustrations from Grimm's Fairytales. The structure of the picture is a square and a circle in equilibrium. It is for me the culmination of my work as a painter, and therefore one I would hold on to if the rest were to be taken away or destroyed.

I attempted one more picture, a commission for my father on the theme of the Persian classic Sufi tale about the Parliament of Birds and their search for the mythical Simurgh. It describes the journey which finally appears to fail in the quest. However the Simurgh is already in each and every one of them. I worked on the framing images, which are tributes to friends and family interspersed with my usual naked figures. At the painting's centre is a white nothing. It looks unfinished even though there are several layers of pigment. In a way it is the antithesis of Kazimir Malevich's famous Black Square, one of several works of art at the start of the 20th century which ushered in a new era. I never painted this kind of picture again.

Running the Coffee House, and then working for the Soul of Europe, I only had time for watercolours and drawings. The watercolours are quick, and the ones that work out are glued into calendars for friends at Christmas. Drawings I can scratch away at whenever time allows, usually late at night. I am also filling dummy books with meditations on *The Angelic Wanderer, Der Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, a 17th century collection of poems by a German poet priest, Angelus Silesius, which my father had translated into English before he died. They are in the form of illustrations, faces, bodies, and flights of fancy.

Whatever the theme of my paintings, flowers are a constant as is the naked human body. In most of the pictures people share a meal or drink tea while they converse. Sometimes they prepare food, when they are not making love.

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We are told that the two most important elements of life are food and sex. Although true, this description reduces human beings to the lowest of common denominations. Early on in our development as a species we developed a need to understand the world and our place in it. Out of this came the imagination. This continues to express itself in many forms from science to the arts, and all these have an intellectual and spiritual dimension. Spirituality has always been part of this impulse to understand. The earliest cave paintings celebrate the relationship between mankind and nature. The earliest artists were consciously bestowing eternal life on what gave them sustenance. Imagination and spirituality became an essential part of mankind's character.

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My parents were the first to admit they couldn't cook, even priding themselves on despising the frivolous bourgeois preoccupation with preparation of food. Meat would be put in a pressure cooker and left to turn into a greyish slab that no one could even chew. Lentils were also cooked that way, and came out dry as dust. One day the pressure cooker exploded. It rolled on the floor, bruised and knocked somewhat out of shape. But there was no sign of the chicken that had been inside. Suddenly my father shouted and pointed to the ceiling. Tiny bits of chicken flesh were hanging like stalactites. It was not just the inedibility of the food that distressed me. I felt the chicken and the lentils deserved better. If I were to be slaughtered or picked for someone to eat, then I hope I would be prepared properly, and to my best advantage. Not however in the manner of Andersen's satirical tale about the snails in a rich man's garden who dream of being cooked and served up on silver platters. Despite not wanting to be prey, it is the way of nature. Documentaries show that survival and procreation are the fundamentals of existence, and most of the drama consists of hunting, killing, eating and mating. At least the predator should give due respect to its

prey, which is after all keeping the predator alive. As cave paintings show, mankind always understood the sanctity of this relationship. The first human beings understood that resources needed to be valued and protected, not out of empathy, although the paintings indicate they probably did have such feelings: survivor empathy.

My child self had an instinctive awareness that my parents' Puritanism about food was misplaced. They did not approve of my early cooking efforts, considering such activity trivial and to be discouraged. My first apple pie made without access to a recipe probably would have tasted as awful as it looked, but it did not deserve to be thrown away in a fury by my mother. The dreaded pressure cooker continued to whistle and pulverise food. When eventually I left home I took control of whatever kitchen I happened to be part of. I began to rescue chickens and lentils from disrespect, learning from people who knew what they were doing. I picked up tips and read Mrs. Beeton and the classic cookery writers who followed her, those who favoured practicality over fussy excess. Elizabeth David introduced me to the distilled methods and taste of Mediterranean traditions; Madhur Jaffrey to the basics and variety of oriental cuisine, particularly vegetarian; Rosemary Hemphill to the use of herbs. Audrey Ellis's *Farmhouse Kitchen* taught me how to make preserves and wine. Claudia Roden did the same with her encyclopaedic knowledge of Middle Eastern cuisine. Richard Mabey inspired with his love of foraging and then suggesting the best way of preparing wild fruits. I did however inherit some of my parents' puritanical attitude to cookery as a decadent pursuit: I detest fussiness and intense focus on presentation. Food should be about sharing and is therefore a political and social activity. My current inspiration comes from people like Nigel Slater for whom food is about human relations. He is what I would call a sensible cook, but spiced with flare and the unorthodox, open-minded, sexy and enthusiastic. I pick up hints from Jack Monroe who has recently become my pin-up when she described herself as

a ‘gobby lesbian’ and appears on shows like *Question Time*, so linking her kitchen activity with political issues. I collect recipes that catch my eye, but have to simplify lovable Yotam Ottolenghi’s complicated lists. I don’t want to spend too much time in the kitchen, and I am intimidated by the many ingredients his dishes require. I don’t even know what some of them are. They are not available at most stores.

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The garden is a kingdom, particularly for Biscuit the cat, who patrols constantly in those hours when he is not sleeping. He catches mice and small birds and brings them excitedly into the house, eyes blazing with predatory fervour, before consuming them with much gnashing of teeth. This can be disconcerting when I try to play soft pieces on the piano, say Bach or a piece of Schubert. The loud crack of small skulls being chewed not far from my feet is a constant reminder to me of Tennyson’s famous phrase: ‘Nature, red in tooth and claw.’ Otherwise Biscuit accompanies me on my weeding or harvesting expeditions, weaving in between my hands and legs as I kneel among the plants. He manages to get in the way and stand precisely where I want to be pulling and picking. Meanwhile he is perpetually on guard. He may be trying to protect me from predators, or be on the look out for prey.

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Herbs are a basic. Rosemary spreads in the sunniest corner of the patio along with thyme, oregano and sage. I emulate Anne Ridley with a well-drained raised bed in which herbs mingle with rockery plants and lavender that can be rubbed between the fingers in passing, so releasing the scent. Tarragon and parsley grow well in partial shade, so long as they get enough sun during part of the day. Lovage also flourishes under trees in a neglected corner. It is worth having just one plant that tends to grow tall. A small leaf is enough to flavour a stew with its concentrated celery aroma. Chives grow anywhere, and spread. I snip the flower heads off, so the leaves can grow

on through the summer. A few basil plants grow well on a sunny window and as with the chives, cutting the flowering heads encourages more leaves.

I envy those gardeners whose parsley plants are luxuriant with a forest of deep green stalks and leaves. Mine struggle. I plant them in different parts of the garden, and try to find an ideal spot. But my parsley is capricious. The odd seed will produce a healthy growth where others failed. The saying is that parsley only grows for whoever is boss in the home. Clearly I am not the boss in mine.

When chives and parsley are growing at their height, pick in quantity, chop and keep in the freezer packed in tubs or plastic bags for use in soups and stews throughout the winter.

One of the salad herbs easy to grow is American cress, and can be used like the more familiar watercress. If left to its own devices it will seed all over the garden which it colonises, and then offers a regular supply of leaves throughout most of the year, particularly winter and early spring when nothing much else is growing. Added to leek and potato, it makes a fine-flavoured soup. Nasturtiums' peppery leaves are not to everyone's taste. Guests have spat them out. However the flower buds are milder, and together with cucumber-flavoured sky-blue borage flowers are an attractive addition to salads.

AMERICAN CRESS SOUP

1 onion peeled and chopped roughly

2 large potatoes peeled and chopped into small pieces

2 or more cloves of garlic finely chopped

1-2 large leeks cleaned and chopped

A large handful of cress leaves chopped roughly

2-3 tablespoons of sunflower seed oil

2 litres of water (some people like stock, but to my mind the best results are with water, so the delicate flavour of the leek and cress is not swamped)

Salt and pepper to taste

No more than ¼ pint of cream, optional. Not too much, because the soup shouldn't be too rich. However cream adds a bit of luxury to this queen of soups.

Chives or parsley, chopped. I use chives generously when they are in season.

Salt and freshly ground pepper

Heat the pan over a low heat while preparing the vegetables. Fry the onion until translucent, which will take several minutes, then add the potatoes and garlic and fry stirring for a few minutes until beginning to brown. Add the leeks and cress leaves at this point, and stir until wilting. Now add the water and bring to the boil. Simmer for 20 minutes when the potatoes should be cooked. Add a teaspoon of salt. Turn the heat off and leave to cool a little. Once it is warm pour into a blender in several batches and puree. Heat up in the cleaned pan and stir in optional cream, no more than quarter of a pint. Garnish the soup with chopped chives or parsley.

Eric is a kitchen staple. The woman who gave it me emphasised the need to wash the plant thoroughly after each straining. I kept her advice, and now Eric is 50 years old. Once the water is running clear, the plant is put in small crock or bowl, covered generously with milk and then with a lid. Quantity of milk varies, and you will soon work out how much you need. The less milk, the more often the plant will need straining. More milk gives a thinner yoghurt.

The yoghurt must be stored in the fridge for up to a week and simply be eaten with fruit.

Soft fruit in season, such as raspberry, blackberry, blueberry or blackcurrant can be frozen, but never strawberries which turn bitter and must be added fresh to the yoghurt. A frozen fruit selection can be heated with a little sugar to create a thick compote.

The yoghurt is a basic ingredient in my lamb and chicken curries. It adds sharpness and depth to the hot spiciness.

When there is too much yoghurt to spare, it can be strained through a double thickness of muslin. Old sheets and pillow slips can also be cut up and used. Place the muslin over a strainer and place over a bowl large enough to accommodate the strainer. Pour at least a pint of yoghurt into the muslin, cover with a plate and leave overnight. By morning there will be a yoghurt cheese with a slight lemony bite that has reached the right consistency so it falls away easily from the muslin and can be stored in the fridge for up to a week. It is not as rich and dense as cream cheese and provides a good base for all kinds of dishes. The strained whey has a robust flavour and can be drunk or used in stews and curries. [The yoghurt cheese as it is can be turned into a spread. Chop parsley, tarragon, chives and any herb you like. I add these to the cheese along with a pinch of salt, a finely chopped clove of garlic, which is a matter of taste, and also a shake of paprika and cayenne pepper. I pickle nasturtium seeds, and these can be added too, giving a caper-like consistency and flavour. This herb cheese works as a dip, but my favourite use of it is as a base for a smoked salmon sandwich. It can also be mixed with smoked mackerel for a fish spread. Skin and flake the fish then use a fork to blend with the cheese, finely chopped garlic and a pinch of cayenne as well as seasoning to taste.](#)

The yoghurt cheese is a substantial ingredient in one of my favourite dishes that I prepare when there is a glut of spinach leaves:

SPINACH BAKE

½ kilo (a pound) spinach, cooked and cooled

¼ kilo (half a pound) yoghurt cheese

3 eggs

1 onion

2 cloves garlic

Two tablespoons of grated mature cheddar or one tablespoon of parmesan.

Seasoning, including any herbs you like. Lovage and basil go well with this dish.

There are several ways to cook spinach. As a side dish I heat a tablespoon of sunflower seed oil in a saucepan large enough to hold the leaves which will however wilt and reduce when cooked. I then fry two garlic cloves in the oil and add just a pinch of salt, no more than quarter of teaspoon. Once the garlic is browned quickly add the spinach leaves well washed and water still dripping. The pan will sizzle alarmingly. Don't worry. Slam a lid on it and cook on a moderate heat for just a few minutes, till the leaves are soft and the whole reduced. This is good side dish.

For the Spinach Bake I put the washed spinach leaves in a large pan with a little water to cover the base. Cook on a moderate heat for just a few minutes until softened, then strain well, pressing the water out, and put aside to cool. I keep the spinach water which makes a strongly flavoured stock for my tofu stir fry.

While the spinach is cooking gently, fry the finely chopped onion in a tablespoon of oil over a low heat. I use sunflower oil because it suits my cooking, and has a bland flavour which does not interfere with the taste of whatever is frying in it. But you can use olive oil, because that flavour gives a Mediterranean aroma to the finished dish. Onions release their best flavour when cooked slowly. It is always good to be patient. They may take several minutes, stirring them regularly. Garlic takes a shorter time to

cook, so only add them, also finely chopped, after the onions are translucent and soft. When they are light brown, turn off the heat and leave to cool.

Break the eggs into a large bowl and beat with a whisk until frothy then add the yoghurt cheese and beat together until it is a creamy mass. Now add the seasoning, yoghurt cheese and herbs together with the cooled onion and garlic. Chop the cooked spinach as fine as you like and fold in to the mixture along with the grated mature cheddar. Sprinkle some of the cheddar on top with a drizzle of oil.

Put all into a greased oven dish, and place in a pre-heated moderate oven and cook for $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 hour, until risen and browned on the surface. Take the dish out to test if done. It should be quite firm, resisting pressure from a finger, but not too much. This is always a tricky moment in cooking. Too little and the mixture is runny. Too much and it dries out. Timings also depend on the oven, so it's a matter of trial and error. The Spinach Bake is best eaten warm, not hot, and is also good cold, stored in the fridge with a lid on.

This is a version of a Balkan dish, popular in Serbia and served with meat and potatoes. Diners help themselves to large portions. The Serbian politician and lawyer Vladimir Bozovic, who was helping us with projects concerning the security of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo, took us out for meals where platters of this bake, cut into large squares, were placed in the middle of the table for everyone to stick a fork into the piece they wanted and lift on to their plates. From the large quantities the guests consumed it seemed they treated this dish as ballast to the meat course.

COFFEEHOUSE CHEESECAKE

This was a favourite at my coffeehouse in Oxfordshire. The teenagers working for me over the weekends and during vacation were so devoted to this cake that during my

final Christmas I baked a whole one each. I suspect they did not share with anyone, but took it home, and consumed it in secret, probably in silence, like a prayer. They would not forget me and have nice memories.

For the cheesecake filling, use caster sugar that has been flavoured with vanilla. Keep a large jar of the sugar with several sticks of vanilla well covered and lid screwed tightly. Top up as required. The same can be done with icing sugar.

4oz biscuit crumbs

2oz butter, melted

½ lb yoghurt cheese

4 eggs

¼ pint whipping cream

4oz vanilla flavoured caster sugar

Oven set to Gas 2

The base is made with home-made biscuits, ground to crumbs and stirred into the melted butter, then pressed into a greased high sided tin lined with greaseproof paper.

Beat the eggs with the vanilla sugar until frothy.

Add the cheese and fork together until it is beginning to blend then beat with the whisk until well mixed.

Whip the cream to soft peaks, be careful not to over beat. Then fold into the cheese mixture and pour on to the biscuit base.

Put into the preheated oven and cook for three quarters of an hour then turn off the oven and leave for an extra quarter of an hour.

It should be quite firm. Don't worry if it is still wobbling in the middle. The cake stiffens more as it cools. Refrigerate well covered.

Writing this recipe brings back memories of what had never been intended to be a business venture. However I did not want to lose money, and went to a business adviser to learn basic professional kitchen management, and how to calculate sensible profit margins. The Coffeehouse Gallery in Charlbury Oxfordshire was just that: a gallery that served coffee and simple meals in a space furnished like a living room. The gallery in the back showed only my own work: the *Sleeping Soldier* series which summed up my life's work as an artist and explored the themes of war and peace. Watercolours of flowers hung in the toilets as well as the main dining area which had a small grandfather clock, round tables with cloths over glass tops, an easy chair by a small fireplace and a pine-dresser against one wall. The kitchen area was open for all to see the food being prepared, including disasters and moments of panic when dishes didn't come off. The piece de resistance was a large Italian coffee-making machine, made to order from the Algerian Coffee Store in London. This gleaming monster besides making espresso and Americano coffee had two spouts, one for hot water and another to heat and froth milk for cappuccinos and hot chocolate.

Arteggiano now replicates a similar model of coffee house but less amateurish, more streamlined and with profit, success and building an empire as its main aim. In my case the Coffeehouse Gallery could be described as an 'art installation': a self-portrait. The pictures, the setting and my preparation of food, brewing best quality coffee and tea, were intended to create an experience for the visitor. Inspiration came from similar places in San Francisco, Germany and Amsterdam: small establishments each with its own character, often a specific menu and an aim to be not just an eatery or bar, but a place to socialise, to listen to music, have discussions as well as relaxation. Customers could sit for hours, reading papers on cane frames, Viennese style, and being served coffee with a fresh-baked biscuit or a home-made Danish pastry. In the five years of its existence under my management the coffeehouse hosted talks,

discussions and concerts. All kinds of people visited the Coffeehouse: broadcasters, actors, film and theatre directors, bishops, including Rowan Williams before he was Archbishop of Canterbury, musicians, journalists and authors. I overheard theatre directors discussing new productions for Stratford with their lead actors in a corner where there could be undisturbed. One author spent hours writing books nearest to the kitchen area, and if he noticed me being rushed off my feet would lend a hand.

Another regular visitor was a flute player from John Eliot Gardiner's English Baroque Soloists. Straight out of a pre-Raphaelite painting this gifted and beautiful woman would relax and talk to me about the stresses of performance. She and three flute-playing colleagues, who made up the Frideswide Consort, then generously donated an evening concert at the coffee house.

I took my first staff on without vetting them. The teenagers still at school who worked at the weekend and during holidays ran rings round me and eventually I had to dismiss them. After that, preferring preparation and serving without the added stress of mischievous youngsters, I picked with care: those who came through the door looking for work to whom I felt immediately attracted, and whom I might enjoy being waited on, those who smiled and looked as though they had the energy for what can be demanding work. I ended up with the two most beautiful girls in Charlbury, both called Katie, who attracted the male customers, and several handsome boys who delighted my mostly female clientele. I observed how they all received generous tips, and that put a smile on my face because I could only afford to pay a minimum wage. This second group of assistants proved to be enthusiastic, friendly and reliable. I could have left them to run the coffeehouse. The girls baked cakes and the boys made pizzas. Criticism of the 'next generation' was unjustified. All of these teenagers who worked with me, the two Katies, the Donegan brothers Tom and Bill, Mark, who

eventually became a restaurateur himself having learned from my mistakes, Barnaby and Matt were more mature and harder-working than I ever had been at their age.

Just two of the older weekday staff caused problems. One stole from me. Another took a dislike to me which made it hard to work with her. She wanted to run her own place, eventually opening a catering business in a neighbouring village. However the others became friends. One helped me out when she could fit in the hours: a kindly woman with a welcoming and motherly manner, all smiles, she got on well with the teenagers but could only give me limited hours. Another started as a regular customer, using the place exactly as I hoped, to read the papers, bringing her grown-up children and husband when he was free.. Angela, wife of the actor Sam Dastor, once noticed that I couldn't cope with a sudden rush of visitors, and began working for me on a regular basis. She brought wild mushrooms from a secret meadow, and put sweet peas from her garden into vases on all the tables. She dusted, watered plants and kept the place fresh and clean.

Only once did someone spend a long time studying my paintings. He took his partner, a woman who said nothing but listened intently as he led her from one picture to the other, explaining and discussing each one. Before leaving he told me he was a soldier. He had understood my intentions completely.

One day a sports car drew up outside with a fanfare of roaring exhaust. The driver, a French football star, entered with his elegantly dressed girlfriend. He consumed one of my breakfast spreads at four in the afternoon, liked it so much that he demanded another while his beautiful partner nibbled a biscuit with her coffee; then both disappeared like magical beings that touch the earth only rarely.

Students travelled up from Oxford for my special breakfast with its unlimited toast and jam. They wrote in my guestbook, and one day when I looked my heart sank as I read the terrible sounding words: 'This place is the dog's bollocks!' signed by them

all. Thank goodness for Charles, one of my teenage assistants, who stared at me as though I were an ignoramus. 'That is the highest praise,' he reassured me. So I learned current lingo as well as current trends in popular music. The two Katies sang whole numbers from the Spice Girls, rowed with Charles and Tom about Oasis and Blur, while Barnaby introduced me to The Prodigy and more esoteric bands.

THE DOGS BOLLOCKS BREAKFAST

Unlimited toast made from home-made bread made with special Italian flour

Home made raspberry jam and marmalade

Eggs, fried or poached

Bacon rashers

Sausages

Fried tomatoes and mushrooms

Breakfast Tea or coffee brewed on the Coffeehouse Italian Espresso machine.

Fresh squeezed orange juice

This breakfast takes skill, because each ingredient has to be prepared separately, and in the correct sequence.

First grill the sausages, or fry over a low heat, turning frequently so they don't burst or burn. Make sure they are cooked through. Test with the sharp point of a knife, and if the juice runs transparent they are done.

Meanwhile fry or grill the bacon. I used thin strips of streaky rashers, in the American style, so they turn crisp.

In a separate pan (I said it was complicated doing this kind of breakfast) fry the eggs gently in an oil with not too strong a flavour. Sunflower seed is best. I never use butter, which has a tendency to burn, and is too rich, although this is a matter of taste.

For poached eggs there are several methods, all of them tricky. I made too many spoiled ones to count. Only lately did I come across a fairly foolproof method. Half fill a pan with water and heat water with a pinch of salt. Break an egg carefully into a cup and as soon as the water reaches a rolling boil, turn off the heat and immediately slide the egg carefully into the seething water. Cover and leave for just 3 minutes, less or more depending on how soft or firm you want the egg. Then lift out carefully with a large slotted spoon and drain the egg on kitchen paper laid on a plate. Use a spatula to ease the egg away from the wet kitchen paper onto the breakfast plate alongside the bacon and sausages. Using the pan in which the bacon has been fried, or one that is already hot and a thin layer of oil poured in, quickly fry the tomato, halved and open side down, on a medium heat to char the surface. Remove with a spatula and put on the breakfast plate. Then fry the halved, sliced or whole mushrooms quickly on a high heat, not too much, but just to soften and cook through, stirring constantly.

Serve with plenty of toast, butter and preserves.

THE COFFEEHOUSE CREAM TEA

Morning coffee and afternoon tea were the main reasons for people, mainly ramblers and cyclists, to visit the Coffeehouse.

Eric provided the secret ingredient that made my scones unique.

SCONES

Heat the oven to Gas 5

8oz plain flour

A level teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda

A pinch, or ¼ teaspoon of cream of tartar

A pinch of salt

2oz chilled butter cut into small cubes

About ¼ pint of yoghurt or just enough to bind the dough

Sieve the flour with the soda, tartar and salt then rub in the butter until the mixture is like breadcrumbs. Quickly stir in the yoghurt, as much as will bind the mixture. The trick is, like making pastry, to handle the dough as little as possible, unlike kneading bread. I use a knife to cut the yoghurt into the mixture, and only handle the dough when it clings together in a ball. Then pat it down gently on a floured surface and spread with a rolling pin to a thickness of about ½ inch. Using a round cutter, and handling the dough as little as possible, cut pieces and place with a palette knife on a baking tray.

Put in the heated oven and leave till risen and browned, about 10 to 15 minutes.

Cool on a rack.

Serve with clotted cream and jam, preferably raspberry, strawberry or blackberry. The intensity of berry flavour, pungently sweet rather than blander plum or other fruit, contrasts more satisfyingly with the silky smooth cream and the slightly salty scone, its crisp crust opening to a warm receptive softness.

These scones can also be served with butter and cheese. The yoghurt gives a depth to the flavour which suits sweet or savoury.

BISCUITS FOR COFFEE

I am indebted to John Tovey who used to serve these to guests at his hotel in the Lake District many years ago. For each couple he would put three biscuits on the tray. The way the couple dealt with the third biscuit would determine how their stay went. He called them Fork Biscuits because once the dough has been formed into balls they are flattened on the baking tray with a fork, leaving a ridge that gives extra crisp to the

biscuit. My version adds a few flaked almonds to the dough. Grated lemon or orange peel work well, in which case don't use vanilla flavouring.

FORK BISCUITS

Heat oven to Gas 4

8oz plain flour

4oz butter, softened

4oz vanilla caster sugar

2oz flaked almonds

Cream butter and sugar thoroughly then add sifted flour and mix quickly, not working it too much. Like pastry, the less the dough is handled, the lighter and crisper it will bake. Add the almonds in the final moments of blending. Take pieces the size of a walnut, roll quickly between the palms of the hands into balls and place well apart on a baking tray, flattening them slightly. Dip a fork into a cup of cold water and press lightly on each biscuit, sprinkling a few drops of water over them at the same time.

Place in the heated oven and bake for between 15 and 20 minutes.

When slightly browned, take out of the oven and cool on a rack.

These biscuits are crisp and have the seductive aroma of the best Scottish shortbread, hence the challenge John Tovey presented to his guests.

CHRISTMAS BISCUITS FROM SCANDINAVIA

A seasonal variation on the Fork Biscuit follows a richer Scandinavian recipe. The method is also different.

6 oz unsalted butter

6 oz caster sugar, vanilla flavoured

1 egg yolk

¼ pint double cream

1 lb sifted plain flour

Small teaspoon baking powder

1-2 tablespoons cardamom powder

6 oz finely ground blanched almonds

Beat butter and sugar until light. Beat in egg yolk and cream. Sift flour with baking powder and cardamom. Add to the batter in stages, stirring until it has been incorporated. Then add the almonds and knead quickly but firmly until the dough holds together and can be shaped into two long sausages, a couple of inches in diameter. Wrap them in greaseproof paper and store in the fridge over night when they will be firm and easy to cut. Heat the oven to Gas 4. Slice the biscuits about ¼ inch thick. Bake for about 15 minutes until they are turning light brown. Cool on racks, and store in airtight tins where they will keep for weeks.

VIENNESE CRESCENT BISCUITS (KIPFERL)

These are the simplest yet subtlest of Christmas biscuits. It is always a mystery to me how precisely this proportion of flour, nuts, sugar and butter produces such a sumptuously delicious texture and flavour. The Ottoman army laid siege to Vienna twice, causing alarm to the whole of Christian Europe, but failed to take the city. However Turkish culture did conquer the city in other ways: music, cuisine and coffee. These biscuits are traditionally baked in the shape of a crescent, a constant reminder of history, and symbolic of how violence and suffering can be transcended. They provide welcome Christmas gifts, and are the simplest biscuits to make.

6oz vanilla flavoured caster sugar

8oz softened unsalted butter

10oz sifted plain flour

6oz ground almonds (or walnuts)

For dusting after baking:

4oz sifted vanilla flavoured icing sugar

Heat oven to gas 4

Work the first four ingredients lightly but well together until they have coalesced into dough, but don't knead too long.

Rest and chill for an hour. Pinch off pieces of dough the size of a walnut, roll quickly and lightly into small thin sausages around 1 ½ inches long between the palms, lay them spaced apart on the baking tray and shape into small crescents by turning the ends down. Place on an ungreased oven tray and bake for about 15 minutes or until risen and golden. For me the mystery is how this dough can rise without a raising agent. Cool for just a few minutes then roll while still warm in a bowl of sifted icing sugar until well coated. Handle gently, these warm biscuits crumble easily.

Cool on racks and store in airtight containers where they will keep well for several weeks.

RECIPES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

LEBANON AND RUSSIA

Ludmilla came from an aristocratic Russian family that fled the revolution in 1913. She remembered being a three year old girl running through the cornfields of the Ukraine, carrying icons, the most precious family heirlooms. Her mother settled in Beirut, Lebanon, and worked as a telephone operator while making the best match for her daughter. Ludmilla married Georges a Greek banker, and for the rest of her life lived like the princess her mother had wanted her to be. They left Beirut after her

mother died, in the 1960s, a time of conflict between Palestinians and Israel which involved Syria and Lebanon. They bought a flat in the centre of Paris and a large chalet in the Austrian Alps overlooking the town of Kitzbühel. Since Donald had been her English tutor in Beirut, she accommodated us whenever we were passing. Georges preferred the Alpine chalet and brought over his Lebanese driver and the driver's wife, Mountaha, a cook. When both husbands died, Mountaha and Ludmilla lived together in Kitzbühel, each looking after the other until Ludmilla died, aged a hundred.

From Mountaha I learned some elegant recipes made from simple ingredients. However I could never achieve the delicacy and perfection of her finished dishes, which she prepared in a small kitchen that, whenever I managed to look, was at all times spotlessly clean and all surfaces empty of materials, utensils and any sign that food had been cooked there.

Ludmilla gave dinner parties attended by retired wealthy people who had been ambassadors, or highly ranked in the civil service, professional musicians, people she liked and occasionally tolerated, like a former SS general who was married to Ludmilla's sister. These guests holidayed or lived in and around this exclusive resort. She had a particular respect for clergyman, so Donald always sat on her right at the table. Being an artist I was put at the end of the table, and motherly Mountaha paid especial attention to me, filling my plate more than the others. She noticed my enthusiasm for her Lebanese spinach pies: small triangular envelopes of crisp light pastry holding a buttery mix of lightly cooked young chard leaves and pine nuts. Every time we visited she made sure we left with a large sandwich box of these delicacies to nibble on our journey. I never succeeded in achieving the lightness and crispness of Mountaha's pies. Mine are more along the lines of Russian pirozhki, small but substantial. Lebanese style keeps the ingredients simple. Russian style adds

a binding of an egg beaten into the mixture along with a few tablespoons of my yoghurt cheese.

SPINACH PIES LEBANESE STYLE

For the pastry:

6oz plain flour, sifted

2oz butter, chilled

2 or more tablespoons yoghurt

For the filling:

Spinach, preferably Swiss chard, lightly cooked

Pine nuts fried in butter

Salt and pepper

1 small egg, beaten, for brushing over the pastries

Sesame seeds for sprinkling on the top

Rub the chilled butter into the sifted flour then stir enough yoghurt to bind the mixture, not too dry, and handle quickly with minimum of kneading.

Roll into a ball, cover and rest in the fridge for half an hour.

Chop the cooled spinach. Fry the pine nuts briefly.

Roll the pastry out thinly and with a wide cutter make circles about 2-3 inches in diameter, or wider for easier handling. I never learnt how to do the triangles, so my recipe has these pies looking like mini-Cornish pasties. Brush beaten egg around the edges of the pastry circles. Then put a teaspoon of cooked spinach in the centre of each circle. Sprinkle a few pine nuts over, then fold over the pastry to form an envelope, pressing on the edges to seal. Brush egg over the top and sprinkle sesame seeds over. Place in the pre-heated oven and bake for about 10 minutes until golden brown. Serve hot, warm, or cool on a rack.

There are several seriously dog-eared recipe books in my kitchen. The most decrepit from use over the decades is Nika Standen Hazelton's *The Continental Flavour*, because it includes recipes rarely found in cookbooks to be bought in England. The Christmas biscuits come from this book, as does my favourite version of the Linzer Torte. Variations on the mix of ground nuts, jam and pastry exist in every country: Bakewell Tart in England and Linzer Torte in Austria. However the Swedish Mazarin Cake in Nika Standen Hazelton's book is lighter and more sophisticated than either of those. It always intrigues me how subtle differences in proportions of ingredients and method of preparation can make such a large difference to end results.

Follow the exact quantities and proportions, and this cake is simple to prepare.

SWEDISH MAZARIN CAKE

Heat oven to gas 3

6 ½ oz plain flour, sifted with

1 teaspoon baking powder

4oz chilled butter

1 small egg

Cut the butter into the flour mixture and rub to the consistency of breadcrumbs.

Lightly beat the egg and add, binding the dough quickly. Never handle pastry more than is necessary otherwise it will lose the airiness which makes for a crisper texture.

Rest for half an hour then roll out and line a greased pie dish or cake tin.

Raspberry jam

4oz icing sugar, sifted

4oz unsalted butter, softened

2 eggs, beaten

4oz ground almonds

Beat the butter and icing sugar together until creamy. Add the eggs gradually, beating the mixture all the time, adding the almonds towards the end.

Spread the pastry lining with a thin layer of raspberry jam. Too much of this strong tasting jam can overwhelm the cake. The tartly sweet sandwich filling provides a satisfying contrast between the crisp unsweetened pastry and the soft almond topping. The elements should be in harmony. The triple-flavoured sensation is what makes this cake special.

Cover with the nut mixture and bake in the oven for about 40 minutes. The top should be golden, firm but not dry.

The cake keeps for up to a week in a tin, but for longer in the fridge.

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The Farmhouse Kitchen is another dog-eared cook book in my kitchen. I found the best ginger biscuit there, going under the name of Cornish Fairings. These are a staple at coffee time and Donald will only eat these.

GINGER BISCUITS

Heat oven to Gas 4

8oz plain flour, sifted with

1 teaspoon ground ginger

1 teaspoon mixed spice

¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon

3 level teaspoons of bicarbonate of soda

Rub in ¼ lb butter till the mixture has the consistency of breadcrumbs

Then add

¼ lb caster sugar or soft brown sugar

Bind all together with

5 tablespoons golden syrup, warmed slightly in its tin placed in a saucepan of simmering water, so the syrup is easy to measure.

Because of the bicarbonate of soda content, which demands immediate cooking before it loses its raising qualities, don't rest the dough but straight away form balls of the dough the size of a small walnut by rolling between the palms and lay them on baking sheets lined with baking parchment, placing them well apart for spreading.

Bake in the oven for 10 minutes,

Take out and, this is a tricky bit, tap the tray on a hard surface, strongly enough for the biscuits to spread flat and crinkle in a characteristic way. I let the tray drop from a couple of inches onto the kitchen top. With practice you will get the hang of it. Put back in the oven to bake for another 5 minutes until well browned.

These hot biscuits are fragile to handle, so leave to cool on the tray, by which time they will be hard and crisp, thanks to the golden syrup. Store them in an air-tight tin.

OAT AND HAZELNUT COOKIES

Coffee time is a sacrosanct daily tradition at the Coach House, an hour when we can chat, discuss work, and run through 'organ recitals': keeping a check on each other's health, and having a laugh about it. Our neighbour Simon joins us every Monday to check on each other, local news and have a gossip. On one occasion he brought some delectably chewy flat oat cakes that I then adapted, adding more flour and nuts, to turn them into crisp biscuits that keep well.

Heat oven to Gas 4

4oz butter, melted in a pan with 3 tablespoons of honey or golden syrup

4oz plain flour sifted

4oz rolled oats

2 - 4oz chopped hazelnuts, as many or as few as you want. My tastebuds find the mixture of oats and hazelnuts irresistible.

4oz vanilla sugar

¼ teaspoon salt

1 egg beaten

Put all the dry ingredients into a large bowl. Add the melted butter and honey or golden syrup. Mix together with the beaten egg.

Put large teaspoons of the dough onto a baking sheet lined with parchment. Press down to flatten them. Bake in a pre-heated oven for 15 minutes or until brown. Cool on the tray then store in an airtight container.

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The success of some dishes, like Mountaha's Lebanese pies, depends on specific ingredients, including flour which differs from country to country. At the Coffeehouse I used Italian flour for baking bread. It had a flavour and texture unlike any made with English flour. I aimed to provide food that would not be replicated elsewhere in the area. In Austria and parts of Germany it takes a particular wheat strain to produce the strong flour that makes Semmeln, to my mind the best bread rolls to be found anywhere. Eastern flours make the best chapattis and poppadums. Similarly you need French flour to create the best baguettes. Different types of flour from across the world reflect the unique tastes and textures of the bread in different countries. For instance English plain flour is incomparable for the best traditional apple pies and crumbles.

COMFORT FOOD

Chicken curry is the meal of choice when I am down. It has to be on the bone. There are two ways I prepare it, both using Eric. The first is simple and involves marinating the chicken pieces overnight in spices, including hot madras curry powder, chopped garlic, oil and yoghurt then baking in a medium to hot oven for an hour, or until cooked through, crisp and tender. The other takes more time, and is along the lines of a traditional korma.

After years of experimenting and adapting Madhur Jaffrey's recipes I have at last managed to produce a chicken curry which visitors now beg me to prepare for them. However, none matches the chicken curry prepared for me and my friends at University by Aisha Ahmed daughter of an ambassador from Pakistan and an undergraduate. She was not a cook, but in her determination to introduce me and my friends to an 'authentic' curry she persuaded her mother to send a recipe, and followed it with all the thoroughness of a Grade A student. She even kept her mother on the phone, at staggering expense, to make sure that all the steps were followed correctly. I never made a record of that recipe, but my memory is of a concentrated thin sauce flavoured with whole cardamom coating spicy chicken pieces, crisp golden on the outside and well cooked on the inside. According to Madhur Jaffrey, the best thickener for the sauce is made from several onions blitzed in a blender with garlic and ginger.

CHICKEN CURRY

A chicken cut into eight pieces, or half a dozen each of thighs and drumsticks

2 tablespoons of hot curry powder

Coat the chicken pieces with the curry powder and leave to chill for several hours or overnight.

3 tablespoons chicken fat or sunflower oil

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3-4 large onions, roughly chopped

At least 7 cloves of garlic, peeled and chopped in half

A piece of ginger, about two inches long, peeled and roughly chopped

Chillies to taste. Depending on their heat, 2 or 3 small ones or just 1 - 2 large are sufficient

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1 tablespoon cumin seeds

1 tablespoon coriander seeds

A few cloves, according to taste: 3 or 4

3 dried bay leaves

A two inch piece of cinnamon stick

6 or more cardamom pods

12 peppercorns

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1 tin of coconut milk

½ pint of yoghurt

A teaspoon of salt

Heat the chicken fat or oil until hot over a medium flame in a large saucepan or ironware casserole and fry the chicken pieces quite quickly, to sear the surface, browning and making crisp. Do no more than 3 or 4 pieces at a time, so as not to crowd the pan. They fry quicker that way with better results. Remove with a slotted spoon and keep aside.

Meanwhile blitz the chopped onions, garlic, chillies and ginger in the blender.

Grind all the spices in a mortar with a pestle, but not reduced to a powder. The cardamom will be released from their husks, and the peppercorns roughly cracked.

When the chicken pieces have been fried, put the spices into the pan and fry quickly. If the fat is hot this will take only a few seconds before the seeds start popping. Quickly pour the onion mixture onto the fried spices and stir for several minutes until the sauce browns, turning the heat to low so the onions don't burn.

When they are cooked and lightly browned slowly add the yoghurt, stirring all the time to prevent separation. Then pour in the coconut milk and the salt. Stir until blended and hot. Add the chicken pieces. If the sauce is insufficient to cover the chicken add boiling water, but not too much. As the chicken cooks the sauce will evaporate and be thick enough.

I personally like the chicken cooked through so the meat comes off the bone easily, although, unlike lamb and stewing beef, it can be over-cooked. This is a matter of taste, but around an hour should be enough. I make a lamb curry in the same way, but it needs an extra hour of slow cooking at least. Aubergine pieces that have been fried in hot sunflower seed oil can be added to either curry while it is cooking, although they go particularly well with lamb. Cubed fried potatoes can be added to the chicken, and they do extend the dish. This curry keeps well, and I personally prefer to eat it a day after preparation, heated through for just half an hour in a medium oven.

LENTIL DHAL

I serve the chicken curry with a dhal that I have developed to my own taste over years.

½ lb red lentils

2 pints or more of water, depending on how thick or soupy you like the dhal to be. I prefer soupy.

A small stick of cinnamon, about 1 inch

2 bay leaves

5 large cloves of garlic chopped

A piece of ginger, about 1 inch, peeled and finely chopped

A heaped teaspoon turmeric

Stir all the above ingredients in a medium sized saucepan, so the lentils don't stick to the bottom, and bring to the boil. Turn down the heat to low and cook until the lentils fluff up. This does not take long: 20 minutes to half an hour.

For the garnish

½ lemon sliced into thin pieces. I also use lemon peel after squeezing out the juice for other purposes.

2 tablespoons sunflower seed oil

1 large whole onion peeled and finely sliced, not chopped

A pinch of asafoetida (if available – it adds a nutty exotic flavour)

1 tablespoon cumin seeds lightly ground in a pestle

When the lentils are soft, add the lemon slices and continue to cook on the lowest heat. Then fry the onion in the oil over a medium heat until the slices are well browned. A few charred bits add extra flavour to the curry. Remove the onion with a slotted spoon and add to the dhal. Finally sprinkle a pinch of asafoetida on to the hot oil in the pan, switching the heat to low. Put in the cumin seeds and quickly fry until they pop, but taking care not to burn. This has happened to me often, and spoils the dhal. Immediately add the seeds to the dhal, stir and cook for a few more minutes, then serve. As with all curry dishes, the dhal tastes best when cooled and reheated. The flavours have time to blend and mature.

I like to add spinach to this dhal. The spinach is cooked in a large pan with a small amount of water to prevent sticking, until it is collapsed, then stored and to the quantity of dhal made above, put in a few ounces of the cooked spinach, chopped.

RICE

I am still learning how to cook rice.

In my book DUST THOU ART I include a recipe given by my great-aunt Fritzi in Vienna. That only works with American or Italian long-grain rice, not Indian. It is the simplest and most fool-proof recipe. Put a cup of rice in a pan with two cups of water, add salt to taste, bring to the boil, immediately cover, take off the heat and then wrap the pan in a thick towel. Leave for half an hour at least, and when ready to serve, remove the covering, lift the lid and see the rice swelled up and cooked. Add a small lump of butter.

My friend Joseph taught me the Brazilian method which involves frying some onion or garlic in a medium sized pan, adding rice, covering with water and stirring occasionally until cooked.

Another friend Ari from Iraq taught me the Middle Eastern method which is my favourite, though I have slightly adapted it. Both Joseph's and Ari's rice are perfect in themselves and prove that cooking rice is as personal a procedure as painting or writing, even though it seems to be simple as boiling an egg. But even boiling an egg is an art.

½ a cup of rice

1 cup of cold water

1 tablespoon of sunflower seed oil

½ onion thinly sliced, not chopped

Salt to taste

Fry the onions in the oil until lightly browned. Pour in the rice and fry for just 1 - 2 minutes over medium heat, stirring all the time. Then add the water. Don't be surprised if it hisses and bubbles alarmingly. Immediately add the salt and quickly stir so the rice is not sticking to the bottom of the pan. Then, and this is the important method insisted on by Ari, leave to cook on the lowest heat without stirring. Don't touch. As soon as the rice has cooked and absorbed all the water, stir to release the grains so they don't stick together or to the bottom of the pan, and serve.

VEGETABLE CURRY

I like to serve the chicken or lamb curry, the dhal and rice with a vegetable curry, cauliflower and potatoes. The cauliflower is covered in water, brought to the boil and cooked for no more than 5 minutes. The potatoes are chopped into small or large cubes and fried in oil in a medium sized pan until lightly browned, then removed with a slotted spoon. The same mixture of onion, garlic, ginger and chilli as used in the meat curry is added to the hot fat, cooked for a few minutes and then the vegetables added along with salt to taste, and cooked until warmed through. Add water if the sauce is too dry. All kinds of vegetables can be prepared in this way in different combinations, such as aubergines and peppers in a curried variation of ratatouille.

PICKLES AND CHUTNEYS FOR THE CURRY

Apart from a side salad of cucumber cut into small cubes, red onion slices, or chopped spring onion, covered in yoghurt into which some mint is chopped I serve a salted apple pickle, based on a recipe given me by my Mauritian friend Ash, who got it from his aunt. Her version was a little dry and it took me some years to learn that the salt needs to be washed off the apples before final preparation with oil and spices.

APPLE PICKLE

This is only worth making if you have access to an apple tree in a good year's harvest.

Peel and core as many apples as you like, chop up into small cubes, lay on a large flat dish or in a big wide bowl, cover generously with plain table salt, mix and leave for at least a day in a sunny place under a mesh cover to keep off flies.

The salt draws out a lot of the water in the apples.

When the apples are swimming in their water, drain them and wash off the salt. Clean the dish or bowl, line with kitchen paper, return the apples and leave to dry for another day or more in a warm place, a sunny windowsill or a conservatory.

Now prepare the pickling oil. This is a matter of taste and judgement, but I favour using lots of oil so the apples are well covered, and any oil left over can be used in cooking. Spices are a matter of taste and amount, I use cumin, coriander, mustard seed, cloves, peppercorns, cardamom pods, fenugreek seeds, all ground in a pestle and mortar. Fry these with some crumbled bay leaves, plenty of chopped garlic and ginger, turmeric powder for colour, in a heated thick layer of oil in a large saucepan over a medium heat until the seeds are popping. Then add the apples, stirring well. Put into clean jars heated in a low oven so the glass doesn't break when the hot mixture is poured in. Make sure there is half an inch at least of oil covering the apples. Screw lids tightly and leave for several weeks before using. This unusual pickle lasts years, and the taste improves all the time.

KULFI

This is easy ice cream and a good use of evaporated and condensed milk. I spent hours as a child trying to whip evaporated milk to make cream, with no success except for creating a froth on top.

1 large tin of evaporated milk (1/2 pint)

1 large tin of condensed milk (1/2 pint)

½ pint of double cream

A few cardamom pods, ground in a mortar

Grated zest of an orange

Saffron threads soaked in a tablespoon of boiling water

Warm the milks over a low heat with the zest and cardamom, stirring regularly.

Cook for about five minutes, remove from the heat, add the saffron, stir and leave to cool.

After two hours, strain into ramekins or dariole moulds and freeze.

To serve, dip the moulds into a bowl of hot water. This releases the ice cream from the sides and makes it easier to dislodge.

As that Imperial Russian meerkat says ever more annoyingly: ‘Simples!’

TWO TARTS

Plum tart was a favourite of my aunt’s. She prepared it every summer when the harvest of ‘Zwetschken’ is at its height. These dark blue fruits have the lush sensuality of ripe Victoria plums and the stronger flavour of damsons. I haven’t come across them in England. This is more of a cake than a tart, and suits pears as well, but they need to be stewed first.

PLUM TART, GERMAN STYLE

3oz butter, softened

3oz castor sugar

1 egg

6oz plain flour sifted with

1 level teaspoon baking powder

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1lb plums halved and stoned

Heat oven to gas 4

Cream the butter and sugar as for a sponge cake. This means taking time, at least 5 minutes to ensure the sugar is well incorporated and the mixture is pale and fluffy: the longer the better. Beat in the egg well and then add the sifted flour mixture, carefully folding into the cream but not over-mixing, to keep it light and aerated.

Spread the mixture into a creased pie dish, or a cake tin with a removable base.

Lay the plum halves skin side down so the cake base is covered.

Bake in the heated oven for about half an hour.

I like to sprinkle sugar lightly over the top.

The tart is best eaten warm, and keeps well in the fridge for a few days.

Personally I like to add a dollop of whipped cream, but this cake needs no extras.

APPLE PIE

For me the pastry is important and I prefer it thick and crisp.

I also find it best to cook the apples beforehand, then cool. Sprinkle some flour on the pastry base before adding the fruit, so the base doesn't get soggy during baking.

4 large cooking apples, peeled, cored and cut into chunks

1oz butter melted in a pan

A small piece of cinnamon

A few cloves according to taste. I use 3 -4

4oz sugar

10oz plain flour

6oz butter from the fridge

2 eggs

Cook the apple chunks in the butter with cinnamon and cloves until just turning soft and fluffy with pieces still uncooked. Stir in sugar and set aside to cool.

Rub the cold butter into the sifted flour until it resembles breadcrumbs. Add one whole egg and one yolk to the mixture. Keep the white of the second egg aside for brushing the pastry base and top. This white needs a light whisking, just to break it up. Cut the eggs into the flour with a knife and continue rapidly until the mixture begins to gather in small lumps. Then use the hands to gather them into a ball, shape lightly, not working it too much, just enough to bind the pastry. Set aside in a cool place to rest. The purpose of this preparation is so the pastry will bake crisply. The more it is handled, the stodgier the end result will be.

Heat the oven to gas 4

Divide the pastry into two pieces with a knife, one slightly bigger than the other.

Press the larger piece lightly down on a floured surface and roll out to fit a pie dish which should be well buttered.

Sprinkle some flour onto the surface and brush egg white round the edge of the pastry.

Add the apple mixture.

Roll out the smaller piece of pastry in the same way, large enough to cover the apples. Seal the edges. The egg white helps. Use the rest of the egg white to brush the surface of the pie and sprinkle a tablespoon of granulated sugar over it.

Bake in the heated oven for between 35 and 45 minutes.

Best eaten warm. It keeps well in the fridge, well covered.

RASPBERRY TART

Gooseberries and blackcurrants are also good in this tart, which is my invention. It's a marriage of pie and crumble, with almonds.

1lb raspberries or other soft fruit

4oz sugar

For the pie base:

6oz plain flour sifted with a pinch of salt and a teaspoon of baking powder

3oz butter

1 small egg

For the crumble

3oz butter

6oz plain flour, sifted

2oz flaked almonds

2oz castor sugar

Prepare the pastry as for the apple pie.

Prepare the crumble by rubbing the butter into the flour to the consistency of rough bread crumbs, mix in sugar and almonds

Line a greased pie dish with the rested pastry, sprinkle flour over the pie base to absorb the fruit juices, put in the fruit, cover with the crumble topping and bake in heated oven for 35 – 45 minutes. Serve warm or cold.

VICTORIA SPONGE CAKE

This classic traditional English cake with its equal proportion of butter, sugar and flour blended with 2 or 3 eggs seems simple. In fact it requires the skill and precision of preparing the perfect boiled egg, and a considerable amount of elbow grease. Effort is rewarded.

Heat the oven to gas 4

2 or 3 eggs, depending on the size of the cake you want to bake

Weigh them

Then weigh the same amount of self raising flour, butter and castor sugar (usually around 6oz of each). Sift the flour and set aside. Warm the butter (12 seconds in a microwave should be enough, but if the butter is cold from the fridge, another 12 seconds may be needed). Beat the butter to a cream and then add the castor sugar.

This is where the effort comes in, and is worth it, not just for the end result, but because it is easier to blend in the eggs.

I spend at least 5 minutes beating the butter and sugar till it is pale and fluffy. Some people beat for as much as 15 minutes, but their cakes are the best.

Then beat in each egg, one at a time, adding a tablespoon of the sifted flour. This prevents the mixture curdling when it is being beaten. If it does curdle, add another tablespoon of flour. Beat well until the mixture rises and thickens. Once all the eggs are incorporated in this way, fold in the rest of the flour. This requires speed and dexterity. Add half of the flour, sifted again. Holding the side of the bowl with one hand, incorporate the flour into the egg mixture with a tablespoon, lifting and folding over with even motion. Keep turning the bowl with the one hand until the flour is mixed in, without any beating. The mixture should be light and fluffy.

Have two equal sized sponge tins well-buttered and dusted with enough flour to cover the bottoms and sides (about a dessertspoon). Spoon half the mixture into one tin and the other half into the other, and bake in the heated oven for 20 -25 minutes. This cake bakes quickly. Keep an eye on it, but don't open the oven until it has risen and firmed.

Take out of the oven and cool down, but still warm.

A sharp tap of the tins on a hard surface should release the cake from the bottom and sides of the tin. Invert the tins over a cake rack and let the cake fall on to the rack.

Sometimes I need to release the cake with a knife round the edge of each tin. I also use tins with a releasable bottom. Then it is easy to invert and the tin bottom sliced off with a knife if the cake is still sticking.

When thoroughly cooled, spread one of the cakes with a layer of raspberry jam then cover with the other cake. Sift a tablespoon of icing sugar over the cake. It is ready to slice and serve.

This cake is a challenge to bake successfully, which is why good cooks take pride in it. It should be well risen and the consistency of soft sponge with a comforting flavour entirely owing to the perfect blend of all the fresh ingredients.

My mother, who was not a cook, took great pains once to bake this cake for my 8th birthday. It put her in such a bad mood that I wished she hadn't done it. She certainly never baked another cake ever again. It is hit and miss with me, but one thing I learned is that the procedure must not be rushed. The lengthy initial beating of butter and sugar is crucial for a successful end result.

BESSIE GLOVER'S ORANGE PUDDING

There is a whiff of an Edwardian household in this recipe. In those days time would have been lavished on decorating. I prefer it simple, and not too rich.

2 medium to large oranges, zest grated into one large bowl, the juice put in another bowl, sprinkled with a packed of gelatine powder and left to soak.

4oz caster sugar

4 eggs

1 dessertspoon of corn flour

$\frac{3}{4}$ pint of milk

For special occasions add:

2 tablespoons orange liqueur

¼ pint of whipping cream

Heat the milk slowly to blood temperature, you should be able to stick a finger in without burning. I find heating in a microwave for a minute is sufficient.

Meanwhile separate the eggs, putting the yolks into the bowl with the orange zest along with the sugar.

Put the egg whites in another mixing bowl. I keep a special copper bowl for the purpose of whipping them.

Now whisk the egg yolks, sugar and orange zest until well blended and frothy. The corn flour is a fail safe, to make sure the pudding sets, but it also adds texture. Whisk it in well.

Now gradually add the milk whisking all the time until well mixed. Pour into a medium sized saucepan and cook gently over a low heat for several minutes until thick. Skilled cooks can speed this process by cooking over a higher heat, beating all the time with a wooden spoon. The aim is to reach the point when the sauce thickens noticeably, at which point remove from the heat immediately before the mixture starts to become lumpy. Keep beating and pour over the gelatine and orange juice, then stir together.

Leave this custard mixture to cool down.

Now whisk the egg whites until the froth makes stiff peaks, incorporating a tablespoon of caster sugar in the final seconds.

Gently but quickly fold into the custard mixture, so the pudding is light and well aerated.

Now beat the cream, if you want a richer pudding, and fold into the custard mixture along with the orange liqueur.

Cover and put in the fridge to set.

Check on the pudding every hour and stir gently so the egg whites do not rise to the surface, and the whole dessert is of the same texture. Leave to set firm in the fridge.

However if by chance it sets before being sufficiently blended there is the bonus of a layer of orange jelly at the bottom of the bowl.

Lemons also make a good pudding in exactly the same way, although it is fresher tasting. Use a lemon liqueur instead of the orange.

This goes well with Turkish coffee:

SESAME SEED HALVA

3oz butter

3 tablespoons golden syrup

8oz sesame seeds, or any mixture of seeds and rolled oats

2 oz pistachios or halved hazelnuts, or both

Preheat oven to gas 3

Melt butter and syrup, remove from heat and stir in all the dry ingredients

Pour into a greased lined baking tin. Press down lightly so it is evenly spread.

Bake for half an hour until it browns, cool, break into small pieces and store in an airtight tin.

STIR FRY TOFU

Sunflower seed oil, about 2 -3 tablespoons

A packet of tofu, dried out by wrapping in kitchen paper and placing a weight on top to squeeze out the water, then cut into squares, big or small according to taste,

Black bean paste, a heaped tablespoon, optional

Sweet peppers

A chillie pepper

3 cloves of garlic, skinned and chopped

1 inch of ginger, peeled and sliced

3-4 medium sized mushrooms

Half a bunch of spring onions

Half a pint of vegetable stock: best from water in which sweet corn, spinach, carrots, or whatever is to hand has been cooked

A dessertspoon of corn flour

Soya sauce

Sugar, salt and pepper

This cooks best in a wok.

Heat the wok and add a layer of sunflower seed oil, about 2 - 3 tablespoons. When it begins to smoke layer the tofu pieces by sliding into the hot oil, so they don't stick to the bottom of the work. Leave to fry for a couple of minutes before turning over.

Don't cook too long, just enough to crisp and brown. Remove with a slotted spoon and leave aside. Meanwhile blend the cornflour with the vegetable stock, adding soya sauce, seasoning, sugar and the glass of sherry. Fry the sliced sweet peppers until beginning to char at the edges, then add sliced ginger and chopped garlic and stir until about to turn colour. Fry the sliced mushrooms quickly. Now add the black bean paste, if using. Put in tofu and chopped spring onion and add the cornflour mixture,

stirring well until cooking, then turn the heat down and simmer for a few minutes before serving with rice.

This is a basic tofu dish suitable for vegetarians, but prawns can be added along with the mushrooms.

For carnivores, pork escalopes or chicken breast, sliced into thin slivers, can replace the tofu, also being fried until crisp and cooked.

MUNG DAL PANCAKES

These are a hit with everyone, and comes from one of my kitchen bibles: Madhur Jaffrey's Eastern Vegetarian Cooking. She is good on detailed preparation.

7 oz mung dal, soaked in 1 ½ pints of water for at least 4 – 5 hours

1 inch peeled and sliced ginger

3 cloves of garlic peeled and chopped

1 hot chillie cut into pieces

1 teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

¼ teaspoon ground turmeric

2 tablespoons chopped fresh coriander leaves

1 small onion finely chopped

2 tablespoons or more of sunflower seed oil, as needed for frying the pancakes

Put the garlic, ginger and chillie into a food processor and blend until finely chopped then add the strained mung dal and process until it has turned to paste. Now add 3 fluid ounces, just under a quarter of a pint, of water, salt, bicarbonate of soda and turmeric. Run the machine for about 2 minutes until the paste has turned into a thick batter. Empty into a bowl and stir in the chopped coriander leaves and onion.

Heat 1 tablespoon of oil in a non-stick pan. Madhur Jaffrey warns about the importance of using this kind of pan, because the batter is not like the usual pancake mixture. This one tends to stick, and can be tricky to manoeuvre. I had many mistakes, but soon got the hang.

The best method is to place a large tablespoon of the batter in a blob into the middle of the hot oil, let it sit for a few seconds, then slowly and gently in a spiral motion flatten the pancake until it is quite thin, about 5 inches across. Dribble half a tablespoon of oil over the pancake and a few drops around it then spread the oil on the pancake with a spatula. Now cover the pan and allow the pancake to cook for 2 minutes. Lift the lid and turn the pancake over. If the bottom is cooked and browned it should not be difficult to do. Let it to cook uncovered for another 2 minutes. Red spots should appear on the surface when it is cooked. Put on a plate and keep warm while the other pancakes are cooked in the same way. It is important to keep stirring the batter before putting tablespoons into the pan.

Serve with yoghurt, salad, pickle and chutney.

ROAST CHICKEN

This is my take on a staple. Each household has their own version.

Cookbooks rarely give important advice on how to handle chicken. No need to clean it, but it is essential to wash hands every time you handle the carcass before cooking, to prevent dangerous germs and bacteria from being passed to other foods in the kitchen. I rub the juice of a lemon all over the carcass, inside and out then put the rest of the lemon in the cavity along with a bunch of tarragon. I wash my hands and then pour 2 – 3 tablespoons of sunflower seed oil over the carcass, as well as the bottom of the dish in which the chicken will be roasted. After washing my hands again I sprinkle

a teaspoon of salt over the carcass and a few rosemary leaves. Then I layer strips of smoked streaky bacon over the breast, in a lattice shape, and wash my hands again.

Heat the oven to gas 5 and when hot put in the chicken. Leave for half an hour then baste, return to the oven and put the heat down to gas 4 and roast for another half an hour. Remove the bacon lattice which should be crisp, baste the chicken once more and leave to roast for another hour. Cooking times depend on the size of the chicken. A small to medium sized bird I would cook for at least one and a half hours, a large one for two hours at gas 3-4, but this is a matter of taste, and how well you like the chicken done. I prefer mine well roasted. Take out of the oven when ready and leave to rest on a carving plate.

I like to serve a stuffing separately from the bird, and this can be baked after the chicken has been taken out of the oven. Raise the heat first to high gas 6 or 7.

While the chicken is roasting prepare the stuffing

STUFFING FOR CHICKEN

½ lb breadcrumbs, made from old or stale loaf, chopped in a processor

2 tablespoons of oil

1 onion finely chopped

2 cloves of garlic, peeled and chopped fine

¼ lb ham, or cooked bacon, chopped small

a handful of parsley, chopped

1 tablespoon of chopped sage leaves

Seasoning to taste

1 large egg or 2 small eggs

some stock or water to moisten the mixture

Fry the onion gently in the oil, heated in a small frying pan. When it is translucent, add the garlic and cook for a minute longer then take of the heat and leave to cool.

Mix the breadcrumbs with the chopped herbs and ham or bacon bits.

Stir in the cooled onion and the egg beaten but not whisked. Add water or stock, just a little, to moisten the mixture if it is too dry.

Press into a shallow pyrex dish that has been well greased. Drizzle more oil over the top and put in the hot oven for half an hour.

I like to serve the chicken and stuffing with boiled vegetables, the carrots done in a special way. After peeling I chop them into bite size pieces, cover with water, bring to the boil, then add a few drops of sunflower seed oil and a teaspoon of honey. Boil quite rapidly until the water has evaporated and the carrots are coated in the oil and honey.

MISCELLANEOUS

AISHA'S CARROT HALVA

This dish is a luxury not so much in ingredients, just milk and carrots, but in time and effort. The result is exceptional.

6oz carrots, finely grated

4 pints of milk

6 cardamoms ground up roughly in a pestle to release and crush the seeds

To finish (optional..the flavour of the finished halva is sweet and strong enough):

1 oz butter

1 teaspoon honey

Cover the grated carrots with the milk in a large pan and bring to the boil.

Turn the heat down to the lowest simmer and continue to cook for several hours, stirring regularly to avoid burning the bottom of the pan. After several hours the milk should have evaporated so there is a solid mass left. Add the cardamoms and continue stirring until the mixture is almost dried out and solid. If you can pull a spoon through it like Red Sea parting, then the halva is ready. Add the honey and the butter, if wanted, at this stage and stir some more. The sugar in the carrots however provides enough sweetness in this halva. Cheating works on this recipe. Instead of 6 pints of milk, use 3 pints and as it boils away add a large tin of evaporated milk. The flavour is still good

CAULIFLOWER CAKE

The secret is to drain the cooked cauliflower thoroughly, till it is quite dry.

Heat Over to Gas 4

1 cauliflower separated into small florets, brought to the boil, simmered for just a few minutes till a knife can easily slice through the vegetable. Drain well and leave to dry out.

6 – 10 eggs, depending on the size of the cauliflower

1 onion, peeled and chopped

3 garlic cloves peeled and chopped

2 oz grated cheddar cheese

Parsley, basil leaves and just a few rosemary leaves (the flavour is otherwise overpowering) chopped

Salt and pepper

Fry the onion over a low heat for about 10 minutes until soft, then add the garlic and fry for a further 2 minutes.

Meanwhile whisk the eggs as for an omelette in a large bowl until well broken up, but not too frothy. Add the cooked onions, herbs, seasoning to taste and cheese and blend well.

Finally stir in the grated cheese.

Now stir in the strained and dry cauliflower, pour into a well greased baking dish, sprinkle with more grated cheese to taste, and bake in the centre of the heated oven for half an hour to three quarters of an hour, until firm.

This is best eaten warm, but is good cold or reheated in a microwave.

PETER'S MINCE