

Orange, almond and polenta cake

I love slightly unusual cakes – my pistachio and walnut crumbly cake and gingerbread cake with blood orange syrup are two examples of my leaning towards not-too-sweet, spiced, no-icing cakes that are better suited to grown-ups than the under eights in your household. And this cake is another in that category. There is texture from the polenta, spice with the inclusion of star anise in the syrup and beautiful perfume from a judicious sprinkling of orange blossom water. But it is a simple cake to make, and would be a wonderful finish to dinner with friends, served with some Greek yoghurt or a dollop of cream. Serves 8-10

Orange and star anise syrup Preheat oven to 165 C. Lightly grease a 22 cm diameter springform tin and line the base with silicon paper. In a medium sized bowl beat together the butter and sugar until pale and fluffy. The sugar will not completely dissolve, as the crystals are quite large. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well between each addition. Add the almonds, polenta and orange zest and beat for 1 minute. Finally, add the orange blossom water and baking powder and beat for another minute, making sure they are well incorporated. Turn the batter into the tin and carefully spread out evenly with a flat bladed knife. Bake for 40 – 45 minutes, or until the cake springs back lightly when gently pressed with your fingertips. It should be golden and evenly risen. Carefully remove from the tin and turn onto a serving plate. Cool to room temperature. To make the syrup place the orange and lemon juice in a small saucepan with the sugar, orange blossom water and star anise. Bring to the boil and simmer gently for 20 minutes. Set aside to cool to room temperature. When ready to serve, dust one half of the cake with icing sugar. Two choices now – serve the cake and pass the syrup around for people to pour on their own slice, or dramatically pour the syrup over the whole cake at the table and then serve individual slices.... I'm firmly in the pour-over-the-cake-then-serve camp. The cake will keep for 2 – 3 days stored in an airtight container. Don't store in the refrigerator, and if the weather is very humid, just forget the diet and eat it on the day it is made. *Orange blossom water has been a traditional ingredient used often in North African as well as Middle Eastern cooking. Orange blossom water can be purchased from good delicatessens or a Middle Eastern supermarket. If it is unavailable you can leave out, but it adds something special to the cake. Be very careful not too use too much, as it is quite strong, and is only used for perfume, not flavour.

Baked chicken with cider and smoky bacon

Once in a while i am struck all over again by just how blue the sky appears on wind-played

autumn mornings, blue enough to bruise a heart. The weather has turned in my part of the world, and autumn has rushed in with crisp mornings, clear azure skies and the promise of cool evenings. It's a short season, and every day is to be cherished. It's a joy to be cooking food for the season – warming and hearty – stews and soups, roasts and puddings, root vegetables with earthy herbs like thyme, tarragon and rosemary. This casserole is rich and filling; perfect for the season, especially after a day in the outdoors. When making it try and find cider made from fresh apple juice, rather than concentrate, and look for a dry, not sweet variety. We love drinking cider in the summer, and the brew from the Barossa Cider Co. is one of our favourites. It is perfect for this dish. Serve with creamy mashed potatoes and steamed green beans and some crusty bread to sop up the leftover sauce. Serves 4 Preheat oven to 180 C. Place a large frying pan over a medium heat and add the olive oil. Add the chicken and brown the pieces all over until golden brown. Remove from the pan, and set aside. Place the onion, garlic, bacon and thyme into the pan and saute until the onion is softened. Take care not to burn the garlic. Turn the heat up to high. Pour in the cider and cook for a couple of minutes before adding and Dijon mustard. Use a wooden spoon to stir and scrape off any of the delicious crispy bits stuck to the bottom of the pan. Remove from the heat. Place the sauce in the bottom of a medium-sized casserole dish. Add the chicken pieces in a single layer and spoon over some of the sauce. Season well with salt and freshly ground black pepper. Cover tightly with foil and bake in the oven for 35-40 minutes. Remove the foil and spoon a little more of the sauce over the chicken and return to the oven for another 10 minutes. Remove the cooked thyme before serving and scatter over about a tablespoon more of fresh thyme leaves, and another generous grind of black pepper.

Potatoes with rosemary and sea salt

A great marriage is one where each person, without agenda, celebrates the unique and distinctive characteristics of the other, and lovingly helps them be the best possible version of themselves. When I see a couple who express this in their relationship I am always moved and inspired, because they are so much more together than they could possibly be individually. In my world I have a number of friends whose marriages have worked out this principle for many years and each day they bring joy to each other, and those in their sphere of influence. In a very roundabout way, this is an introduction to the marriage of ingredients and this recipe. Tomatoes and basil, chocolate and coffee, peas and mint are ingredients that belong together,

and, when paired in a recipe with love, care and a little finesse, bring out the very best in each other while still maintaining their individual and distinctive flavours. Potatoes and rosemary are another such pairing, and in this simple, simple recipe bring out the absolute best in each other. It's a perfect accompaniment to grilled meat or fish and salad. You can easily increase the quantities in this recipe to feed a crowd – it really just depends on the size of your biggest baking dish and the size of your oven! Ingredients: (serves 4 – 6) Preheat oven to 180 C. Using a mandolin slice the potatoes very thinly. Place in a medium sized glass bowl and cover with cold water. Let sit for about 20 minutes then drain and dry well with a tea towel. Pick the leaves off the rosemary and place in the base of a 20 cm round or 18 cm square dish. This enables their earthy flavour to infuse the potatoes as they cook and keeps them from burning and becoming bitter. Stack the potato slices in the dish, quite tightly. They will shrink a little as they cook. Drizzle with the olive oil and season well with sea salt and black pepper. Bake for 45 – 55 minutes, until the potatoes are golden and crispy around the edges. Serve immediately.

Tiramisu

Sam Baldwin: What is “tiramisu”? Jay: You'll find out. Sam Baldwin: Well, what is it? Jay: You'll see! Sam Baldwin: Some woman is gonna want me to do it to her and I'm not gonna know what it is! Jay: You'll love it! Far from being the traditional Italian dessert you assume it is, tiramisu is actually a fairly recent invention. It seems it first appeared in a recipe book as late as 1981, and was created in the 1950s at the earliest. Like most recipe origin stories, sources disagree over who should take the credit, but most agree it originated in the northern town of Treviso. You can read about it in this article in The Guardian, [How to make the perfect Tiramisu](#) and this one from the Washington Post, [The trail of tiramisu](#) All I want to say is that if made well, a trifle of sponge fingers, coffee, liqueur, a light yet rich creamy filling and chocolate is a glorious thing, and I love it! My recipe tries to balance richness and lightness with the addition of a couple whipped egg whites in the cream layer. I also advocate not soaking the sponge fingers until they are soggy and giving several hours in the fridge for the flavours to combine and the texture to be just right – fluffy, not gluggy; creamy rather than stodgy; and with just the right sparkle from the coffee. Ingredients: In a clean bowl whisk the egg whites until they form soft peaks. Set aside and in another medium sized bowl beat the mascarpone, cream, sugar and vanilla until the mixture creates soft peaks. Carefully fold the egg whites into the cream mixture, so as not to knock air out of the egg whites. Mix the coffee with the liqueur and place

in a shallow dish. Dip the savoiardi on both sides quickly in the coffee and liqueur and make a layer in the bottom of a glass serving bowl (approx. 20 cm diameter). Cover with 1/3 of the cream mixture, and repeat twice more, finishing with a cream layer. Dust the top with the cocoa, cover and place in the refrigerator for several hours.

Luxury cauliflower cheese

My husband used to say that the only purpose of cauliflower was as a vehicle for cheese sauce. Given his childhood memories of soggy cauliflower cooked in the pressure cooker – limp, transparent and almost tasteless – it has taken me some time to excite him about the wonders of cauliflower when it is roasted, grilled and used in warm salads. I made this recipe to revisit the principal treatment of cauliflower from my childhood, served with lashings of thick cheese sauce, but I wanted to make it something more luxurious and unctuous. So, no bechamel sauce, just double cream, roasted cauliflower, walnuts and some strong cheddar cheese. We scarfed it down for dinner and vowed to make this our go to winter comfort food. Hope you do too. Ingredients: (serves 4 as a side dish and 2 as a main) Preheat oven to 180 C. Place the cauliflower in a single layer on a baking tray and drizzle over the olive oil. Season well with salt and pepper and bake for 35-45 minutes, until the cauliflower is a dark golden brown, turning once during the cooking time. It's fine for there to be a few charry bits; this is what gives the cauliflower amazing flavour. In one medium-sized or 2 smaller baking dishes that can be taken straight to the table, place the roasted cauliflower, piling up a little if needed. Scatter over the walnuts and the thyme leaves. Dollop the cream into the middle of the cauliflower and sprinkle over the grated cheese. Bake for 15 minutes until the cheese is melted and the cream transformed into an oozy, bubbling sauce. Serve while it is piping hot.

Rainbow salad with haloumi

If you are looking for a salad packed with goodness, and full of delicious and colourful ingredients (and there is a saying that the more colourful your meal, the healthier it is) then this is a salad for you. Topped with crispy-on-the-outside, oozy-on-the-inside haloumi it stands on its own as a vegetarian lunch, or a wonderful accompaniment to some grilled lamb or chicken. The dressing is quite sharp and tangy to contrast with the saltiness of the haloumi and adds zing and a little bit of heat to the whole salad. Ingredients: (Serves 4-6) Heat oven to 180 C.

Place the pepitas and pecans on a baking tray and bake for 10 minutes until they smell toasty and are satisfyingly crunchy. Take out of the oven and set aside to cool. Dice capsicums into 1 cm square pieces. Peel carrots and julienne. Peel beetroot and julienne. Keep the beetroot separate from the other ingredients so its rich purple juice doesn't stain the other ingredients. Cut the tomatoes into halves. Using a sharp knife cut the kernels off the corn cobs. Roughly chop the parsley and snip the chives. Make the dressing. Place 2 1/2 tablespoons olive oil, the lemon juice, capers and chilli flakes in a small glass jar with a lid. Shake well and then season to taste with sea salt and black pepper. When ready to serve, toss all the salad ingredients together and place in a serving dish. Heat a non-stick pan over medium heat and add the remaining olive oil. Cut the haloumi into 8 pieces and pan fry until golden. Place the haloumi on the salad, pour over the dressing and serve immediately.

Triple choc cookies (desperate times call for desperate measures)

In my part of the world flour has become a scarce commodity, and to scratch my baking itch I decided to make a recipe that used buckwheat flour, all that was available for me to buy this week. I found a few recipes and eventually made an amalgam of my own, using as a base a recipe by Nigella Lawson and another by David Lebowitz. They are really rich, and soft and ultra chocolaty. They were also the best gluten free cookie I have made; it's really hard to make a good, chewy-soft gluten free cookie, so it was a double win. Ingredients: (makes 12) Preheat oven to 170 C. Melt the dark chocolate in the microwave or over a pan of simmering water. Sift the cocoa, buckwheat flour and baking powder together. Beat the butter, brown sugar, vanilla and espresso together until smooth. Add the eggs one at a time and beat until well incorporated. Add the flour mixture and, using a wooden spoon, mix together. Add the chocolate chips and mix well. Line 2 cookie trays with non-stick paper and place rounded tablespoons of the mixture on the trays, about 6 cm apart. The mixture should be very soft and squidgy. Bake for 10 – 12 minutes until firm on the outside, but still quite soft. Leave for several minutes on the trays before placing on a baking rack to cool. If you are impatient the super soft cookies will collapse and you will be left with chocolate schmoosh.

Beetroot hummus

Middle age is mostly getting excited about different flavours of hummus. Middle age is my

demographic – and caramelised onion, chilli and sweet potato are some of my favourite ways to zhush up hummus. Hummus as originally conceived – chick peas, garlic, tahini, salt, lemon and olive oil is a glorious thing, but adding a twist here and there does no harm at all and honours the humble chick pea and this middle eastern staple. I have made a beetroot flavoured version here, which is creamy and earthy and super delicious with dukkah and flatbread.

Ingredients: Roughly chop the beetroot and finely chop the garlic. Place the beetroot, chick peas, garlic, tahini, lemon juice and olive oil in a food processor and process until smooth and creamy. Season with sea salt to taste, and perhaps a little more lemon juice, if it needs more punch. Serve, sprinkled with nigella seeds and dukkah, with flatbread or seed crackers . Also wonderful spread on rye toast and topped with sliced avocado or a poached egg.

Pumpkin, pecan and pepita muffins: goodness in difficult times

When times are tough we often turn to familiar things that give us comfort and peace. It could be listening to music or walking on the beach at sunset; reading or meditating or praying. For me, cooking is always a haven; I can be creative and nurturing and useful at the same time. All across the world people are facing challenges – through illness or isolation or fatigue or fear or no income, and the loss of what was normal life before. Before the virus, and self-isolation, and ‘social distancing’; lockdowns, and not having enough money or food or medical care for everyone who needs it. I am immune from the worst challenges people are facing. Aside from needing to work from home, not seeing my friends and family, missing weddings, my husband needing to take his scrubs off at the front door when he gets home from work, and the occasional toilet paper crisis, my life is carrying on pretty much as usual. But it is profoundly unsettling and wearying to be living in the ambiguity of this time – not knowing what will happen next, if more people will become sick and die, and when this time might be over. I hope that you are able to find something that gives you comfort and peace, and if you cook, like me, this recipe might be something simple and delicious you can make for yourself and your loved ones. Ingredients: Preheat oven to 180 C. Line a 12-hole muffin tin with paper cases. To make the mashed pumpkin roast at 180 C about 500 g Kent chopped pumpkin (with skin on), drizzled with a little canola oil for about 30 minutes or until soft. When cool enough to handle, scoop the flesh out of the skin and mash with a fork. To make the muffins sift the flour, cinnamon, nutmeg, salt and sugar into a medium sized mixing bowl. Add the pecans and mix well. In another bowl whisk together the vegetable oil, milk, mashed pumpkin, maple syrup, vanilla and

eggs. Tip the dry ingredients into the wet ingredients and combine quickly. Do not over beat or the muffins will be tough. Spoon the mixture evenly into the muffin tin and sprinkle the pepitas on top. Bake for 25 – 30 minutes until the muffins spring back when gently touched with your fingertips. Eat warm or at room temperature on their own, or with butter and a drizzle of honey.

Luscious lemon bars

When did the lemons learn the same creed as the sun? The concept of this recipe, which is a staple in America, but not well known at all in my part of the world, is genius. Two of the most delicious things in the world – shortbread and lemon curd – brought together in a way that elevates both and causes me to salivate even while writing this! I have no idea why in Britain, the land of lemon curd and lemon delicious pudding, and the home of shortbread, the lemon bar was not part of the national cuisine, and then transported to Australia for generations to enjoy. It fell however, to the R&D team at Betty Crocker in the United States to bring the lemon bar to life. Although a recipe for a lemon bar had been published in the August 27, 1962 edition of the Chicago Daily Tribune submitted by Mrs. Eleanore Mickelson for its “Today’s \$5 Favorite Recipe” column, Betty Crocker published the first known recipe in a cook book; the Betty Crocker Cooky Book in 1963. It immediately became wildly popular. There are hundreds of recipes available, all with little differences in the amount of lemon or eggs, or the ration of curd to shortbread. My recipe is full of lemony goodness, quite tart, and with a rich shortbread crust as a base for the curd filling. You could reduce the lemon juice a little if it is too sour, but I think it is perfect as it is. Dusted with icing sugar they are a delightful afternoon tea treat. Makes 16

Preheat oven to 180C. Line a 20 cm x 20 cm slice tin with silicon paper, allowing a 2 cm overhang on all sides. Place the butter, vanilla, sugar and flour into the bowl of a food processor and pulse until a soft and crumbly dough forms. Turn into the prepared tin and press with your fingertips to evenly distribute across the base. Bake for 15 to 20 minutes or until golden. While the base is baking whisk eggs, flour, sugar and lemon together until smooth. Gently pour over the base and bake for a further 15 minutes or until just set. Cool completely in the tin before dusting with icing sugar. Carefully cut into squares or rectangles as the whim takes you.

Raspberry and cream cheese muffins

I used to think raspberry and cream cheese were best combined in a summery cheesecake, but in these muffins, served for brunch on a grey, wintry morning they were perfect companions. I have a number of muffin recipes that I love to bake – blueberry and lemon and pine nut are firm favourites, but this new recipe is now a contender for the top spot. The muffins are full of sweet and tangy raspberries and have a surprise centre full of vanilla infused cream cheese. To add some crunch they are sprinkled with demerara sugar* before baking. They are wonderful warm from the oven or at room temperature with a cup of tea or a glass of cold milk. If you would like some ideas for making muffins sing I have some tips at the bottom of this post. Otherwise turn on the oven, grab a bowl and start baking! Makes 12 Cream cheese filling:

Preheat oven to 180C. Line a 12 hole muffin tin with muffin cases. In a medium sized bowl add the the flour and sugar and gently toss through the raspberries. In a smaller bowl whisk together the eggs, buttermilk, vanilla extract and oil. In another small bowl mix together the cream cheese, sugar and vanilla until well combined. Combine the egg mixture with the dry ingredients and mix quickly until just combined. Do not over mix or the muffins will end up with a tough, unappealing texture. Spoon mixture into the muffin cases to fill them about one-third. Place small spoonfuls of the cream cheese mixture on top and then fill with the remainder of the muffin mix. Finally, sprinkle over the demerara sugar. Bake in the oven for 25 – 30 minutes, until the muffins spring back when lightly touched. Serve warm or at room temperature. Tips for making muffins moist, tender and delicious: *Demerara sugar is a type of raw cane sugar that is minimally refined. It has large grains with an amber colour and a gentle molasses flavour and it's often used by coffee aficionados to sweeten their brew. If you can't find it, regular raw sugar is a good substitute.

Pumpkin soup with crunchy walnuts and pepitas

To feel safe and warm on a cold wet night, all you really need is soup. In my part of the world pumpkin soup is synonymous with winter. Everyone has a favourite recipe and there are almost endless variations that enhance the rich, buttery flavour of pumpkin. My preferred pumpkin variety to use to make soup is the Kent pumpkin. It seems to have the right degree of sweetness and makes a superbly smooth soup. I like spicy enhancements – either Indian or Thai influences work spectacularly well. But sometimes the classic flavours are what is called for. Pumpkin, garlic and onion, roasted with some good olive oil and fresh thyme until the pumpkin is deeply golden and starting to caramelise on the edges, and then pureed with stock

and a little cream speaks to me. Topped with salty sweet walnuts and pepitas and served with crispy croutons, this classic pumpkin soup is lifted to a level that brings joy to whomever eats it. Serves 4 – 6, with crusty bread on the side Preheat oven to 180 C. Place the pumpkin, onions, garlic and thyme in a large, shallow roasting tray and drizzle with the olive oil. Season well with sea salt and black pepper and then roast in the oven for 40 – 45 minutes until the vegetables are soft and a little caramelised around the edges. While the pumpkin is roasting make the crunchy walnuts and pepitas. Place them with the maple syrup in a small bowl and mix well. Season with a couple of good pinches of sea salt and then tip onto a shallow baking tray lined with silicon baking paper and roast for 15 minutes until toasted. Set aside to cool. Once the vegetables are cooked, remove the thyme and then tip them into a large saucepan. Using a stick blender puree the vegetables with the stock until the soup is very smooth. If you like a thicker soup use less stock, and if you like it a little thinner, add more. Finally stir through the cream and season well to taste with salt, pepper and nutmeg. Serve piping hot with the crunchy walnuts and pepitas on the side, and some crusty bread or crunchy croutons.

Tarte tatin with rosemary

Stephen Harris, food writer for the London Telegraph, and owner and chef at The Sportsman, an award winning pub-turned-restaurant in Kent, wrote a wonderful article about the origins of tarte Tatin. In the article he says that. “the first time I came across this dish it was given its full name: tarte renversée des demoiselles Tatin. Stephanie and Caroline Tatin were sisters who owned the Hotel Tatin in Lamotte-Beuvron, about 100 miles west of Paris, at the turn of the 20th century. The story goes that one day Stephanie was making an apple tart and forgot to add the pastry. Not wanting to waste the apples she popped some pastry on top and cooked the tart anyway. When it came out of the oven, she turned it upside down – and the tarte Tatin was born.” The tarte became a signature dish of the Hôtel Tatin. Historians and gourmets have argued whether it is a genuine creation of the Demoiselles (sisters) Tatin, or the branding of an improved version of the “tarte solognote”, a traditional dish named after the Sologne region which surrounds Lamotte-Beuvron. It matters little to me how the dish was created or inspired. It is a genius combination of flaky pastry, caramel and apple – pure heaven. I like to add rosemary to my tarte tatin. It gives some earthy depth to the dish when combined with a caramel that is just short of bitter and the natural sweetness of apples. It’s a wonderful dessert for a winter’s evening, especially with cream or ice cream. The pastry I use is simple and quick

to make – no tedious folding and rolling and folding and rolling – but is very flaky and light. The rest is simplicity itself. Just remember to use oven mitts when you take the pan out of the oven so as not to leave yourself with blisters on your fingers as I did! Serves 6 – 8 Pastry: 250 g plain flour 200g chilled butter, cut into cubes 125 ml sour cream Apple filling: 3/4 cup sugar 1/2 cup water 1 sprig rosemary 50g butter 4 Granny Smith apples, peeled, cored and cut into quarters Heat oven to 190 C. To make the pastry, dice the butter, then pulse with the flour in a food processor until the mixture resembles fine breadcrumbs. Add the sour cream and continue to pulse until the dough incorporates into a ball. Wrap the dough in plastic film and refrigerate for about 20 minutes. Place the sugar, water and rosemary in a 20 cm oven-proof frying pan over medium heat and cook, without stirring for about 7 – 9 minutes, or until a light caramel forms. Carefully add in the butter and stir to combine. Take off the heat. Arrange the apple pieces, cut side up in the pan. Roll out the pastry to about 3 mm thickness. Cut out the pastry into a round slightly bigger than the pan. Carefully place the pastry over the top of the apples and tuck the edges in around the sides. Using a sharp knife cut three slits in the pastry to let steam escape as the tarte cooks. Bake in the oven for 30 – 40 minutes, until the pastry is well cooked, and there are glimpses of dark caramel bubbling around the sides. Carefully invert the pan onto a serving plate and serve hot with runny cream, or vanilla ice cream.

Roasted pumpkin with fennel and thyme

Pumpkin is probably my most favourite vegetable, for its natural nutty sweetness and capacity to absorb flavour. I love it in soups, curries, as part of a traditional baked dinner slathered with gravy, and roasted with spices and garlic and herbs as in this recipe. In my part of the world there are a number of excellent varieties of pumpkin that are full of flavour, but Butternut and Kent pumpkins are my preference. This recipe uses Kent pumpkin and I roast it with the skin on, to help the pumpkin hold its shape when it is cooked, and for the eyes to feast on its mottled green and gold skin. The best part of this dish is the juxtaposition of the hot pumpkin – slightly sweet, with aniseed notes from the fennel and earthy thyme – and the cool freshness of the yoghurt. It's best eaten straight from the oven as an accompaniment to lamb or as a component of a vegetarian meal, or with some pita or turkish bread as a snack or quick lunch. Serves 4 – 6 as an accompaniment Preheat oven to 180 C. Put all ingredients except the pumpkin and yoghurt in a large mixing bowl. Add the pumpkin and coat well with the spice mixture. Place pumpkin on a baking tray, drizzle over every last drop of the spice mixture and

roast for about 40 minutes until golden and with some crispy charred edges on the pumpkin. Spread the yoghurt onto a serving plate and heap the pumpkin on top. Sprinkle with the remaining fresh thyme and serve straight away.

Charred eggplant with capers

“Gleaming skin; a plump elongated shape: the eggplant is a vegetable you’d want to caress with your eyes and fingers, even if you didn’t know its luscious flavor.” ~ Roger Verge I cannot praise the delights of beautifully cooked eggplant more highly. The flesh is creamy and soft, and slightly smoky in flavour. And in this recipe the salty piquancy of pan fried capers and the earthy freshness of parsley bring even more joy to the palate. I made it as part of a mezze, but it stands alone as an addicitve vegetable accompaniment, or smashed onto toasted sourdough, or tossed through pasta or cous cous. As soon as we finished photographing this dish I found myself eating it straight from the bowl and had to be restrained from wolfing down the lot. Eggplant has a tendency to absorb an infinite amount of oil, but the way I have cooked it in this recipe allows for the fruity goodness of extra virgin olive oil to bless the eggplant without it being greasy or overpowering. Serves 4 as part of a mezze or as an accompaniment Preheat oven to 180 C. Slice the eggplants into 1 cm slices. Pour the olive oil onto a large baking tray. Take each slice of eggplant and quickly coat both sides with the olive oil and then place in a single layer on the tray. Season well with sea salt and then bake for 35 – 40 minutes in the oven until golden brown and a little charred around the edges. Meanwhile heat a non-stick pan over high heat, and a splash of olive oil and quickly fry the capers until they are crispy. Drain on absorbent paper and set aside. When the eggplant is cooked carefully turn over once to lightly glaze with any of the remaining oil and then place in a serving dish. Sprinkle with the parsley and capers and serve hot, warm or at room temperature.

Tomato salad with sumac

As a lover of tomatoes I am always looking for different ways to prepare and serve them that will enhance their already beautiful flavour. This recipe is based on one I read in an Ottolenghi cookbook – it used sumac as an ingredient – a spice I have been experimenting with for some time. Sumac is the fruit of a shrub or small tree which grows in parts of the Middle East, Africa and Asia. The berries vary in colour from brick red to dark purple, depending on where the

shrub is grown. They are harvested and dried whole and then ground into a coarse powder. Sumac has a tangy taste with citrus notes and is a core ingredient in cuisines across the Middle East and parts of the Mediterranean. I have found the best quality sumac is sold in Australia through Herbie's spices, which you can get through their online store, or at a good delicatessen. This salad works really well as part of a mezze, or to accompany grilled or slow roasted lamb. It is sweet, sharp and tangy, and utterly delicious. Have the tomatoes at room temperature for the best flavour – imagine bringing them fresh in from the garden, fully ripe and still a little warm from the sun – that's the way to serve and eat fresh tomatoes! Serves 4 – 6 Peel and slice the onion into rings, about 1 mm thick. Place in a small bowl and add the vinegar, sumac and a good pinch of salt. Set aside to let the onion soften for about 30 minutes. This method of preparing them removes all the acrid aftertaste of raw onion, and the red wine vinegar turns them the most gorgeous pale pink colour. Slice the tomatoes in a variety of ways – wedges, cross wise, length wise, in quarters or halves. Place in a medium sized bowl. In a small pan over medium heat toast the pine nuts until they are lightly golden. Just before serving add the pine nuts to the sliced tomatoes with the parsley and oregano leaves. Drain the onion and add to the tomatoes along with the olive oil and the lemon zest. Carefully toss together and then turn onto a serving platter.

Macaroni and cheese: the ultimate comfort food

When the nights begin to cool, and autumn takes hold there is nothing more wonderful for Sunday night supper than macaroni and cheese. It's oozy and creamy and warming, and almost universally loved. My recipe includes pieces of crisp bacon, fresh chives and a crunchy topping of cheesy sourdough crumbs. Best of all the sauce is a luxurious no-cook mixture of mascarpone cheese, milk and tangy mustard, which is poured over the cooked pasta before baking in the oven until crisp and golden. Heartily recommend eating while watching a favourite movie, glass of wine in hand with the ones you love. Serves 4: 300g macaroni 250g bacon, diced 125g sharp cheddar cheese, grated 1 cup milk 250g mascarpone cheese 2 teaspoons seeded mustard 1 tablespoon chives,snipped 100g fresh crusty sourdough bread Preheat oven to 180 C. Bring a large saucepan of lightly salted water to the boil and cook the macaroni for 8 – 10 minutes, until just al dente. Meanwhile, fry the bacon in a small pan over medium heat until crispy, then drain on absorbent paper and set aside. In a medium sized bowl place the milk, mascarpone, mustard and chives and whisk together gently until well combined.

Tear the bread into chunks and process in a food processor with half the cheese until rough crumbs are formed. When the macaroni is cooked, drain well and add to the creamy mixture with the remainder of the cheese, and the bacon, and stir well. The mixture will seem quite runny, but it will thicken as the pasta bakes. Season well with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper. Place in a 1.5L casserole dish and spread the breadcrumb mixture evenly over the top. Bake for 20 – 25 minutes in the oven until the crumb topping is golden brown. Take out of the oven and rest for 5 minutes before serving to your hungry family or guests, on its own or with a green salad on the side.

Pannacotta with finger lime

I am something of a pannacotta aficionado, and often choose it for dessert when I eat at Italian restaurants. It is quite simple to make, but it takes a delicate touch to get the gelatine to liquid ratio just right, so that the pannacotta is set but quite wobbly when turned out from its mould, and the texture silky smooth and quite delicate. I make a pannacotta that uses a combination of cream and buttermilk, which makes it rich, but light and silky in texture and with faint citrus notes. It is perfect to pair with finger lime, an Australian native citrus fruit that is becoming more readily available, due to its pretty colours and gorgeous flavour. The finger lime is native to the rainforests of the border ranges of south east Queensland and northern New South Wales. The pulp of the fruit is made up of individual juice vesicles that look like caviar or tiny pearls. They are compressed inside the fruit and burst out when the fruit is opened. The pulp has an astringent citrus flavour and is almost effervescent on the tongue, a bit like sherbert. We have been growing a finger lime for several years now and it started to bear fruit a couple of years ago. Ours has a dark green fruit and the pearls are a pale green, but the ones I bought to make this recipe have an almost black skin and the pearls are translucent pink. If you can't get finger limes then any tropical fruit works wonderfully in this recipe – finely diced mango, passionfruit pulp, or small chunks of caramelised pineapple. But if you can find finger limes please try them to top this pannacotta – you won't be disappointed. Serves 6

3 leaves of gold strength gelatine 1 2/3 cups pouring cream 150 g castor sugar 1 1/4 cups buttermilk juice of 1 lemon 2 medium sized finger limes (available from good fruit shops) sliced lengthwise and the pearl like fruit removed. Soak the gelatine leaves in cold water to soften. Combine the cream and sugar in a saucepan on medium heat and bring it almost to the boil. Take off the heat and add it to the buttermilk in a medium sized bowl. Squeeze the excess

moisture out of the gelatine and whisk into the buttermilk and cream mixture until completely dissolved. Stir through the lemon juice and let it cool a little. Pour into moulds and then set in the fridge for around 4 hours. When ready to serve carefully invert the pannacottas onto a serving plate. They should come out easily and be set but very wobbly. Carefully top with a teaspoon of finger lime pearls and serve right away.

Chinese cabbage and crispy noodle salad, and messing with classic recipes

Mrs. Chang's Chinese cabbage and crispy noodle salad is a staple at Australian bar-be-ques and family gatherings. It is a very simple salad – wombok, slivered almonds, shallots and crispy noodles – but it has a sweet and tangy dressing that makes it an absolute winner. So why mess with it by adding different ingredients? Why not keep it just as it always has been? I believe all recipes are evolutionary. They start with an idea, then development and testing, tweaking flavours and ideas until it tastes as the creator conceived. But then someone else comes along and thinks of a different way, a next step, something new, and the recipe evolves. Imagine if the Italians had looked at this new ingredient, the tomato, that came to Europe in the 16th century after being discovered in South America by the Spanish and decided not to experiment and add it to their traditional recipes. And so to Mrs Chang's salad. I wanted to add some freshness and a little more colour to the traditional recipe. It has always seemed a little pale and flat looking to me so I added finely shredded carrot and lots of bright, earthy coriander. The dressing is so delicious, but I wanted a little more punch, so I added freshly grated ginger, a squeeze of fresh lime, and the smooth sweetness of honey. You can decide if you want to keep the shallots, I find them a bit acrid, and they leave a weird taste in my mouth, similar to the aftertaste of raw onion. So when I make it I leave them out. It's important to not dress the salad until right before serving – the crunch of the almonds and noodles will disappear fairly quickly. If you want to make it ahead, then add the noodles and almonds at the last minute and then add the dressing. Have fun with it and make your own changes to suit your tastes. Serves 8 – 10

1 cup slivered almonds, toasted in the oven until lightly golden
1/2 chinese cabbage (wombok), finely shredded
2 carrots, peeled and finely shredded
1 large bunch coriander, stems and leaves, chopped
6 shallots, finely sliced
100 g packet Chang's Fried Noodles
Dressing: 60 ml (1/4 cup) white vinegar
60 ml (1/4 cup) peanut oil
2 tablespoons caster sugar
1 tablespoon brown sugar
2 tablespoons soy sauces
2 teaspoons fresh ginger, grated
1 teaspoon honey
lime juice, to taste

Place the wombok, carrots and coriander in a large bowl

and mix together well (I use my hands to do this). Just before serving add in the almonds and noodles and toss through the dressing. To make the dressing combine all the ingredients in a small saucepan and heat gently until the sugar is dissolved and the dressing warm, but not hot. Enjoy at your next BBQ with some well cooked steak and a glass of something sparkly.

Super seeds

Seeds are a powerhouse of nutrients and have many benefits to our health. They contain healthy monounsaturated fats, polyunsaturated fats and many important vitamins, minerals and antioxidants and they also taste delicious! I like to use seeds (and also some nuts) to make a treat to sprinkle over salads, or to serve with hummus and other dips. They add texture and flavour, as well as being much lower in fat than many dressings. Also wonderful is tossing them through roasted carrots, beetroot or sweet potato just before serving. This is my standard recipe – which has sesame, flax, pumpkin, sunflower and nigella seeds, plus some dry roasted almonds and a little chilli. The mix keeps well in a glass jar, and also makes a great gift for a health conscious friend. Change the quantities around to suit your taste, or substitute other seeds or nuts that you love – like chia, poppy seeds, or pistachios. Ingredients: 2 tablespoons pumpkin kernels 2 tablespoons sesame seeds 2 tablespoons roughly chopped dry roasted almonds 1 tablespoon nigella seeds 1 tablespoon brown flax seeds 1 tablespoon sunflower kernels 1 teaspoon sea salt flakes a pinch of dried chilli flakes In a small bowl combine all the ingredients and mix well. Store in an airtight container and add to salads or top hummus or dips. You could also make a version to top your winter porridge oats by leaving out the salt and chilli and adding some ground cinnamon.

Chilli linguini with cavolo nero

The secret to this rustic dish lies in the heat of garlic and chilli, and the saltiness of anchovies. If you do not like anchovies do not blanch in horror – they melt away during cooking and underpin the dish with a subtle saltiness and depth, but not fishiness. The cavolo nero is sauteed in this trinity of flavour packed ingredients and some good olive oil, and then tossed through chilli linguini and seasoned with parmesan and lemon zest. Delizioso! Cavolo nero, or Tuscan kale, is an Italian variety of kale, originally from Tuscany. Its glossy very dark green leaves have a robust texture and the flavour is somewhat like spinach but with a delicious

nuttness and slight sweetness. There are recipes using it dating from the 17th century, and it thrives in the garden without much need for care and attention. It is incredibly versatile, and can be eaten fresh, steamed, sauteed, or in a stir fry. We grew it over winter in our vegetable garden, and it is still providing us more than we can use, halfway through spring. Serves 4

500 g cavolo nero 1/3 cup good olive oil 2 large cloves garlic, crushed 2 long red chillis, sliced finely 4 anchovy fillets, chopped 500 g linguini (I use a chilli infused variety, but whatever is your favourite should work) 40 g parmesan, grated zest of 1 lemon sea salt and freshly cracked black pepper Trim the stalks from the cavolo nero and slice finely. In a large frying pan heat the olive oil and saute the garlic, chilli and anchovy fillets over medium heat, taking care not to burn the garlic for a couple of minutes. Bring a large pot of salted water to boil. Add the cavolo nero to the frying pan and saute until tender. Meanwhile, when the water comes to the boil, cook the pasta until al dente (about 8 – 10 minutes). When the pasta is cooked, drain well, keeping aside about 1/2 cup of the starchy cooking water. Toss the pasta through the kale mixture, adding some of the pasta water to bring it all together, glossy and delicious. Season to taste with sea salt and black pepper. Sprinkle with the grated parmesan and lemon zest and serve right away. A red wine with some body to it goes beautifully with this dish, with Nina Simone as the soundtrack. Image credit: Cavolo nero Pauline Mak

Coconut cupcakes

Sweet and moist, with a creamy icing redolent of citrus, these little cakes are beautiful morsels of deliciousness. The cake batter is really easy to prepare – no creaming of butter and sugar – just all in together in a food processor and it's done. There are a host of end-of-year parties and events happening in my world and a cake that can be quickly made, keeps well, looks lovely and tastes wonderful is perfection. If you have the icing skills you could make them look a little bit fancy, but I like the simple home-made look of cakes when iced using just a flat bladed knife and a little bit of artistic sculpting. Enjoy!

Makes 12

150 g butter, cut into small cubes 1 cup (220g) sugar 2 eggs 1/2 cup desiccated coconut 200 ml coconut milk 250 g self-raising flour

Icing: 250 g cream cheese, softened 60 g icing sugar zest of 2 oranges or tangelos Preheat oven to 160 C. Place the butter, sugar, eggs, desiccated coconut, coconut milk and flour into a food processor and process until well combined and a smooth batter is formed. Spoon into patty pan cases in a patty pan tin, and then bake in the oven for 15 – 18 minutes, until lightly golden and the cake springs back when lightly touched. Place on a wire cake rack to cool. To

make the icing beat together the cream cheese, icing sugar and zest until smooth and creamy. Ice the cakes when they are cool. Store in an airtight container in the fridge, and ring to room temperature before serving.

Zucchini, mint and haloumi fritters

All happiness depends on a leisurely breakfast. John Gunther My weekday breakfast is anything but leisurely; a quick bowl of porridge or granola before tackling the peak hour traffic is the norm. On Saturday morning however, several cups of tea, followed by poached eggs on toast made by my husband is the way I like to start my day. It's a welcome change from the relentless pace of the working week; an opportunity to regroup, enjoy time together and share a meal. These fritters would be a fabulous addition. While I was working on the recipe I initially thought of them as something to serve as an starter or perhaps a snack with late afternoon drinks. But then my thoughts turned to breakfast and I realised these crisp little fritters would be perfection on a plate with poached eggs, blistered tomatoes, and perhaps a little bacon. Either way they are delicious, and very simple to prepare and cook. Makes about 30 small fritters

500 g zucchini 250 g haloumi 1 small onion 1 clove garlic 1 long red chilli 1/2 cup fresh mint leave, plus more for serving 1 large egg 1 cup self-raising flour sea salt olive oil dried chilli flakes

Using a box grater, grate the zucchini and haloumi and place in a large bowl. Finely dice the onion and chilli (leave the seeds in the chilli if you like things a little more spicy, otherwise remove before dicing), crush the garlic, and roughly chop the mint. Add these ingredients to the zucchini and haloumi, then the egg and flour and a good pinch of salt. Mix well to combine. Add enough olive oil to a large shallow frying pan to fill to a depth of about 1/2 cm and place over medium heat. When the oil is hot carefully spoon in dessert spoonfuls of the fritter mixture and flatten very slightly. Cook until golden brown, turning once. Drain on absorbent kitchen towel. Repeat until all the fritters are cooked. Serve hot, sprinkled liberally with sea salt, chilli flakes and fresh mint leaves.

Olive oil crispbread

This recipe is based on one by Yotam Ottolenghi, the famous Israeli-British chef, restaurant owner, and food writer, who has made vegetables made interesting a feature of his cooking and describes his food goal as drama in the mouth. I changed the quantity of both olive oil and

water in the original recipe, as my attempts following the quantities specified resulted in a quite crumbly dough that was hard to work with. I also took away additional spices from the original, as I wanted to serve the crackers with soft cheese and didn't want to conflict with the creamy wonderfulness of triple brie from the Woombye Cheese Company (if you are able try this cheese – it is amazing). It was a very easy and quick to make something that looked and tasted quite special and very delicious. The crispbread is delicate and golden, and is a perfect accompaniment to soft cheese, or hummus, or labne. We added some pistachio and cranberry paste and a soft rosé, along with the cheese, and it was fabulous. Makes 16 250g plain flour, plus extra for dusting 1 tsp baking powder 125ml water 60 ml olive oil, plus extra for brushing (use a really fruity extra-virgin olive oil because the flavour will shine through) ½ tsp salt sea salt flakes for sprinkling In a medium sized bowl combine the flour, baking powder, water and olive oil and mix together until a dough is formed. Tip onto a bench top and knead lightly for a couple of minutes until the dough is smooth. Wrap in cling film and set aside for about 20 – 30 minutes. Preheat oven to 180C. Cut the dough into sixteen pieces. Dust the bench top with a little of the flour and then roll as thinly and evenly as possible using a rolling pin, to get a longish rectangle shape. You could also use a pasta machine if you have one. The final result should almost be transparent. Place on a baking sheet and brush lightly with a little of the extra olive oil, and then sprinkle on the salt. You could also sprinkle sesame seeds or nigella seeds for something a little different. Bake in the oven for 10 – 15 minutes, until golden brown. Cool on a wire cooling rack and when cold store in an airtight container. The crackers will keep for 3 – 4 days. You will never want to buy fancy deli crackers again, once you have tried these.

Overnight oats with berries and chia

Like religion, politics, and family planning, cereal is not a topic to be brought up in public. It's too controversial. Erma Bombeck After a lifetime of detestation of oat porridge (something about the texture was anathema to me), I have lately come to love it quite passionately. I decided at age 52 that I needed to get over myself and try this wholesome, energy-filled breakfast food again. My 8 year old self had a minor tantrum, but grown-up me tried it, loved it, and now eats porridge almost every day for breakfast. As winter comes to a close I need something for my summer morning breakfast, and so tried overnight oats, also known as bircher meusli, after the Swiss physician Maximilian Bircher-Benner, who invented the recipe in the early 1900s. Really delicious, it is quick, easy and healthy. There are many variations of

overnight oats, but this recipe is the one for me. I like the coconut particularly, and although the chia seeds are non-traditional, they give a protein boost to the dish. I used black chia seeds, but white ones would also be fine to use. If you are avoiding dairy foods, then almond milk would be an excellent substitute. Serves 2 – 3

100 g oats 1 tablespoons chia seeds 2 tablespoons shredded coconut 300 ml milk 1/2 teaspoon honey, to taste a few drops of vanilla extract a squeeze of lemon juice

Toppings: 1 tablespoon pumpkin seeds 1 tablespoon dry roasted almonds, roughly chopped 1/2 – 1 cup blueberries and raspberries, or any fruit you have to hand (grated apple and sultanas, banana and passion-fruit, strawberries and pear, dried cranberries, flaked coconut and sultanas are all good combinations) honey

In a 600 ml container with a lid, place all the ingredients and give a gentle stir. Cover and put in the refrigerator overnight. In the morning divide between two bowls and add the toppings. Drizzle over honey, to taste and eat right away.

Golden beetroot salad with honeyed walnuts

The beet is the most intense of vegetables. The radish, admittedly, is more feverish, but the fire of the radish is a cold fire, the fire of discontent, not of passion. Tomatoes are lusty enough, yet there runs through tomatoes an undercurrent of frivolity. Beets are deadly serious. Tom Robbins

Serves 4

4 small purple beetroots 4 small golden beetroots 100 g walnuts 2 tablespoons honey 50g soft goat's cheese, broken into small pieces 1 cup baby rocket leaves 1 cup baby spinach leaves 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar 3 tablespoons olive oil sea salt and black pepper

Preheat oven to 180 C. Wrap the beetroots in aluminium foil – in separate packages for golden and purple beets. Bake in the oven for 1 hour, or until tender. While the beets are cooking, spread the walnuts onto a shallow baking tray that is lined with silicon baking paper. Drizzle over the honey and place in the oven. Cook for about 15 minutes, turning once or twice. Remove from the oven and set aside to cool. Once the beetroots are cooked, unwrap from the foil and as soon as they are cool enough to handle, peel away the skin. It's a messy job, and you may want to wear gloves to avoid staining your fingers. Chop the beetroots into quarters and place in separate small bowls. Sprinkle the vinegar and olive oil over the beetroots, half in each bowl and then season well with salt and pepper. Place the salad greens on the bottom of a serving platter. Top with the beetroot, walnuts and goat's cheese. Serve at once.

Eggplant curry: the miracle meal

A few weeks ago I was catering for a retreat for 150 young adults. They needed to be fed for the whole weekend, which involved some serious cooking and quantities of food that were quite staggering. The friends who helped in the kitchen with me laughed and cried (onions, lots of onions), chopped, peeled, roasted, baked and served. It was a fun weekend, doing life with my tribe. There were a number of campers with special dietary requirements and I was determined to create a dinner dish that would cover everyone. So here it is – a vegetarian, vegan, dairy free, gluten free, nut free eggplant curry. Huzzah!! And it tastes amazing. Even without garlic and onion (to accommodate low- FODMAP requirements) there is a rich depth of flavour and balance between salt, sweet and heat. It is a great dish to have in the repertoire for friends and family with special dietary needs – and it is quick and easy too. If you want it to be a little more robust then add some small pieces of potato to the sauce a couple of minutes before adding the eggplant. Serve with rice or naan, or both. Serves 4

1 stalk lemongrass
1 teaspoon dried chilli flakes
1 teaspoon coriander seeds
1 tablespoon fresh turmeric
5 cm piece fresh ginger
1 teaspoon salt
50 ml canola oil
3 green shallots, finely chopped
1 bunch coriander
750 g eggplant
400 ml can coconut cream
1/2 tablespoon fish sauce (don't use this if making the dish vegan – just add a little more salt)
1/2 juicy lime
3 teaspoons brown sugar
1 long red fresh chilli, finely chopped
1/4 cup toasted flaked coconut

In a pestle and mortar, or a small food processor, combine the lemongrass (bruised with the pestle and finely sliced), chilli flakes, coriander seeds, turmeric (peeled and finely chopped), ginger (peeled and finely chopped), salt and the oil until it forms a rough paste. Add to a medium sized pan with the shallots and the finely chopped roots and stems of the fresh coriander. Cook over medium heat until aromatic. Add the coconut cream and 100 ml water and bring to a simmer. Meanwhile, chop the eggplant into chunks. When the sauce reaches a simmer, add the eggplant and bring again to the boil. Simmer, uncovered for about 10 minutes, until the eggplant is soft and the sauce thickened a little. Add the fish sauce, lime juice and brown sugar and taste. Adjust with a little more lime or sugar, if needed. Just before serving stir through the coriander leaves, roughly chopped and scatter over the toasted coconut and fresh chilli.

Fennel and blood orange salad

At the beginning of winter this year I planted fennel in my vegetable garden for the first time. It's been an astounding success and I am harvesting beautiful bulbs every few days. The aroma

of the freshly cut young fennel is astonishing – so fresh and sharply aniseed, but also almost sweet in overtone. I love fennel slowly roasted, or gently braised with some butter, but it is also delicious raw in salads, crunchy as celery, but not stringy or fibrous, and with a complexity of flavour that complements sweet ingredients such as oranges, or apple. Today I paired two finely shaved bulbs with some blood oranges and made a dressing with apple cider vinegar, honey and good olive oil. Garnished with a few of the delicate fennel fronds there could scarcely be a simpler salad. It was wonderful on its own with just some chewy bread to accompany, but it would also pair well with rich roasted pork belly or perfectly pan-fried duck breast. Serves 2 – 4

2 young fennel bulbs, trimmed 3 blood oranges fennel fronds for garnish
sea salt and freshly cracked black pepper 1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil 1 teaspoon honey

Finely slice the fennel and place in a serving bowl. Carefully cut away the rind and pith of the blood oranges and slice horizontally. Place the oranges on top of the fennel and garnish with the fennel fronds. In a small jar with a screw top lid, place the vinegar, olive oil and honey and shake well to combine. Season to taste with salt and pepper. When ready to serve pour the dressing over the fennel and oranges and toss very carefully, or pass separately in a small serving jug.

Carrots and beets and all the good things

It's a lot harder to get people to 'ooh' and 'aah' over beets and carrots than it is to get them to 'ooh' and 'aah' over artichokes or asparagus, and I enjoy being able to take these humble, 'lowbrow' foodstuffs up a few notches and serve them with great exuberance. Charlie Trotter Hear, hear, Mr. Trotter! If you have followed my blog for even a little while you know that I love carrots – in fact, recipes featuring this delicious root vegetable are almost becoming a signature. This latest offering is a warm, rich, toasty version of a salad, with a creamy thickened yoghurt base, baby beets, lots of herbs and the crunch of almonds and pepitas. A meal on its own or a perfect accompaniment to slow roasted lamb. Serves 2 as a meal, or 4 as an accompaniment

500g Greek yogurt 2 long red chillis, finely chopped 1 bunch dill 5 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil 1 lemon 500g dutch carrots, peeled and trimmed 400g baby beetroots, cooked and peeled, or a 440 g tin of whole baby beetroots, well drained on paper towel 2 teaspoons cumin seeds 1/3 cup pepitas 1/3 cup roasted almonds, roughly chopped sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

First of all make the thickened yoghurt. You can do this several hours ahead. Line a sieve with a piece of muslin and place the sieve into a medium sized

bowl. Tip in the yogurt and leave in the fridge for 2 hrs to drain and thicken. Put the drained yogurt in a bowl and combine with the chilli, half of the dill (leaves only and roughly chopped), 2 tablespoons of the olive oil, and the the zest of the lemon. Preheat oven to 180 C. Toss the prepared carrots in 2 tablespoons of olive oil and 1 teaspoon of the cumin seeds. Season well with salt and pepper. Tip into a shallow roasting tray and roast for 20 minutes, or until the carrots are tender and cooked through. At the same time roast the pepitas for 5 – 10 minutes and then set aside. Cut the beets into wedges and toss in 3/4 tablespoon of oil with the remaining cumin seeds. When the carrots are cooked, remove from the oven to cool a little and start assembling the dish. Spread the yoghurt mixture on the bottom of the serving plate. Sprinkle over a few almonds and pepitas. Next add the beets, and a few of the remaining dill leaves. Then sprinkle over some more almonds and pepitas. Lay the carrots on top, and then scatter over the remaining almonds, pepitas and dill. Finally drizzle over a the remaining olive oil and a teaspoon of juice from the lemon and serve right away. Wine choice – Pinot gris. Music choice – Compassion (Nigel Westlake and Lior) And if this recipe does not pique your interest, or if it is warm an summery in your part of the world, rather than at the windy end of winter, dip into the carrot recipe archives for inspiration. This slideshow requires JavaScript.

Doughnuts with strawberry sauce

When I was a teenager I had a disastrous first experience making doughnuts. The dough was gluey, the oil not hot enough, and the result so hideous they were inedible. It was years before I had the courage to try deep frying again, and only recently that I started experimenting with doughnuts. This recipe is really the holes not the doughnut, and they taste wonderful, especially when eaten warm, dipped in strawberry sauce. The dough uses baking powder rather than yeast, so the recipe is simplicity itself, and perfect for a morning or afternoon treat. Miss 16 said, with mouth full and sauce dripping from her chin, that they were like a jam doughnut from the bakery only much, much better. They would also be divine with a bitter chocolate sauce or thick lemon curd, for dipping. Makes about 24 small doughnuts

50 g butter 125 ml milk 1.5 litres sunflower oil 250 g plain flour 1½ teaspoons baking powder ½ teaspoon sea salt 100 g caster sugar 200 g strawberries 1 tablespoon icing sugar zest of ½ orange or tangelo

Melt the butter, milk and 2 tablespoons of the sunflower oil in a small saucepan over a medium heat. Combine the flour, baking powder, salt and 50 g sugar in a medium-sized bowl. Make a well in the middle, then tip in the warm milk mixture. Stir the mixture with a knife until it forms a soft,

sticky dough. Heat the rest of the oil in a medium-sized deep saucepan pan until it reaches 180 C. The most useful kitchen tool I have ever bought, aside from a really good knife, is a kitchen thermometer. It's the best way to ensure that the cooking temperature is correct and that the result is not soggy, oil soaked lumps, or brown and crisp but raw in the middle doughnuts. But if you don't have a thermometer, here are alternative ways to check the temperature of the oil. Roll the dough into small balls about the size of a walnut in its shell. Use a slotted spoon to carefully lower batches of six balls into the oil. Cook for 3 to 4 minutes, or until golden, turning occasionally. Place the cooked doughnuts onto a double layer of paper towel to drain. Cool for a few minutes, then roll gently in the remaining sugar until finely coated. To make the strawberry sauce place the strawberries, icing sugar and the zest of the orange or tangelo into a small bowl, then blend together until it forms a slightly chunky sauce. Serve the warm doughnuts with the strawberry sauce for dipping and slurping and spooning over. The diet starts tomorrow!

Warm potato salad with dill and almonds

It is always wise to make too much potato salad. Even if you are cooking for two, make enough for five. Potato salad improves with age – that is, if you are lucky enough to have any left over. My mother was a proponent of the 'you can't have too much' school of thought when it came to catering. We always had masses of leftovers after a party or family function, and dined on them for days afterwards. I have made it my mission to master portion control, and count catering a true success if there is plenty to eat, but hardly anything leftover. But potato salad is a special class of leftover and perfect for snacking, putting on a sandwich or, in the case of this recipe, putting in a hot frying pan with a little olive oil and making crispy, crunchy and decadent. It's a lighter and fresher tasting potato salad – no heavy mayonnaise dressing to overwhelm the delicate potatoes – just a simple dressing to bring the ingredients together. The almonds provide a satisfying textural contrast, and the dill is heady and herbaceous. It takes only about 20 minutes to make and is a great addition to almost any summertime meal. Serves 4 – 6

1 kg small new potatoes, skin on
3 tablespoons fresh dill, roughly chopped
1 tablespoon roasted almonds, roughly chopped
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

Dressing: 1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
2 tbsp red wine vinegar
2 tsp Dijon mustard
pinch sea salt

Cut the potatoes in half lengthwise and then boil in a large saucepan in plenty of lightly salted water until tender, but not too soft. when the potatoes are cooked, carefully drain off the water and

then return to the pot and cover with a tea towel (this absorbs the steam and stops the potatoes from going soggy and falling apart). Mix together all the dressing ingredients in a small jar and shake well to combine. While the potatoes are still hot pour over the dressing and transfer to a serving bowl. Scatter over the almonds and dill and season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper. Best served right away, but is still good warm or at room temperature.

Fig, raspberry and ginger cake

A great fig should look like it's just about to burst its skin. When squeezed lightly it should give a little and not spring back. It must be almost unctuously sweet, soft and wet. Yotam Ottolenghi I was rewarded for a chilly early morning visit to the markets this weekend with a bounty of fresh figs, raspberries, blueberries and strawberries from a stall holder who was desperate to sell her excess produce before closing time. Fresh figs are a special occasion treat at our place, and to have enough to use in baking a cake is a rarity. Rich and sweet and unctuous, with a sharp tang of raspberry and subtle heat of fresh ginger, the cake was perfect for afternoon tea on a sunny, but cool autumn afternoon. Makes one 20 cm cake (serves 8 – 10) 1 cup almond meal 1/4 cup self-raising flour 1/4 cup sugar 120 g butter, melted 2 tablespoons honey 1 teaspoon vanilla extract 2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger 3 eggs 4–6 fresh figs 60–80 g fresh raspberries thick cream and edible gold glitter, to serve Preheat oven to 175 C. Lightly grease the base and sides of a 20 cm spring-form tin. In a medium sized bowl combine the almond meal, flour and sugar. In a smaller bowl whisk together the melted butter, vanilla extract, ginger and eggs. Add the liquid to the dry ingredients and whisk together. Pour into the tin and gently tap the tin on the table to even the filling out. Trim the stems off the figs and slice in half. Place the figs, cut side up, around the outside of the cake, and then place the raspberries in the centre. Bake for 30 minutes until the cake is golden brown and a skewer inserted into the cake comes away clean. Take out of the oven and cool on a wire cake rack. Serve warm or at room temperature with thick cream. I sprinkled edible gold glitter over the cake (it can be found in cake decorating shops) but plain icing sugar would also look pretty. Keeps well for two or three days in an airtight container.

Wilted greens on sourdough

I used to visit and revisit it a dozen times a day, and stand in deep contemplation over my vegetable progeny with a love that nobody could share or conceive of who had never taken part in the process of creation. It was one of the most bewitching sights in the world to observe a hill of beans thrusting aside the soil, or a rose of early peas just peeping forth sufficiently to trace a line of delicate green. Nathaniel Hawthorne A few weeks ago we planted some autumn greens in the vegetable patch. As winter has been very slow in coming in our part of the world, they have taken off and we have spinach and kale and rocket and a variety of lettuces and Chinese greens a-plenty. There is joy in seeing this abundance, that has had very little to do with me, except of providing a rich soil, and netting to keep possums and other intruders away. Water and sunshine have done all the work, and left me with the simple pleasure of the miracle of growing things. For lunch today I gathered a good handful of spinach and then foraged about for herbs – thyme, fennel fronds, parsley, baby nasturtium leaves and chives. I sauteed the spinach and herbs in a little butter and seasoned with pepper. A slice of toasted sourdough rubbed with a cut garlic clove was the base on which I laid the greens. A little finely grated pecorino was the final seasoning. It was deeply satisfying to make lunch from fresh produce from my own garden, and simply delicious. There is no need for a recipe for this dish – it's just about some beautiful spinach and whatever herbs you have to hand, gently and quickly cooked in a little butter, with the best quality grainy sourdough bread you can find, an earthy and delicious lunch for one. You could add a poached egg or fresh curd cheese for a more filling meal, but I prefer the absolute simplicity of the greens on their own. Photo credit: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/wwwworks/4633459332>

Roasted almonds with thyme and sea salt

Almonds are native to the Middle East, from Syria and Turkey and the regions towards Pakistan. Spread by human settlement along the shores of the Mediterranean into northern Africa and southern Europe, it is a prominent part of the food culture of both the Middle East and Europe – think tagines, marzipan, macarons and amaretti, and used in both sweet and savoury dishes. I love them roasted whole, chopped and added to salads, and covered with dark chocolate as a special treat. The earthy flavour of thyme is really delicious in this recipe, and with the sea salt they become the perfect snack. Really great as tapas, part of a cheese board, or with some Pedro Ximénez sherry, they would also make a lovely gift, in a fancy schmancy glass bottle. Makes 2 cups 2 cups almonds (skin on) 2 tablespoons olive oil 6 –

8 sprigs thyme sea salt Preheat oven to 180 C. In a medium sized bowl mix together the almonds and olive oil and add the thyme, mixing well. Place on a flat baking tray in a single layer and roast in the oven for 15 minutes. Take out of the oven and sprinkle with sea salt, to taste. Cool on the tray and then store in an airtight container.

Oat, date and ginger slice

This slice is a little bit like a muesli bar for grown-ups. The sweetness of the dates and subtle heat of the ginger are a great combination. It made a delicious morning tea after an early morning visit to the markets to shop for fruit and vegetables for the week. There is a charming camaraderie among those of us who eschew a Saturday morning sleep-in for market shopping. Prepared with sturdy bags or trolleys and fortified with an espresso and perhaps a croissant, crisp, warm and buttery from the pastry stall, we examine the produce to find the best and freshest, banter lightly with the stall owners, and relish in knowledge that the prices are extraordinarily cheap and the quality wonderful. I also bought organic oats to use in this recipe, and used uncrystallised ginger, which is less sweet and has, I think, a little more warmth. It will keep well for several days in an air tight container, and is perfect with a cup of tea, or packed into a lunch box to counter the two o'clock slump. Makes 24 pieces 250 g dates, diced 1 cup water 180 g butter, softened 1 cup brown sugar 1 1/3 cups plain flour 3/4 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda 1/3 cup finely chopped uncrystallised ginger 1 1/2 cups rolled oats Preheat oven to 180 C. Lightly grease a 30 x 20 cm slice tin and line with silicon baking paper. Place the dates and water in a small saucepan and bring to the boil. Simmer for 10 – 15 minutes, until the water is absorbed and the dates soft. Set aside to cool slightly. In a medium sized bowl beat the butter and brown sugar together until soft and creamy. Fold in the flour and bicarbonate of soda until well mixed. Stir in the oats and ginger and mix until well combined. Divide the mixture in half. Press one half into the tin with your fingertips. Spread the date mixture evenly over the surface. Crumble the other half of the mixture over the top and spread out to cover, using your fingertips. Bake for 35 minutes until the top is golden. Cook on a wire rack and then cut into 24 pieces. Store in an airtight container for 3 – 5 days.

Patatas puttanesca: a series of fortunate events

‘Puttanesca.’ It’s an Italian sauce for pasta. All we need to do is sauté olives, capers, anchovies,

garlic, chopped parsley, and tomatoes together in a pot, and prepare spaghetti to go with it.”

Klaus Baudelaire When my children were younger we read Lemony Snicket’s A Series of Unfortunate Events, relishing every page, enthralled by the Baudelaire orphans and their deliciously dreadful uncle, Count Olaf. The making of pasta puttanesca for a dinner party for their uncle and his friends (rather than the roast beef he had requested), and the ensuing explosive scene was a highlight, especially their father’s dramatic rendition of the hysterical Olaf – “Roast beef!! I ordered roast beef!!” This recipe is a riff on the traditional pasta puttanesca, using new potatoes and sun dried tomatoes, rather than fresh. It is packed with chilli and salty capers, parsley and olives – not for the faint hearted! It came about because I found organic sun-dried tomatoes at my local fruit shop, and although a somewhat dated ingredient, they are so rich and full of flavour when truly dried in the sun and not treated with any preservatives that I had to revive them in this recipe. Serves 4 – 6

1 kg small new potatoes
6 – 8 sun dried tomatoes
1 tablespoon capers
1 long fresh red chilli, finely chopped
1 teaspoon dried chilli flakes
6 – 8 kalamata olives, sliced
1 tablespoon finely chopped parsley
2 tablespoon olive oil
salt and pepper

Preheat oven to 180 C. Place the potatoes in a shallow oven tray. Drizzle with 1 tablespoon of olive oil, season with salt and pepper and roast for 20- 30 minutes until cooked through. It depends a little on the size of your potatoes how long this will take. They need to be soft when skewered with a sharp knife, but not crispy on the outside as a normal roasted potato would be. Slice the tomatoes into small pieces and place in a small bowl. Just cover with boiling water and set aside for 10 minutes to soften. While the potatoes are cooking heat the remaining oil in a frying pan that is large enough to hold the potatoes. Toss in the capers and cook for a minute. Add the chilli, chilli flakes olives and parsley and cook for another minute. Lower the heat and add the tomatoes and their soaking liquid. Cook until almost all the liquid is evaporated. Check the seasoning and adjust with more salt and pepper if needed and then set aside. When the potatoes are done add them to the pan and toss them carefully so they are covered with the tomato mixture. Serve hot or warm. Great as part of a tapas selection, or served for dinner with grilled beef and a crisp salad. Pass more dried chilli flakes for those who like extra heat.

Hot cross buns: perfect is the enemy of good.

Miss 16 and I made hot cross buns on Easter Sunday, and they were deliciously light, spicy, soft and sticky – a triumph. They were also enormous, the result of inaccurate yeast measuring, or

making them too big. We called them mutant hot cross buns, but wolfed them down anyway, fresh from the oven and slathered with butter. I wasn't going to add the recipe here, because they certainly did not look like the perfectly styled buns that have been littering the blogosphere over the last week or so. But then I took myself to task. A recipe for delicious buns was what I aimed for, and that certainly was the result. So here it is, my hot cross bun recipe, and the buns, in all their bumpy, over-sized, very imperfect scrumptiousness. Don't wait until next Easter to make them. Leave off the flour paste crosses and call them currant buns. I certainly will be making them again. There are thousands of recipes for hot cross buns; on the internet, in cookbooks, and even in old newspapers. I found recipes from the 1890s in Australian newspapers when I was looking for a source recipe. This slideshow requires JavaScript. What I liked most about the recipe I chose to base mine on was that there was no peel, lots of mixed spice (and I increased it further) and the dough was enriched with eggs and butter, keeping to the tradition of rich, yeasty breads to mark the celebration of the end of the Lenten season on Easter Sunday. It takes quite a long time to make any bread, but most of the time is taken up with waiting for the bread to rise. It's easy and simple to potter around the house or garden while the dough is rising, a slow and relaxing way to spend a weekend morning. Makes 16 buns (unless you too want giant buns!)

4 cups plain flour 14 g dried yeast
1/4 cup caster sugar 2 teaspoons mixed spice pinch of salt 1 1/2 cups currants 3-4 dried apricots chopped into small pieces the same size as the currants 40 g butter 300 ml full cream milk 2 eggs, lightly beaten

Flour paste: 1/2 cup plain flour 4 to 5 tablespoons water
Glaze: 1/3 cup water 2 tablespoons caster sugar

Combine flour, yeast, sugar, mixed spice, salt and currants in a large mixing bowl. Melt the butter in a small saucepan over medium heat. Add the milk and heat for a little longer, until the mixture is lukewarm. It needs to be not too hot and not too cold to activate the yeast. Add warm milk mixture and eggs to the dry ingredients. Use a knife to mix until dough almost comes together. Then finish mixing to form a soft dough with your hands. Turn dough out onto a floured bench top or board. Knead for about 10 minutes, or until the dough is smooth and elastic, adding a little extra flour if it is too sticky to work with. Place into a lightly oiled bowl and cover with cling film. Put somewhere warm and let the yeast work its magic. It should take about 1 – 1/2 hours to double in size. Punch the dough down to its original size with your fist – the most satisfying moment in bread making. Knead for 30 seconds on a lightly floured surface until smooth, or as smooth as it can be given the currants in the dough. Divide into 16 even pieces and roll each piece into a ball. Place balls onto a baking tray lined with silicon paper, about 1cm apart, which will give them room to spread without

joining completely to the buns next to them. Cover lightly with plastic wrap. Put somewhere warm again for about 30 minutes, or until the buns double in size again. Preheat oven to 170 C. Make the flour paste by mixing the flour and water together in a small bowl until smooth. Spoon into a small snap-lock bag and snip off 1 corner of bag. Pipe the flour paste over tops of buns to form crosses. (The snap lock bag trick is a great one for all sorts of quick piping tasks, especially children's birthday cakes.) Bake for 20 to 25 minutes, or until buns are cooked through. While they are baking make the glaze. Place the water and sugar in a small saucepan. Bring to the boil and simmer for 5 minutes until slightly thickened. When the buns are ready, take them out of the oven and place on a wire cooling rack. Brush generously with the sugar glaze to coat all of the top of the buns. Serve the buns warm with butter. If they are not all eaten the day they are made they are delicious split in half and toasted.

Almond and vanilla cake

There are many appalling things that were done with and to food in the 1970s – for a comprehensive overview I recommend following the 70s Dinner Party on Twitter, but for a sampling consider salad in aspic and grapefruit prawn cocktail as two examples that had plenty of traction in the era of tight, tight pants, handle bar moustaches and macrame bikinis. However, at the same time the incredible chef, organic food activist and visionary Alice Waters opened her restaurant Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California with co-owner, pastry chef Lindsey Shere. She championed the concept of cooking with fresh, sustainable organic food grown by local farmers and has tirelessly advocated for improved food in American schools, establishing the Chez Panisse Foundation in 1996, with a mission to transform public education by using food to teach, nurture, and empower young people. She has had a number of chefs working in her kitchen over the years, many of whom have gone on to establish stellar careers of their own. Which brings me to this cake. It is based on one by Devid Lebovitz, renowned baker and cookbook writer, who worked at Chez Panisse for thirteen years, honing his baking skills before moving to France to live and write cookbooks. His recipe, based on one by Lindsey Shere, uses almond paste (not marzipan) which I could not source, so I experimented with my own version using almond meal instead. He also included almond essence, which I have always found almost medicinal and quite unappealing, so I omitted it. Best of all, it is made in a food processor, and there is no creaming of butter and sugar, or separating of eggs involved. Huzzah! It is just one of the nicest cakes I have ever made, and the texture and flavour superb.

It is very simple and plain – and I think that is what I find most appealing. However, the almond and vanilla are intensely present and satisfyingly rich. It needs nothing more than a dusting of icing sugar to finish it, but would be delicious served with poached fruit (I am thinking rhubarb or apricots) and some greek yoghurt mixed with a little honey. Makes one large cake (serves 12 – 14)

1 1/3 cups sugar 225 g almond meal 140 g plain flour 1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder 1/2 teaspoon salt 250 g cold butter, cut into small cubes 1 teaspoon vanilla paste 6 eggs icing sugar, for dusting

Preheat oven to 165C. Line the base of a 22 cm spring form tin with baking paper and very lightly grease the sides of the pan with a little butter. In a food processor combine the sugar, almond meal, flour, baking powder, salt and butter and process until the mixture looks like coarse breadcrumbs and comes together slightly. Add the vanilla and eggs and process until a smooth batter forms. Tip into the spring form pan and smooth the top until it is even. Bake in the oven for 45 – 50 minutes, until a skewer inserted into the centre of the cake comes with no clinging crumbs. When the cake is cooked take out of the oven, place on a wire cake rack and cool for about 15 minutes in the tin. Carefully turn the cake out of the tin and leave to cool completely. Dust with icing sugar when the cake is cold. Serve on its own with coffee, or with poached fruit and a dollop of Greek yoghurt.

Get stuffed: mushrooms, that is

I am a late comer to goat's cheese, having been scarred by my first experience, which was an intensely smelly, fiercely flavoured french variety. However, I have been educating my palate to milder versions and now love a subtle, creamy, ash covered chevre. Mushrooms pair beautifully with it, as the cheese seems to enhance their earthy tones so this recipe is perfect to show off both. Fantastic as an accompaniment to grilled meat, or as part of a vegetarian feast, they are simple, quick and just delicious.

6 – 8 medium sized field mushrooms 2 tablespoons olive oil 2 tomatoes 1/2 cup flat leaf parsley, chopped 1/2 teaspoon dried chilli flakes sea salt and freshly cracked black pepper 50 – 80 g chevre (mild or full bodied, whichever is your preference)

Preheat oven to 180C. Wipe the outside of the mushrooms with a piece of paper towel to remove any particles of dirt and then brush with a little of the olive oil. Place on a baking tray lined with silicon paper. Scoop out the seeds and pulp of the tomato and discard. Finely dice the tomato flesh. Combine the tomatoes, parsley, the remaining olive oil and chilli flakes in a small bowl. Season well with salt and pepper. Spoon the tomato mixture into the mushrooms. Finely chop the chevre and place small pieces among the tomato mixture.

Bake in the oven for 15 – 20 minutes. Serve hot, warm or at room temperature.

Pistachio and walnut crumbly cake

I first had a 'crumbly' cake at an afternoon tea hosted by a friend whose brother lived in Norway, and she made a traditional Scandinavian cake that was not too sweet and had a unique slightly crumbly texture. I loved it and have been trying for some time to create my own version from that memory. Loosely based on a recipe I dug up from somewhere now long forgotten, scribbled and scrawled over, and liberally stained with spilled ingredients, here is the end result. It has aniseed undertones, a hint of saltiness, and richness from the pistachios and walnuts. It's also super easy to make, and keeps well. I like to serve this cake with coffee for afternoon tea, but it is also really spectacular as a dessert when served with espresso syrup and burnt caramel ice cream. If you come from Brisbane as I do then Lick make the most awesomely delicious burnt caramel ice cream – with just the right edge of bitterness. And for espresso syrup I would suggest using this recipe – it is my favourite. Serves 12

Topping: 100g shelled pistachios, coarsely chopped 1/2 cup plain flour 1/4 cup sugar 2 tablespoons dark brown sugar 50g melted butter pinch salt

Cake: 85 g shelled pistachios 1/2 cup walnuts 1 cup plain flour 3/4 cup sugar 2 star anise 1/2 teaspoon sea salt 1/2 teaspoon baking powder 2 eggs 3 tablespoons olive oil 50 g butter, melted zest of 1 lemon

Heat oven to 165 C. Lightly grease a 23 cm spring-form tin with a little butter and then line the base with baking paper. In a small bowl combine all the topping ingredients and set aside. In a pestle and mortar crush the star anise until it is quite finely ground. The smell should be heavenly (and so much better than using powdered spice). Combine the pistachios, walnuts, flour, sugar, star anise, salt and baking powder in a food processor and process until the nuts are finely chopped. Whisk the remaining ingredients together and process until combined. Spread into the base of the baking tin and then cover with the topping mixture, pressing down very lightly with your fingertips. Bake for 30 – 35 minutes. Remove from the oven and cool before carefully removing the tin. Store in an airtight container.

Holy guacamole, Batman!

A perennial favourite, everyone has their preferred recipe for guacamole. and this is mine – smooth and creamy avocado contrasting with tomatoes, chilli, onion and herbs. There's a tang

of lemon, and the earthy notes of coriander in the dukkah I sprinkle on top, as well as a good seasoning of salt and black pepper. It's very good with tortilla chips, on top of nachos, or folded into a soft taco or burrito. But it is also superb piled onto a piece of toast with soft feta and fresh coriander scattered on top. This recipe makes enough for a crowd, and it will keep for a couple of days. Perfect for summer afternoon drinks with good friends.

3 ripe avocados 1/2 red onion, very finely diced 1 long green chilli, very finely diced 3 ripe tomatoes, de-seeded and finely chopped 1 tablespoon chopped chives 1 tablespoon chopped mint 1 tablespoon chopped parsley juice of 1 large lemon sea salt and black pepper corn chips, dukkah, to serve Peel and de-seed the avocados and then combine with the onion, chilli, tomatoes, chives, mint and parsley, mashing the avocado with a fork. It's up to you how smooth you want to make the guacamole – I like it with a bit of texture. Squeeze over the lemon juice and season well with sea salt and black pepper, to taste. Scatter over the dukkah and serve with corn chips.

Raspberry and hazelnut brownies

"Reader, I married him." Jane Eyre My husband and I are soon to mark 25 years of marriage and one of the things I appreciate most about him is his unfailing support of my dreams and goals. He photographs most of the recipes for this blog in his spare time, and helps bring to life my food ideas. I could not do it without him. So this recipe is dedicated to him with my heartfelt thanks. Raspberries, Nutella and brownies are three things he loves, so this recipe, adapted from one in a magazine I picked up at the supermarket and read in the queue waiting for the checkout, is perfect for him. The brownies are super fudgy, but the raspberries bring just enough tartness to counter the richness of the chocolate. The addition of the toasted hazelnuts is mine, and I think the crunch and texture of the nuts adds something special. Use frozen berries in the brownies, but if fresh are in season they finish the brownies beautifully when scattered over the top. Makes 16 – 20 slices, depending on size.

4 eggs 1/2 teaspoon sea salt 2 cups Nutella 1 cup self-raising flour 1 cup frozen raspberries 1/2 cup hazelnuts 125 fresh raspberries Preheat oven to 180C (or 160C if fan-forced). Line a 28 cm x 19 cm shallow baking tray with silicon paper. Beat the eggs in an electric mixer on high speed for 8 – 10 minutes, until they are light and fluffy. While the eggs are beating place the hazelnuts in a single layer on a flat tray and toast in the oven for 5 – 6 minutes. Take out of the oven and place on a tea towel. Wrap up the nuts and then rub vigorously with your hands to remove the skins. Roughly chop the nuts and set aside. In a small saucepan gently heat the Nutella until it is softened and a

little runny. While still beating, add the Nutella to the egg mixture along with the salt, and beat for another minute. Fold in the flour and frozen raspberries. Pour into the baking tin and smooth the surface gently. Sprinkle over the toasted hazelnuts and bake in the oven for 35 – 40 minutes until firm. Cool in the tin before slicing into squares. The brownies are very gooey so have patience and don't try to slice them when they are hot. Before serving scatter over some fresh raspberries. Fabulous with a dollop of thick cream and a cup of coffee. The brownies will keep in the fridge for a few days, but take out of the fridge about half an hour before serving so they can get to room temperature.

Sticky Asian lamb

Sticky, sweet and spicy lamb cutlets, with a slightly astringent dipping sauce is a perfect starter for a dinner with friends – good friends, who don't mind slurping and eating with their fingers to get every last morsel off the bone. It tastes best if the lamb can be marinated for several hours, or even overnight, to really let the flavours sing, but otherwise it's simplicity itself to prepare and cook and returns significant benefit for a small investment of time and effort. This recipe took its inspiration from Australian chef Matt Moran . Serves 4 – 6 1 kg lamb cutlets lime cheeks, to serve Marinade: 2 tablespoons brown sugar 2 tablespoons light soy sauce 1 tablespoon fish sauce 2 tablespoons canola oil 2 tablespoons tamarind paste (available at supermarkets and Asian groceries) 2 teaspoons sambal olek 1 teaspoon ground coriander 2 cloves garlic, chopped 2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger 1/2 teaspoon salt 2 spring onions, finely chopped 2 tablespoons lime juice Dipping sauce: 2-3 tablespoons lime juice 1 tablespoon rice wine vinegar 1 tablespoon brown sugar 1/2 tablespoon fish sauce 1 tablespoon light soy sauce 1 small garlic clove, very finely chopped 1 long red chilli, de-seeded, and finely chopped To make the marinade, place all the ingredients in a small food processor and process until a fairly smooth paste. You could also use a stick blender for this task. Coat the lamb cutlets with the marinade (use your hands) and then cover with cling wrap and put in the fridge for several hours or overnight. To make the dipping sauce combine all the ingredients in a small bowl and mix well to ensure the sugar dissolves. Check for seasoning and add a little more lime juice or fish sauce if necessary to balance the flavours. It should taste neither too salty or sweet, and have just enough warmth from the chilli to cut through the richness of the meat. Just before you are ready to serve, heat a grill pan or a BBQ to a medium heat and cook the chops for 2 – 3 minutes each side, turning once. Rest the lamb for a couple of minutes and then serve with the

dipping sauce and lime cheeks (and napkins). Wine choice: A cabernet sauvignon is a good match for the slightly sweet and spicy lamb.

Slow roasted pork belly with apples

Rich and unctuous, with a crispy crackling, pork belly is a spectacular dinner party dish and the pan fried apples and spiced sauce are wonderful partners. It's important to cook the pork long and slow to help render out most of the fat, and end up with meltingly soft flesh. But then the last part of the cooking needs to be at high heat, to enable the skin to become crisp – the essence of great pork is the crackling! Serves 6

1 teaspoon cumin seeds
1 teaspoon fennel seeds
1 1/2 tablespoons salt
1.5 kg pork belly, skin on
1 bulb fresh fennel
3 carrots
6 granny smith apples
40 g butter
2 cinnamon quills
3 star anise
1/3 cup brown sugar
1/3 cup verjuice

Coarsely grind the spices and salt in a pestle and mortar. Score the skin of the pork at about 1 cm intervals, being careful to not cut into the flesh. Rub the spice mixture into the skin of the pork, and then set aside in the fridge, uncovered for about 3 hours. This will help to draw moisture out of the skin and help get a crispy crackling. Cut the fennel bulb into 1 cm thick slices and cut the carrots in half lengthwise. In a large heavy based roasting pan lay the fennel and the carrots across the base and then place the pork, skin side up onto the vegetables. Bake at 140 C for 2 hours. Turn the heat up to 220 C and roast for another 30 minutes until the skin is crispy. Take out of the oven and rest for about 15 minutes. While the pork is resting, peel and core the apples and then cut in half. Heat a large frying pan over a medium heat and add the butter. When it starts to foam add the apples, cinnamon and star anise and cook for 3 – 4 minutes. Add the brown sugar and verjuice and simmer until the apples are cooked, but not collapsing, and the sauce almost syrupy. Carve the pork and serve with the apples and a drizzle of the sauce. Wine choice: A full bodied red wine is perfect with this dish. I'd suggest a shiraz, which has the depth and intensity to match the richness of the pork.

Chilli prawns with pasta

This is a new favourite of mine – only problem is that I am the sole prawn lover at our place. But then – no sharing required! I used tiger prawns, but you could use any variety of your choosing. The chilli, parsley and lemon zest are astonishingly simple ingredients, but together they are a trinity of delight when paired with the pasta, the prawns and a splash of white wine. Serves 4: 1

tablespoon olive oil 4 cloves garlic, finely chopped 1 long red chilli, finely chopped 80 ml white wine 60 g butter 1 kg tiger prawn, peeled and de-veined 400g dried spaghetti (get the best quality you can afford – it makes a difference to the result) zest of 1 large lemon, finely chopped 2 tablespoons chopped flat leaf parsley sea salt and black pepper Bring a large pot of water to the boil. Heat the olive oil in a large frying pan over medium heat. Saute the garlic and chilli for a couple of minutes. As soon as the water is boiling, add the pasta to the pot. Add the wine to the pan with the chilli and garlic and cook for a minute or two. Add the prawns and cook until they change colour and are just cooked through. By this time the pasta should be just about ready. Add the butter to the prawns and stir to coat them. Drain the pasta in a colander and then add to the prawns. Toss together with the lemon zest and parsley, check the seasoning and add salt to taste. Serve immediately. Wine choice: To accompany this simple yet sophisticated dish I'd suggest a verdhelo, which has tropical fruit tones and an almost creamy texture.

Rich beef stew with winter vegetables

In my part of the world it is wintry, with cool, bright days, and chilly nights. This rich stew is perfect for this time of year. Tender beef and root vegetables, with undertones of smoky paprika, garlic and onions, and finished with the freshness of gremolata sprinkled over the top, it is only made better when accompanied with a large glass of red wine, and eaten in front of a roaring fire. Serves 4 – 6 1 kg chuck steak, cut into 2 1/2 cm cubes 3 tablespoons olive oil 1 tablespoon butter 3 cloves garlic, finely chopped 2 medium onions, diced 4 cups good quality beef stock 3 tablespoons tomato paste 2 teaspoons sugar 1/2 teaspoon smoked paprika 1/2 teaspoon salt 2 carrots, peeled and sliced lengthwise 2 parsnips, chopped into large pieces 1 turnip, chopped into large pieces Gremolata: 1/4 cup flat leaf parsley, finely chopped 1 clove garlic, very finely chopped 2 teaspoons very finely chopped lemon zest In a large, heavy based casserole dish heat the butter and oil over high heat and brown the beef in batches. Put the beef to one side, and then lower the heat. Cook the onions and garlic until they soften slightly and then add the browned beef and any juices, beef stock, tomato paste, sugar, smoked paprika and salt. Simmer covered, over low heat for 1 1/2 hours. Add the vegetables and cook for another 30 minutes, until the vegetables are cooked and the beef tender. Serve with the gremolata and mashed potato or soft polenta. Gremolata: Combine the parsley, garlic and lemon zest and mix together. sprinkle a little over the stew, and pass the remainder for guests

to add according to taste. Wine choice: Lagrein, an Italian varietal. It's an earthy, full bodied wine with rich fruit tones, and is an excellent pairing with this dish. Shameless spruiking of this particular Lagrein is in order after an almost Bacchanalian feast, where we tried it with this stew and pronounced them as perfectly wonderful together.

Lemongrass beef

Such a simple recipe title, but this dish is packed with spicy flavours and interesting textures that make it a complex and satisfying dish to eat. Don't be put off by the list of ingredients – it takes only about 20 minutes from start to finish to make. Serves 4

2 cloves garlic 1 stalk of lemongrass (white part only), sliced 1 teaspoon whole black peppercorns 1 teaspoon sugar 300g beef mince 1 tablespoon fish sauce 1 1/2 tablespoons canola oil 200g rice vermicelli 1 large lime

Dressing: 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped 1 long red chilli, finely chopped 1 1/2 tablespoons sugar 1 tablespoon fish sauce 1 1/2 tablespoons lime juice 1 1/2 tablespoons rice wine vinegar 1 tablespoon water

To serve: 100g bean sprouts 1/2 cup fresh coriander leaves 1/2 cup mint leaves 1/2 cup fresh basil leaves

In a pestle and mortar pound together the garlic, lemongrass, whole black peppercorns and sugar until they form a rough paste. In a medium sized glass bowl combine the spice mixture, the mince and the fish sauce and set aside. In another medium sized bowl pour boiling water over the rice vermicelli and leave to sit for 5 – 6 minutes, then drain in a colander. Mix all the dressing ingredients together in a small bowl. Heat a medium sized frying pan over high heat. Add the oil and then fry the mince, breaking up any lumps as it cooks. It will take about 6 – 8 minutes to cook. Pour over the dressing and cook for another couple of minutes. Serve the beef and rice vermicelli with the sprouts and herbs, and wedges of lime on the side. Wine choice: I'd suggest a Gewurztraminer to drink with this dish, for its slightly sweet notes offset the spicy and peppery flavours in the beef.

Pork with creamy leek and mustard sauce

This is a perfect week-night dinner. Simple, fast and fuss free, but delivering delicious flavour and a great serve of comfort. My friends at Symphony Hill asked me to develop some recipes to pair with some of their wines and this pork matches beautifully with their 2006 Viognier. Sacrifice half a glass to use in the recipe. We should always cook with the wine we are drinking because the depth of flavour in the final dish resonates with the wine the

accompanies it. This pork would also be fabulous with some smashed potatoes, drizzled with good olive oil, sprinkled with sea salt and finished in the oven to add a little gnarly, crispy goodness. Serves 4

1 tbspn olive oil
4 pork loin chops, on the bone
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
30g butter
2 leeks, white part only, sliced finely
80 ml white wine
1 tbspn wholegrain mustard
100 ml chicken stock
2/3 cup double cream
2 tbspn chopped parsley
sea salt
1 bunch watercress, to serve

Heat a small frying pan over medium heat. Add the garlic, butter and leeks and cook until softened. Turn up the heat a little and add the wine. Cook for a couple of minutes until it reduces a little, then add the mustard and stock, turn the heat down again and simmer gently while you cook the pork. In another pan heat olive oil over high heat and then cook the chops until they are just done, Don't overcook. A couple of minutes before the pork is cooked add the cream and parsley to the sauce, turn up the heat and stir gently until it thickens slightly. Season to taste with the sea salt. Serve the pork with the sauce spooned over the top, with the watercress on the side as a fresh, slightly peppery accompaniment. Wine choice: Viognier

Snapper with coconut, ginger and coriander

When Ewen and Elissa Macpherson of Symphony Hill wines asked me to create a recipe to go with their Moscato Giallo I was both flattered and excited. They are a couple who have lived out their passions and dreams, and make spectacular, award winning wines with great style and panache. Matching a wine to a dish is a real art, and this variety is both unusual and unfamiliar. I wanted to design a dish that would bring out its highly aromatic tones and not overwhelm its complexity. Moscato is often associated with sweet or dessert wines, but this amazing wine challenges stereotypical pairings. It is quite special with this dish of snapper, with coconut, ginger and coriander. I'd love to hear what you think of it, especially if you pair it with the Moscato Giallo. Serves 4

4 skinless snapper fillets, about 180g each
1 teaspoons sea salt
2 teaspoons fennel seeds, lightly crushed
1 tablespoon plain flour
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
1/2 cup fresh coriander leaves with the tender stems attached
¼ cup alfalfa sprouts
2 tablespoons shredded coconut, lightly toasted
1 small dried red chilli, finely diced

Coconut Sauce: 1/4 cup vegetable oil
1 small peeled brown onion
2 fresh garlic cloves
1cm piece peeled fresh turmeric
1cm piece peeled fresh ginger
1 teaspoon sea salt
3 large vine-ripened tomatoes, with seeds and core removed, very finely diced
1 cup coconut milk
1 teaspoon light brown sugar
3 teaspoons fish sauce
½ teaspoon garam masala

First make the sauce. Heat vegetable oil on a

low temperature in a medium sized heavy-based saucepan. In a small food processor combine the onion, garlic, turmeric, ginger and salt and process until finely minced. Add this mixture to the pot and cook slowly on a low heat until caramelised (this can take up to 30 minutes – don't rush it, or the sauce will taste burned and bitter). Add the tomatoes and cook for 10 minutes. Remove the mixture from the pot and then return 2 heaped tablespoons into the pot, setting aside the remainder. Add coconut cream, sugar, fish sauce, and garam masala. Bring to the boil then reduce heat and simmer for 10 minutes. While the sauce is simmering, cook the fish. Season the fish on both sides with sea salt. Combine the fennel seeds and flour and lightly coat the fish pieces with the flour mixture, dusting off any excess. Heat oil in a large nonstick pan over medium heat. Cook the fish on one side for 6–8 minutes, depending on the thickness of the fillets. Turn and cook on other side 30 seconds. Divide the sauce between four bowls, place a piece of fish gently on top of the sauce, and top firstly with a little of the remaining tomato mixture, and the fresh coriander, sprouts, toasted coconut and dried chilli.

Huevos rancheros – for Sunday breakfast, brunch, lunch or dinner

Huevos rancheros, or “ranch eggs” are Mexican in origin, and a simple and quite humble dish. But they taste terrific, especially with lots of delicious accompaniments such as dollops of sour cream, sprinklings of fresh coriander, chunks of smooth avocado and rounds of soft tortillas. They are also, we decided at our place, the perfect Sunday meal at any time of the day. One pan, quick and easy, lots of punchy flavours, and loved by all. If you are feeding more than two, just double the recipe and use a bigger pan, or two smaller pans. If dining solo, then halve the ingredients and luxuriate in a dish that you can eat straight out of the pan. Serves 2

1 medium onion, finely diced
1 small red capsicum, diced
1 clove garlic, crushed
1 tablespoon olive oil
2 long, fresh red chillies, finely chopped (if you like lots of heat then by all means add more, or add some dried chilli flakes)
400g cherry tomatoes, halved
1/2 bunch fresh coriander
4 eggs
sour cream, sweet chilli sauce, freshly diced avocado, fresh coriander leaves, and soft tortillas,

to serve In a medium sized frying pan heat the olive oil and then saute the onions, capsicum, chillies and garlic until softened. Finely chop the stems of the coriander, and add to the pan, reserving the leaves for garnish. Add the tomatoes, a tablespoon of water, and cook over medium heat until the tomatoes have broken down somewhat and become quite soft. Season well with sea salt and a little black pepper. Using a spoon make wells in the tomato mixture for the eggs. Gently crack the eggs into the pan, lower the heat and cook the eggs to your liking.

Take the pan to the table and serve straight away with the garnishes on the side for everyone to add to their taste. For breakfast and brunch have with orange juice then coffee. For lunch, a Corona, and for dinner, a crisp white wine.

Summer breakfast – vanilla spiced yoghurt

It's the last day of my holiday today and I wanted to make something especially nice for my breakfast. Summer's bounty has been particularly rich and beautiful this year. Stunning mangoes, peaches, nectarines, apricots, cherries and blueberries are available in abundance and typify the flavours of summer in my part of the world. This recipe is really about the thick vanilla spiced yoghurt that sits perfectly on top of toasted banana bread or fruit loaf or brioche and under the fresh nectarines and blueberries drizzled with maple and vanilla syrup. The possibilities of foods that would benefit from a dollop of this lusciously thick, creamy, slightly sweet and tangy yoghurt are endless. But here is how I did it this morning. Makes about 1 1/2 cups 500 g thick Greek yoghurt (my favourite brand is Farmer's Union) 1 teaspoon vanilla bean paste 1 tablespoon icing sugar In a medium sized bowl mix together the yoghurt, vanilla and sugar until well combined. Spoon the yoghurt into a piece of muslin. Place in a sieve over a bowl. Cover and place in the fridge overnight to drain. It will reduce to about 2/3 of the original amount and be super thick, almost like cream cheese in texture. In the morning, remove it from the muslin, discard the liquid, and store the thickened yogurt in an airtight container in the fridge. Here's a great photo of how to do this from Coloured plates that is far better than my words to describe this process. In their lovely blog post, Rachael and Ahmad describe how to make labne, which is a traditional Middle Eastern thickened yoghurt, usually paired with savoury ingredients. My version is simply a slightly sweet version. I toasted some banana bread, spread it thickly with the yoghurt, added nectarine slices and a few blueberries, and drizzled over a little maple syrup. Would love to hear of delicious variations from you.

Summer rice salad

Besides the noble art of getting things done, there is a nobler art of leaving things undone. Lin Yutang A week's holiday in the middle of summer has been an opportunity to rest and relax before the busy year really begins in earnest. It's been stiflingly hot in my part of the world, so hot that a very fit man in his early thirties died of heat stroke over the weekend while biking in a

nature reserve just north of Brisbane. So outdoor projects have been taken off the agenda, besides keeping the garden alive by watering in the late afternoon. Instead, I have been reading, finishing a quilt and spending lots of time in the kitchen. Creating new recipes is something that relaxes me, and this season has been one of trying to incorporate more seeds and nuts into my diet, both for the health benefits and for their taste. This rice salad was today's experiment. The fresh peas, asparagus and zucchini sit atop a bowl of brown rice, seasoned with rice wine vinegar and a little olive oil, and stirred through are pepitas, sunflower seeds and black sesame seeds. I ate it on its own, but this salad would also be delicious as a side with grilled salmon. Serves 2 as a meal, or 4 as an accompaniment

1 cup brown rice
2 cups water
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
1/3 cup pepitas
1/3 cup sunflower seeds
2 tablespoons black sesame seeds
2 tablespoons rice wine vinegar
2 teaspoons olive oil
1 cup peas
1 large zucchini, sliced into thin strips, long-wise
1 bunch asparagus, ends trimmed and cut into short lengths
2 tablespoons soft feta cheese

Bring the water to the boil in a medium sized saucepan. when boiling add the rice and stir gently. Cover and simmer for 20 – 25 minutes until the rice is cooked, but still retains some bite. Check the rice occasionally and add a little more water if it begins to stick to the bottom of the pan before it is cooked. Drain the rice and turn into a medium sized glass bowl. Stir through the rice wine vinegar and olive oil and season to taste with salt and pepper. Leave to cool slightly. Meanwhile, rinse out the saucepan and bring more water to boil. Add the zucchini, asparagus and peas, and cook for 1 minute, until tender crisp and bright green. Stir through 1/3 of the vegetables into the rice and then place the rice into a serving dish. Top with the remaining vegetables and scatter over the feta. Best eaten warm or at room temperature.

Raspberry and almond smoothie bowl – food is not art

I've seen some astonishingly pretty smoothie bowls online in the last few months, intricately and beautifully decorated with nuts, seeds, fruit and flowers. The smoothie takes but a moment to make, but I can't imagine how long it must take to carefully and artfully place these toppings, to achieve the effect of an edible artwork. I am sure tweezers must often be involved. I even saw one where tiny cookie cutters were used to cut out banana shapes into stars and hearts. I like my food to look good, but I cannot imagine any person in the real world actually having time in the morning to create a smoothie bowl that is more art than food to be eaten. So as a small act of rebellion I created this smoothie bowl, which takes less than a minute to make,

and I think looks pretty and delicious. No elder-flowers, no careful linear display of pepitas, granola and berries – just a sprinkling of chopped almonds and coconut and a few little raspberries on top. The almond butter adds beautiful flavour and the vanilla a delicate sweet perfume. It's healthy and delicious, and certainly achievable before a busy day at work or play. Would love to see smoothie bowls you have made! Makes 1 serve, takes less than a minute to make 1 medium sized lady finger banana 1 cup frozen raspberries, with a few reserved for topping 1/2 cup milk (cows, soy, almond or whatever you have to hand) 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract/vanilla paste 1 tablespoon almond butter A few dry roasted almonds, roughly chopped, and a little coconut In a blender combine all ingredients except for the almonds and coconut and blend until smooth. Pour into a shallow bowl and top with the almonds, coconut and reserved raspberries. Eat straight away.

Seed crackers – and I have not gone crackers

Making my own crackers came about almost by chance. Some time ago I was looking for a gluten free cracker for my son that did not taste like cardboard and have the texture of polystyrene. I came across some seed crackers in the health food aisle of my local supermarket. They were delicious, full of nutty flavour, and crisp in texture. The only downside was the exorbitant cost. Even in the world of gluten free foods, they were eye-poppingly expensive.

So they were only purchased for special occasions. Recently, however, I saw a blog post for home-made seed crackers, which looked very similar to these crackers and decided to attempt making them. They turned out to be really easy to make, and so much more economical than buying them. I never thought I would be a woman who made crackers, who would have the time and energy to devote to a task that could be argued was a waste of time, but these are so worth the small investment of time and effort required, that henceforth, I will be a constant baker of crackers. I discovered that seed crackers are a traditional Norwegian food, called knekkebrød, although the traditional recipes also seemed to have rye flour as an ingredient. A gorgeous blog, called North Wild Kitchen , gave me some great background on knekkebrød. "A Norwegian breakfast and lunch is never complete without a slice of bread or a type of knekkebrød. These 'crisp breads' or 'breaking breads' which are flat and dry, resembling a cracker, probably originated in Scandinavia close to 500 years ago. Some sources say that crisp bread was a staple of the Vikings as they could store them for long periods of time. These crisp breads would have been baked on hot stones, while today's knekkebrød is baked in the

oven. Baking them in the oven is what makes these crisp breads so different from the Norwegian flatbrød, which is baked on a flat griddle, much like lefse. Once considered a poor man's diet, knekkebrød has become widely popular boasting a healthy lifestyle with numerous variants from slightly sweet to nutty to herby & salty. They are easy to make, forgiving, and require only a few ingredients, which can be interchanged depending on what you have available in your cupboards. All one needs is a little imagination and water." I created my recipe using this blog's recipe as a base, removing the flour and using chia seeds soaked in water to bind the seeds together, which seems to be how most of the other flour-less recipes make the seeds into a mixture that could be bound. I think the combination below is a good one, but you could use poppy seeds instead of some of the sesame seeds, or add a few more flax seeds. You could also add spices such as whole cumin seeds, or even dried chilli flakes. I like them plain, and enjoy eating them with a scoop of avocado, some sliced tomato, and a sprinkling of soft feta and pungent coriander, or with hummus, shaved carrot and mint. Makes about 40 crackers

1/2 cup sunflower seeds 1/2 cup pepitas (pumpkin seeds) 1/2 cup sesame seeds (a mixture of black and white is nice) 1/2 cup flax seeds 1/3 cup chia seeds 3/4 teaspoon salt 1/2 teaspoon honey 1 1/2 cups water

Preheat oven to 170 C. Place all the seeds, the salt and the honey in a medium sized bowl. Pour in the water and mix to combine. Leave for 15 minutes for the chia and flax seeds to soften and to thicken the water. Tip out on to a large oven tray lined with silicon baking paper, or divide between 2 medium sized trays. Spread out as thin as possible, firstly using the back of a spoon, and then using a smaller oven tray to press the mixture really flat (after covering with another piece of baking paper. You will get the best results if the mixture is spread really thin and there is still some room on the tray to separate the crackers during the cooking. If in doubt, use 2 trays. Bake for 20 minutes. Take out of the oven and cut into into crackers, what ever shape you like, and carefully turn them over. Return to the oven to cook for another 20-30 minutes until crisp and golden. Place on a rack to cool then store in an airtight container.

Lime cupcakes

I don't drown my sorrows..I suffocate them with cupcakes. Anon. Everyone needs a no-fail, go-to, whip-it-up-in-a-flash cupcake recipe, and this is mine. It works every time and is soft and moist and delicious. The lime gives a refreshing tang to counter the sweetness of the cake and icing, and the almond meal has a nice undertone of nuttiness and richness. My daughter

makes fabulous cupcakes and she is also an expert with a piping bag and palette knife to decorate, and she has tested this recipe many times. Her advice is to make sure that you cream the butter and sugar until it is very light and fluffy, and not to be impatient at this stage of the recipe; then you will get light-as-air cakes. Enjoy any time you need a sweet treat – not just to drown your sorrows! Makes 12

125g soft butter 180g raw caster sugar 2 eggs 1 teaspoon vanilla paste zest of 3 limes 185g self-raising flour 2 tablespoons almond meal 125ml milk Icing: 2 cups soft icing mixture 3 tablespoons butter juice of 1 lime, approximately Preheat oven to 180 C.

Line a 12 hole muffin or cake tin with cake liners. In a medium sized bowl cream together the butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Beat in the vanilla and lemon zest. Add the eggs, one at a time and mix well. Alternately add the flour and milk until well combined. Carefully spoon the mixture into the cake tin, filling each liner to about 2/3 capacity. There should be just enough mixture. Bake in the oven for 12 – 15 minutes, or until lightly golden and an individual cake springs back when lightly touched with your finger. take the cakes out of the tin and cool on a cake tray until completely cold. meanwhile, in a small bowl beat together the icing ingredients, adding enough lime juice to get a smooth consistency. When the cakes are cold, ice and decorate them, unleashing all your creative impulses. I used thinly sliced lime zest, but you could use shave or toasted coconut, grated lime zest, sprinkles or sugar flowers, or whatever takes your fancy. The cakes will keep for 2 or 3 days if store in an airtight container.

Spicy roasted pumpkin

Now in my part of the world it is hot, hot, hot, and very steamy. It is not the weather for roast dinners, and snuggling beside a fireplace, or eating soup and thick crusty bread. But as I am a fanatical lover of pumpkin, this season is where salads with warm roasted pumpkin come into their own. I love pairing pumpkin with peppery rocket, Persian feta and pistachios, or with cous cous, spinach and currants, or with segmented oranges, cranberries and romaine lettuce. This is an excellent recipe to give a spicy edge to your roasted pumpkin, and is oh so quick and easy to pop into the oven while you cool off in the pool. Serves 4 – 6 depending on the oomph of your salad and the appetite of those partaking 1 kg Kent pumpkin 2 tablespoons olive oil 1 teaspoon ground ginger 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon 1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg 1/2 teaspoon dried chilli flakes 1 teaspoon black sesame seeds 1 teaspoon cumin seeds, whole 1/2 teaspoon ground coriander seed salt and black pepper Preheat oven to 180 C. Slice the pumpkin into medium sized wedges, leaving the skin on, but scraping out the seeds and membrane.

Place a sheet of silicon paper onto a baking tray and arrange the pumpkin in a single layer on the tray. Drizzle over the olive oil and then evenly scatter over the spices, turning once to cover both sides. Season well with the salt and pepper and roast for 35 – 40 minutes. Remove from the oven and eat hot, or warm in a robust salad.

Strawberry and fig pastries – to welcome the new year

We spend January 1st walking through our lives, room by room, drawing up a list of work to be done, cracks to be patched. Maybe this year, to balance the list, we ought to walk through the rooms of our lives...not looking for flaws, but for potential. Ellen Goodman As usual we spent our New Year's break at our friend's vineyard and winery, where there was much laughter, exquisite wines, and beautiful food. It was unusually warm and we spent much time on the front verandah with our glasses in hand, and jazz playing on their vintage record player. I contracted a summer head cold, which is the worst of all colds in my opinion, but this did not stop me from celebrating, nor from delighting in the best of summer produce. The New Year will be full of challenges and opportunities in equal measure for our family, including a trip to France in April for my daughter and I, the end of five long years of medical school for my husband, and the start of his new career as a doctor. I want to hold on to the joys of long summer days and relaxation with friends and family as long as possible, and so am cooking and creating dishes designed to foster wonderful informality and shared enjoyment of time spent together. Luscious figs and sweet strawberries are paired in this dessert, with thin, crisp pastry, crunchy nuts and vanilla laced cream setting them off to perfection. This dish would make a wonderful end to a casual summer meal as everything can be easily prepared ahead of time and then assembled at the last moment. Serves 4

2 sheets ready rolled frozen puff pastry
1 punnet strawberries
4 fresh figs, each sliced into 6 wedges
2 tablespoons hulled pistachio nuts
1/4 cup icing sugar, plus 2 teaspoons, extra
juice of 1/2 lime
200 ml cream
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Preheat oven to 190C. Defrost the pastry and when softened cut out 4 rounds from each sheet using a 10 cm fluted circular cutter. If you do't have a suitable cutter, use a saucer or othe small plate and use a sharp knife to cut out the pastry rounds. Place on a baking sheet lined with silicon paper and then top with another sheet of silicon paper and another baking tray so that the pastry is squished between them, and won't puff up during baking. Cook in the oven for about 15 minutes, or until pastry is a light golden colour. Set on a rack to cool. Meanwhile, evenly and thinly slice the strawberries and sprinkle over the 1/4 cup of icing

sugar and the lime juice. carefully stir and set aside for about 20 minutes. A ruby red liquid will form and the strawberries will have a beautifully intense flavour. Gently whip the cream with the vanilla and remaining icing sugar. Roughly chop the pistachio nuts into small pieces. When the pastry is cool and you are ready to serve, place a pastry round on each of 4 dessert plates. Place strawberries over the pastry in an even layer and then top with a spoonful of cream, spreading it out over the strawberries. Reserve the liquid and place in a small jug. Place another pastry round on top of the cream and gently press down. Spread out spoonfuls of the remaining cream onto the top layer and then top with the figs. Sprinkle over the nuts and serve immediately, with the sauce from the strawberries passed separately.

It's hot in Brisbane but it's Coolangatta – summer salads for celebrations

It's so hot here – unreasonably hot for November, and as my thoughts turn towards upcoming end-of-year and Christmas celebrations, I've gathered a collection of my salad recipes for inspiration and to help me to keep cool in the kitchen. There's something here for all tastes, and each one has a little twist to lift it above the usual fare. I hope there's some inspiration here for you too. And if you are wondering about the title of this post – It's hot in Brisbane, but it's Coolangatta – it is the title of a real song, popular in the 1950s. You can read about it, see the fabulously kitsch sheet music and listen to the original recording [here](#) . Cranberry and wild rice salad Potato and pea salad with hazelnut dressing Carrot salad with coriander, chili and sesame Rocket salad with apple and parmesan Nectarines, prosciutto, mozzarella and mint Brie and rocket salad with pomegranate dressing Maple roasted pumpkin with farro Tomato and bocconcini salad with a beautiful basil dressing

Spiced carrot and brown rice salad

I've been having an enforced rest following some surgery, but today felt like some creative cooking – reading the recipe books and magazines given to me by my very thoughtful colleagues the inspiration. Our oldest is back at home with us for a time and as he is a coeliac, gluten free cooking is required at our place. So this combination of nutty brown rice with warm spices, sharp, fresh coriander and sweet carrots makes an excellent salad that is healthy and filling and delicious for all of us. I'd recommend serving it with some grilled chicken, Greek yoghurt or labne, and a crisp white wine. 1 bunch Dutch carrots, tops trimmed, and washed (or

use 5 – 6 carrots, peeled, and sliced in half lengthwise) finely chopped coriander stalks, from 1 bunch of coriander 4 tablespoons olive oil 2 teaspoons cumin seeds 1 teaspoon smoked paprika 1 teaspoon ground turmeric 1 tablespoon honey 1 cup brown rice, rinsed 2 cups water 1/2 cup currants 1/4 cup mixed seeds (I buy mixed seeds from the health food store) 1 teaspoon black sesame seeds 1 teaspoon white sesame seeds 1 bunch coriander leaves, roughly chopped Lemon dressing 1/4 cup (60ml) lemon juice 1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar 2 teaspoons honey 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil Preheat oven to 200C. Place carrots, coriander stalks, olive oil, cumin, smoked paprika, honey, and 1/2 teaspoon turmeric in a bowl, season well with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper, and mix well. Spread out in a single layer on a baking tray lined with silicon paper and roast for 25-30 minutes, turning two or three times, until and tender. I wanted to serve the salad in the roasting tray so as not to lose any of the pan juices, so I used a white enamel tray that could go straight to the table. Set aside to cool. While the carrots are cooking place the rice, 1/2 teaspoon turmeric, and 2 cups water in a saucepan, cover with a tight-fitting lid, and bring to the boil. Reduce the heat and simmer, covered, 30 – 40 minutes, or until the water has been absorbed and the rice is tender. Check it now and then to make sure the rice does not stick to the bottom of the pan and burn. Leave for 10 minutes with the lid on before uncovering to cool to room temperature. To make the lemon dressing, put all the ingredients in a small glass jar and shake well. When the rice is at room temperature pour the dressing over and stir through. Add the currants, seeds and fresh coriander and mix well. Push the carrots to one side in the roasting pan, if you are serving from it and add the rice mixture. It will soak up any of the spiced juices in the pan. Alternatively place the carrots on a serving platter and drizzle over the juices, and pile the rice on the side.

Blueberry and apple crumble

When my sister-in-law died just over three years ago we inherited a blueberry bush, which, in my part of Australia, is not a common thing. It has the most beautiful blossoms and the fruit changes from a pale watery green with a pinkish blush to deep blue when the fruit is ripe. Each year there has been more fruit, and we are convinced this summer we'll harvest at least a punnet! It has made me appreciate the time, effort and cost involved in growing them, and not to be too churlish about the price we pay at the fruit shop. It is mostly a special occasion fruit at our place, but this week there was a glut, and I went to town making a gorgeous apple and blueberry crumble with fresh berries, rather than my usual frozen. This is a great basic recipe

that would work with any berries, and because I use pie apples, it can be prepared and baked and on the table in about 45 minutes – a winner when something sweet is craved for after dinner on a cool night. It's really good with cream or ice cream, but I also like it with a spoonful of Greek yoghurt as a lower fat alternative. Serves 4 – 6

85 g soft brown sugar 50 g shredded coconut 125 g butter, cut into small cubes 150 g self raising flour 440 g tin unsweetened pie apples 250 g fresh or frozen blueberries 1/2 teaspoon vanilla paste cream, or vanilla ice cream, to serve

Preheat oven to 180 C. Spread apples evenly across the base of In a 23 cm (9 inch) shallow pie dish. Tumble over the blueberries and drizzle over the vanilla. Combine the sugar, coconut, butter and flour in the bowl of a food processor and process until the mixture resembles coarse breadcrumbs. Alternatively, place the ingredients in a medium sized bowl and rub the butter into the dry ingredients with the tips of your fingers, until you get the same result. That's how our grandmothers did it in the days before electrical appliances, and some say this method gives a better textural result. But I'm time poor so the food processor it is for me. Spread the crumble over the apple and berries and even out with your fingers, being careful not to compress. Bake for 30 minutes in the oven. Serve hot or warm with cream or ice cream.

Springtime strawberry jam

I'm spending a few days in Ballandean, near Stanthorpe, at my friends' vineyard. They have gone to Italy for a joint 50th birthday celebration, and I'm teen-sitting. It's a pretty easy gig, so I have had lots of time to explore, cook, read, reflect, listen to music and drink some beautiful wine. There are numerous wineries in the area – some making spectacularly good wine – but there are also a number of small enterprises making excellent produce suited to the cool, dry climate of the region. I've visited a cheese maker, specialising in an apple wood smoked cheddar; an olive grove, where I tasted (and bought) a lemon myrtle infused, cold-pressed olive oil that was outstanding, as well as two or three varieties of olives; a jam and preserves enterprise that makes and exports their products Australia-wide; and a bee-keeper, who moves her hives according to the season, and produces subtle eucalyptus honey in the winter (which I also bought). And finally, strawberries, whose growers have had a bumper season, leading to a surplus, and thus, for me at least, the making of jam. I think strawberry jam is the easiest of all jams to make, and gives a result that is far superior to any store bought jam. It's full of soft fruit, slightly tart, and bright, bright red. On toast or scones it is superlative. There's

only a few tips to remember and you will get a great result every time. This is a soft jam, because there is not too much pectin in the fruit, but that's the way I like it – oozing slightly and even dribbling a little down my chin as I eat my breakfast toast. Makes about 2 1/2 cups

1 kg strawberries, hulled, and cut into halves, or quarters if they are large. 500 g sugar (I like to use jam setting sugar, because it has added pectin, making the jam setting more reliable) Juice of 1 large lemon

The day before you want to make the jam, prepare the strawberries. In a large ceramic or glass bowl layer the strawberries and sugar – a quarter of the strawberries, a quarter of the sugar, and so on. Cover with cling film and leave overnight in a cool place. In the morning, all the sugar will have dissolved and turned a bright red, from the strawberry juices (Tip 1: with no added water the flavour is much more intense). When you are ready to make the jam, heat the oven to 100 C and place in it 3 or 4 small, clean glass jars. (Tip 2: this will sterilise the jars, and ensure the jam will keep). In a large saucepan, add the strawberries and the lemon juice, and bring to the boil. Boil rapidly for about 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Meanwhile place a small saucer in the freezer. After 10 minutes, take the pot off the heat, take a teaspoonful of the jam, put it on the plate and place in the freezer for a minute or so. Take it out and run your finger through the jam. If it wrinkles a little bit, and doesn't just look like syrup, then the jam is done. Otherwise, return the pot to the heat for another 5 minutes and test again. (Tip 3: be careful not to let the jam stick to the bottom of the pan and burn.) When the jam is ready take off the heat and let cool for a few minutes. Take the jam jars out of the oven and place on a wooden board. Pour the jam into a large glass jug and carefully fill the jam jars to the top. Seal with their lids when cold, and store in the refrigerator.

Sunday morning avocado

A lazy Sunday morning is not a regular feature of my week, but today was all that could be hoped for in that regard. After a gym workout I joined my husband and daughter at a local cafe for breakfast before discovering a treasure trove of new season fruits and vegetables at the Greengrocer's Pantry next door. There was so much locally sourced produce it made my heart sing. I bought avocados and radishes, fresh Australian garlic and beetroots, and sweet strawberries, then came home to spend the rest of my morning cooking. We harvested rhubarb from the garden and a friend dropped by with a bag of cumquats to make marmalade.

Domestic bliss for me, despite the excessive washing up! I made this avocado with soft feta on grainy bread for a mid-morning snack. The avocado was creamy and soft; the feta sharp and

salty; and the bread chewy and delicious. For each person you'll need: 1/2 a ripe avocado 1 tablespoon soft feta or goat's cheese fresh chives salt and pepper 1 slice of grainy bread a squeeze of lemon juice Peel and de-seed the avocado. Slice thinly and squeeze over the lemon juice. Spread the cheese on the bread and top with the avocado. Sprinkle over the chives and season to taste with salt and pepper. Eat right away, relishing each mouthful.

Vanilla and lavender biscuits

"The air was fragrant with a thousand trodden aromatic herbs, with fields of lavender, and with the brightest roses blushing in tufts all over the meadows. . . ." William Cullen Bryant I gathered a bunch of lavender late one afternoon a couple of weeks ago for my friend Claire. This spring our lavender plants have flowered profusely and their sweet fragrance has been ever present in our garden. I gave them to her when we met without knowing they were her favourite flower. She held the bunch in her hands and deeply breathed in the perfume, her face radiating pleasure. Claire is a beautiful woman, with light-filled eyes, a ready smile and a heart full of compassion and love for her family, her patients (she's a palliative care nurse), her friends, and her God. She inspires me in so many ways, but particularly because she is truly present in every moment of her day, and joyfully exuberant in all she does. We laugh and cry together, share deeply from our hearts, and my life is richer because she is part of it. I created these vanilla and lavender biscuits today, taking time to enjoy and linger over every part of the experience; devising the recipe, mixing the dough, rolling and cutting out the heart shapes, baking them, icing and decorating them. They are sweetly fragrant, crisp and delicious, and perfect with tea in the afternoon. Whenever I make them I will think of my friend Claire; in fact, I think at our place they will be called Claire's biscuits. I hope that you have a friend like Claire in your life, and that you are a friend like her to someone else. Makes about 24

125 g cultured butter 1/2 cup
caster sugar 1 egg 1 teaspoon vanilla extract 2 cups plain flour zest of 1 lemon Icing: 1 cup icing
sugar 60 g cultured butter juice of 1/2 – 1 lemon dried and fresh lavender flowers, to decorate.
(I used lavender from our garden, as it is free of pesticides or other chemicals. If this is not the
case for you, just use dried lavender flowers bought from the supermarket, or deli) Preheat
oven to 160 C. Beat together the butter, sugar, vanilla and lemon zest until creamy. add the egg
and beat until well combined. Add the flour in 2 batches and mix well until you have a soft
dough. Flatten the dough into a disc, wrap in cling film and place in the refrigerator for 20
minutes to firm up. Roll out the dough between two sheets of baking paper until it is about 5

mm thick. Cut into heart shapes and place on a baking tray lined with silicon paper, with a little room between each biscuit. Gather up leftover dough and lightly re-roll it to use it all up. Bake for 15 – 20 minutes, or until lightly golden. Cool on a rack and when cold, ice and decorate. To make the icing combine the icing sugar, butter and enough lemon juice to make a smooth icing that is not too runny. Ice using a palette knife or piping bag and sprinkle over the lavender flowers to decorate. Will keep in an airtight container for 3 – 5 days.

Spring vegetables

“It is a very beautiful day. The woman looks around and thinks: ‘there cannot ever have been a spring more beautiful than this. I did not know until now that clouds could be like this. I did not know that the sky is the sea and that clouds are the souls of happy ships, sunk long ago. I did not know that the wind could be tender, like hands as they caress – what did I know – until now?” Unica Zürn

There are so many things I love about spring. The gradually lengthening days; gardening; cloudless skies, with warmth but not yet heat or humidity; flowers and strawberries and new honey and asparagus and the palpable sense of rejuvenation and re-invigoration all around. Today at the fruit shop I found the first asparagus of the season, along with some baby zucchini, snow peas and sugar snap peas, crisp and sweet and inviting. Cooked until just tender and tossed with a little butter and a sprinkle of sea salt, they were delicious and representative of all that is wonderful about spring vegetables. Any combination of new vegetables is beautiful cooked this way – the only thing to be aware of is not cooking them for too long – tender crisp is how they are best, and brings out their sweetness and delicate flavour. Serves 4, as an accompaniment

2 bunches asparagus, trimmed and cut in half
250 g baby zucchini, halved lengthwise
125 g sugar snap peas
125 g snow peas, trimmed
1/4 cup snow pea sprouts
20 g butter
sea salt

Bring a large pot of lightly salted water to the boil. Cook the asparagus, zucchini, sugar snap and snow peas for 3 – 4 minutes until just tender. Drain and immediately toss in the butter and season to taste with the sea salt. Scatter over the sprouts and serve. Delicious with fish, or chicken, or just with chewy bread smeared with goats cheese or ricotta and herbs.

Butter-braised fennel

There is something deeply satisfying in this super simple dish which enriches the anise

flavoured fennel with butter and earthy thyme. It takes a surprisingly long time to cook, but the wait is worth it as the fennel melts in the mouth and the natural sugars caramelize beautifully in the butter, adding gentle charred notes. It is wonderful with fish or chicken or pork; or topping bruschetta that has been rubbed with garlic and spread with ricotta. Before the warm weather comes we'll be feasting on this dish at our place at every opportunity. Serves 4 as an accompaniment

2 medium-sized fennel bulbs 50 g butter sea salt 1/2 lemon fresh thyme and fennel fronds

Preheat oven to 180 C. Place a 20 cm square ceramic or glass oven-proof dish in the oven with the butter until it is melted. Meanwhile, trim the stalks of the fennel bulb and cut the bulbs into 6 – 8 wedges, depending on the size of the bulbs. Take the dish out of the oven and place the fennel in a single layer, turning over to ensure each wedge is covered with a light coating of the melted butter. Season well with sea salt and bake for 1 – 1 1/2 hours, until the fennel is very soft, and golden brown, carefully turning over a couple of times during the cooking. Place the fennel carefully in a serving dish and scatter over some fresh thyme leaves and fennel fronds. Squeeze about 1 teaspoon of lemon juice into the buttery juices remaining in the dish and mix well. Drizzle over the fennel and serve.

Sourdough, and the benefits of patience

Patience is a conquering virtue. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* This is food at its most basic. Flour, water, salt, and time. The flour and water are mixed and then natural air-borne yeasts and good bacteria develop a culture, or starter, over several days. When combined with more flour and made into dough, this culture acts as a leaven and raises the dough, and when baked, gives it a distinctive 'sourness'. For most of human history, bread production has relied on the use of sourdough as leavening; the use of baker's yeast dates back less than 150 years. Sourdough is still a traditional way of making bread in many parts of the world, and has risen in popularity in the urbanised west in recent times. It takes about a week to make the starter, the essence of all sourdough, and from then on about 24 hours to make each loaf of bread. It's a slow process, and it requires lots of patience and gentle, respectful treatment of these simple ingredients as the wonderful natural yeasts and bacteria work to transform them into bread. Why bother? Because the taste and texture of the bread is chewy, rounded, and ripe; far removed from the bland uniformity of most commercially available sliced bread. It's beautiful made into a sandwich, or toasted, or as croutons, or in a panzanella salad. I love it lightly toasted, with avocado, soft feta and some fresh herbs and black pepper, or nestled

beneath two perfectly poached eggs for my Saturday breakfast. Most of the recipes for sourdough I looked at are either too thin on instructions, or absurdly complicated and scientific. I have looked at many and found this one to be the recipe for me. It follows the method set out in Jamie Oliver's Happy days with the Naked Chef with some slight adaptations and additional notes, which I hope will provide useful tips. I do hope you try this some time when you have a free weekend for baking (meaning you start on Monday morning making the starter). It will be worth it.

Day 1: In a medium sized bowl mix together 250g organic rye flour, 250g organic plain flour and enough water to make a mixture just a little thicker than pancake batter. Place outside in the fresh air for about an hour, then cover with cling film and set aside in a warm place.

Day 2: Do nothing. The mixture will start to bubble as the natural yeasts begin to ferment.

Day 3: Feed the starter by mixing in 250g rye flour and 250ml tepid water, adding a little extra water if necessary to return the starter to its original consistency. Cover again and set aside.

Day 4: Do nothing. The mixture should be bubbling and smelly and have a greyish tinge.

Day 5: In the late afternoon, take the starter, which should be bubbly and now smell pleasantly sour, and combine it with 500g plain flour or spelt flour, and enough water to make a soft and pliable dough. Knead the dough for about 5 minutes until it is smooth and elastic. Take 500 g of the dough and put into a clean bowl – this will become the starter for your next loaf. Add a teaspoon of salt to the remaining dough and continue to knead for another 3 – 4 minutes, adding a little extra flour if the dough starts to feel sticky. Shape into a round or a longish loaf shape, depending on what shape loaf you want to end up with. Line a medium sized glass bowl or a rectangular loaf tin with a tea towel and place the dough inside. Cover with cling film and put somewhere warm for 12 – 14 hours. Add some tepid water to the left-over dough to make the starter mixture look like it did before you added the flour to make the bread. This is really messy – I use my hands and squish it together until the mixture is able to be combined with a wooden spoon. Scrape down the side of the bowl, cover with cling film and place in a warm place. It will be ready to make into another loaf in 24 hours.

Day 6: In the morning, preheat oven to 190C. Gently turn the dough out onto a lightly floured baking tray and carefully take off the tea towel. Cut a few deep slashes into the top of the dough and bake for about 1 hour until brown, and the bread sounds hollow if tapped on the bottom. There's lots of scope for creativity with the slashes on the top – straight lines, curves, decorative patterns all work beautifully and shape the character of the final loaf. And so the rhythm begins. Make the bread dough and prepare the starter for the next loaf in the late afternoon of one day. Bake the bread first thing the next morning. And over and over, each loaf unique, chewy, full of

character and delicious. If you want to miss a day, put the starter mixture in the fridge and bring it to room temperature a few hours before you want to make another batch of dough. Experiment with different proportions and types of flour to give different flavours and textures to your loaves. Enjoy this simple, humble and glorious food that nourishes the body and the soul.

Sweet chilli and sesame dressing

I eat a lot of salad. A lot. It's part of a significant change in my diet to improve my health and lose weight. And I really love salad, so it's been an enjoyable refocus, and an opportunity to develop creativity with salad and dressing ingredients. This dressing is a riff on a Jamie Oliver dressing and it's full of flavour and spice, and some heat. A little bit goes a long way, so it's not a big deal that it's not super low in calories. I paired it with a salad of gem lettuce, radishes, carrots, tomatoes, purple cabbage, mixed seeds, and crunchy noodles, but it works well with all sorts of salads that have an Asian twist. 2 tablespoons sweet chilli sauce (I love Roza's Gourmet Sauces , sweet chilli and ginger sauce) 1 tablespoon soy sauce 1 tablespoon honey juice of 2 small limes 1/2 teaspoon white sesame seeds 1/2 teaspoon black sesame seeds Put all ingredients in a small glass jar with a lid and shake well until combined. Taste, and add a little salt, to taste. Keeps for a week or so in the fridge.

Gingerbread cake with blood orange caramel

"Oh my dear. When has cake ever been for hunger? It's for flavor, and, in this case, comfort." Meena van Praag This cake is very dark and rich, spicy and sweet, and with a slight undercurrent of bitterness from the use of treacle and rapadura sugar, a dark brown, unrefined sugar from Sri Lanka. The blood orange caramel which is served on the side also has bitter-sweet notes, making it a thoroughly adult version of a gingerbread cake. It's perfect for a fireside supper, and for the weather in my part of the world at the moment, which is decidedly chilly. It's also fabulous if left for a couple of days, cut into thick slices and grilled under a hot grill, before serving with mascarpone, sliced bananas and some chopped pecan nuts. I'd also suggest the musical accompaniment of Nina Simone singing "Feeling Good" when eating this cake. Enjoy! Serves 8 – 10 125 g soft butter 125 g rapadura sugar (if unavailable, use dark brown sugar) 1 teaspoon vanilla extract 2 eggs 250 g plain flour 1 teaspoon ground ginger

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon 240 g treacle 1/4 cup fresh ginger, peeled and cut into tiny pieces
2 tablespoons milk 1/2 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda Preheat oven to 180 C. Lightly grease a 22 cm bundt tin or square cake pan. In a medium sized bowl beat together the butter, rapadura sugar and vanilla until creamy. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well between each addition. Fold through the flour, ground ginger, cinnamon, treacle and fresh ginger until well combined. Finally, add the bicarbonate of soda to the milk and fold through the mixture. Turn into prepared pan and bake for 45 – 50 minutes, or until the cake springs back when lightly touched. Serve warm with blood orange caramel and thick cream. Blood orange caramel 220 g caster sugar 100 ml water 2 tablespoons blood orange juice 1 tablespoon lemon juice 1 vanilla bean, seeds scraped 1 teaspoon orange blossom water (optional) 3 blood oranges, peeled to remove skin and all pith, and sliced thickly To make the blood orange caramel place the sugar and water in a medium-sized saucepan, bring to the boil and boil for 8 – 10 minutes until it becomes a golden caramel. Add the juices, vanilla bean and seeds and orange blossom water, if using. Do this carefully as the caramel will spit. Stir until well combined. Place the sliced oranges in a flat dish and when the caramel has cooled slightly, pour over the oranges and cool to room temperature. Remove the vanilla bean before serving with the cake.

Sweet potato soup – winter joy

Simple food Pumpkin soup is ubiquitous as a winter time meal in my part of the world so I thought I'd mix it up a bit and try a sweet potato soup instead. Lots of spices and a bit of heat make this soup a little different and it would be a good introduction for the uninitiated to Indian style flavours, as it's not too hot. I serve it with plain yoghurt on the side and crispy bruschetta for dipping. It is quite a thick soup, but you can add a little more stock to get the texture you like. Snuggle up on the couch and enjoy on a winter's night – perfect for a Sunday night supper with a movie. Serves 4 – 6 1/4 cup oil 3 teaspoons cumin seeds 1 teaspoon ground turmeric 1 teaspoon ground coriander 1 teaspoon dried chilli flakes (use 1/2 a teaspoon if your chilli... [View original post](#) 214 more words

Chocolate chip pecan cookies and the pleasures of baking

"The measuring and mixing always smoothed out her thinking processes – nothing was as calming as creaming butter – and when the kitchen was warm from the oven overheating and

the smell of baking chocolate, she took final stock of where she'd been and where she was going. Everything was fine." Jennifer Crusie It is rainy and cold in my part of the world today and when I came home after my morning of errands I made these cookies for my husband and daughter, who are both studying hard and glued to their respective desks. Unhurried time is one of the things that makes baking pleasurable, rather than a chore that needs to be done so that lunch boxes will be able to be filled for the coming week. As I carefully chopped the chocolate and nuts, creamed the butter and brown sugar, and rolled the dough, I felt a deep peacefulness that came from this nurturing act, and from knowing that there was nothing else that needed to be done, no other demands on my time, only this task that I chose to accomplish. The cookies were made with love and tasted wonderful; rich and chocolate-filled, chewy, but with the subtle crunch of the nuts, and just the right amount of salt to counter the sweetness. I am sure you have your favourite chocolate chip cookie recipe, but if you feel the need for something a little different, why not try these. I'd love to hear what you think of them.

Makes about 30

180 g soft butter 120 g brown sugar 1 teaspoon vanilla extract 1/4 teaspoon salt 2 eggs 300 g self-raising flour 200 g dark chocolate roughly chopped 130 g pecan nut pieces

Preheat oven to 165 C. Line 2 shallow baking trays or cookie sheets with silicon baking paper. In a medium-sized bowl beat the butter, sugar, vanilla and salt together until creamy. You can use a mixer or do it by hand. For me there is something wonderful about doing this by hand, but it does require that the butter is nicely soft for the task to be truly satisfying. Beat in the eggs one at a time. Add half of the flour and combine well. Once well incorporated add the remaining flour, the chocolate and the pecans and mix together gently until all the flour is incorporated and the chocolate and pecans evenly distributed. Using a tablespoon, scoop out spoonfuls of mixture and roll them into a ball with your hands. Place on the trays, with some space for spreading between them. Bake for 15 – 20 minutes, until lightly golden and cooked. They should still have a little give, but this will ensure they are gooey and chewy and scrumptious when they have cooled a little. Serve them warm or cool completely and store in an airtight container. They will keep for 4 or 5 days.

Heritage tomatoes – no recipe required

Sometimes, the food we put on our table does not need to be cooked, or prepared in a special way, or even garnished. On its own it speaks to us; with beauty, astonishing flavour, and a certain joy that's inherent with the feeding of the soul as well as the body. That's how I felt

when I came across these heritage tomatoes in my local fruit shop at Indooroopilly . The tomatoes are grown in Fassifern, about an hour from where I live, by a couple, Matt and Sarah Muller , who started growing them commercially about a year ago. They are so beautiful and the names entrancing – Green Zebra, Tigerella, Ida Gold, Black Cherry and the Mortgage Lifter, to name a few. All I did was to carefully wash them, put them in a bowl, and allow the family to eat them at will. The inside flesh was as much a revelation as their outside colour; rosy pink, bright green, shining yellow, deep purple and rich, dark red. I can't think of any recipe that could have improved the experience we had when eating these tomatoes. If you live in south-east Queensland I encourage you to look for them. If not, perhaps your local Farmer's Market might have a heritage tomato grower you can support. I know you will love them as much as we did.

Cranberry and pecan sugar cookies

It's Mother's Day here tomorrow and these cookies would be a gorgeous gift. So easy an under-ten year old could do a beautiful job. If you are a mum I hope you have a lovely day tomorrow. margaretxx Simple food Sweet and tender and crumbly, these sugar cookies are based on what I think is a traditional American recipe – although there seems to be an almost endless variety of sugar cookie recipes available, both in recipe books and online. It is hard to say for certain the true provenance, although I did read that the recipe can be traced back to the mid 1700s in Nazareth Pennsylvania where German Protestant settlers created a cookie that came to be known as the Nazareth Sugar Cookie and which is the official cookie of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. But at their heart they all seem to be a rich, buttery biscuit, with either icing piped or sugar sprinkled on top. I wanted to try to develop a recipe based on this concept, because the other great thing about them is that the dough can be kept in the freezer and the cookies made... [View original post](#) 365 more words

Lamb with cumin and sweet chilli

Mary had a little lamb... and it was delicious!! unknown genius Today we departed from our usual Anzac Day tradition of making and eating Anzac biscuits in favour of these most delicious lamb cutlets with cumin and home made sweet chilli sauce. Having been up and about quite early for my youngest who was marching in the local Anzac Day service, we were ready for a

hearty lunch. The combination of great quality meat, and some of lamb's best buddies – cumin, chilli, hummus and loads of fresh herbs, makes this recipe a delight to prepare and eat. The secret is to have the pan or grill really hot and to cook the lamb for only a couple of minutes each side, brushing on the sweet chilli sauce in the last minute of cooking and then liberally sprinkling with fresh herbs. I used home made sweet chilli sauce, because we have been inundated with chillis in the vegetable garden, but good quality store-bought sauce will also give an excellent result. Serves 4

1.2 kg lamb cutlets 1 teaspoon ground cumin sea salt and freshly ground black pepper olive oil 2 tablespoons good quality sweet chilli sauce 4 tablespoons roughly chopped herbs – oregano, mint, chives and flat leaf parsley work well hummus, flat bread, and salad greens, to serve

Heat a large frying pan or grill until it is very hot. Meanwhile drizzle a little olive oil over the lamb and rub it in with your fingers. Sprinkle with the cumin and season well with salt and pepper. Cook in the hot pan or on the grill for 2 minutes per side, brushing with the sweet chilli sauce in the last minute of cooking. Place on a serving platter and sprinkle over the herbs. Serve with hummus, flat bread and a green salad for a delicious lunch or dinner.

Hummus – so good!

“God bless the chickpea” Dr. Michael Mitchell a.k.a George Clooney Once you have made hummus yourself you may never go back to buying it. It is so easy, and delicious, and really good for you also. It's a staple at our place, and we use it in lots of ways, especially as we love the food of the Mediterranean and North Africa. According to the Encyclopedia of Jewish Food, the earliest known recipes for a dish similar to hummus are recorded in cookbooks published in Cairo in the 13th century, so it is an ancient dish, with many regional differences, although the core ingredients are the same – chick peas, tahini, olive oil, lemon juice, garlic and salt. There are a host of recipes for hummus available, so I made a version that suits my palate best. I like it with not too much garlic, so my recipe only uses one clove. When I was researching I found some recipes that had 3 or 4 cloves! If you really love garlic then I would suggest you use 2 cloves – any more makes the garlic flavour a bit too overwhelming. You can also add more or less tahini for your taste, but I would always suggest using a good amount of lemon juice – it's a nice foil to the richer ingredients.

Makes about 2 cups

2 x 400 g tins of chickpeas (try and get organic) juice of 1 medium lemon 1 clove garlic 6 tablespoons olive oil 1 teaspoon salt 4 tablespoons water 1 tablespoon tahini

Place all ingredients in a food processor and blitz until

well combined. I like my hummus with a bit of texture, but some people like it really smooth. It's up to you. Keep in the fridge until you are ready to use. I like to serve it with a selection of fresh crisp vegetables and some flat bread, or Turkish bread. You can drizzle a little extra olive oil on top as you serve, or top with paprika, chopped coriander, toasted pine nuts, a swirl of harissa, or finely chopped chilli.

Cherry tomato tarts with mascarpone and herbs

It's difficult to think anything but pleasant thoughts while eating a homegrown tomato. Lewis Grizzard For my friends in the northern hemisphere winter is ended and spring is bringing with it the promise of picnics, long sunshine filled days and new season fruits and vegetables – asparagus, baby peas, tiny new potatoes and strawberries. I'm sitting here listening to rain on the roof, recovering from a particularly nasty virus, feeling the unaccustomed chill of autumn in the air and contemplating all the things I love about winter; snuggling under the blankets at night, soup for dinner, sipping steaming hot chocolate, and sitting in front of the fire drinking a glass of red wine and watching the flames. Cooking is so different in the winter; the seasonal ingredients respond to long, slow cooking and have a richness that warms from the inside. I love creating recipes with winter fruits, vegetables and spices, making casseroles, pies, and tasty puddings. But before I let go of light, summery food I wanted to make these delicious roasted cherry tomato tarts – a last taste of summer for me, and perhaps, a first taste of spring for my friends. They would be perfect for a springtime picnic, and they are still delicious in my world, to show off the last of the summer's tomatoes. I hope you enjoy with a salad of soft herbs and peppery rocket. Makes 8 tarts

2 sheets frozen shortcrust pastry
250 g mascarpone
750 g mixed cherry tomatoes
olive oil
sea salt and black pepper
1 teaspoon dried oregano
1 teaspoon raw caster sugar
4 tablespoons finely chopped fresh herbs

Preheat oven to 180 C. Cut 8 rounds of pastry, 10 cm in diameter from the 2 pastry sheets. Prick all over with a fork, place on a baking tray lined with non-stick baking paper and bake in the oven until lightly browned and crisp. Take out of the oven and cool to room temperature. Slice the tomatoes in half and place sliced side up on a baking tray lined with non-stick baking paper. Drizzle with about 1 tablespoon of olive oil, season well with salt and pepper, and sprinkle with the dried oregano and sugar. Cook in the oven at the same time as the pastry, but for 25 minutes, until the tomatoes are soft, and look a bit shrunken and wrinkled. Take out of the oven and cool slightly. When ready to serve spread about 1 tablespoon of the mascarpone on each pastry

round and top with the tomatoes. Scatter over the herbs and serve.

Egg sandwiches and being a little kid in the 1960s

For me, being a little kid in 1960s country Australia was idyllic, and I don't think it's because nostalgia has crowded out more sober or disturbing memories. It was just a safe, secure and happy childhood, untroubled by violence or poverty or strife, and full of love from parents who nurtured and cared for me – what we all hope and dream of for our children. I come from a family of five siblings, very close in age, so we had a ready made gang and a pretty free-range childhood. Things that today's parents would not dream of allowing their children to do were just a part of everyday life; we walked to and from school from the very first day, rambled unsupervised in the paddock behind our house, clambered over rusty tractors and among the hay bales in the shed of our friend's farm, and scared each other witless playing Spotlight and Bogeyman in the darkness of our sprawling acre of garden. Sunday drives, picnics at the seaside, family parties and church fellowship teas always included sandwiches, and mum's specialties were ham and pickles, roast beef and mustard, and curried egg. I have made egg sandwiches my own over the last few years, especially as I have catered for a number afternoon tea weddings, where finger sandwiches are always on the menu. I make them with rye bread or a dark multi grain loaf in contrast to the filling. Needless to say the 1960s version was always soft white bread. Enjoy these sandwiches next time you picnic with friends, or want something a little fancy for afternoon tea, Makes 12 finger sandwiches

6 eggs
15 cm piece of celery, very finely diced
1/4 cup pine nuts, lightly toasted
1/4 cup finely chopped chives
2 tablespoons mayonnaise
2 tablespoons sour cream or natural yoghurt
salt and freshly ground black pepper
8 slices bread, rye or wholegrain are best

Place the eggs in a medium sized saucepan and cover with cold water. Bring the water to the boil and cook for 5 minutes. Take off the heat and pour off the water. When cool enough to handle peel the eggs. In a glass bowl and using a fork, mash the eggs until the the mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Add the celery, nuts, chives, mayonnaise and sour cream and season to your taste with salt, and lots of freshly ground black pepper. Place the mixture in the fridge to chill for about 20 minutes. divide the mixture between 4 slices of bread, making sure that the filling goes right to the edge of the crusts. Top with the remaining slices of bread and press gently together. Using an electric knife carefully cut the crusts off the sandwiches and then slice each sandwich into three fingers. If not serving right away cover with cling wrap and refrigerate until ready to

serve.

Nutella cheesecake (this is SO not on my health plan)

Chocolate is a serious thing. Deanna Troi (Star Trek: The Next Generation) Those who know me well are aware that since December last year I have been on a medically supervised diet to improve my health and lose weight. Nothing, but nothing in this recipe is on the plan! But, dear readers, an intervention is not required. I was simply wanting to make a delicious dessert for my lovely family, and I can assure you that aside from licking the bowl I will not be eating any of this scrumptious, chocolately, gooey, nutty, creamy cheesecake tonight. But to all of you out there who are keen for some chocolate goodness – knock yourselves out. It is such a simple recipe, but I can't claim it as my own. It's a Nigella Lawson specialty, which I have adapted very slightly; however, I modestly take most of the credit for its creation whenever I make it. A small slice goes a long way, and it's great to have with a really good espresso to counter the sweetness. I will think of you all as I eat my serve of fresh fruit for dessert! Serves 8 – 10

250 grams chocolate digestive biscuits (I use McVitties) 75 g soft butter 1 x 400 g jar Nutella 500 g cream cheese seeds scraped from 1 vanilla bean 40 grams icing sugar 100 grams toasted hazelnuts, with skins removed, and chopped into small pieces Place the digestive biscuits into the bowl of a food processor, add the butter and process until it starts to clump, and look a little bit like damp sand. Spoon into a 22cm round springform tin and press into the base using your fingers or the back of a spoon. Place in the fridge while you make the filling. Beat the cream cheese, vanilla seeds and icing sugar in a medium sized bowl until smooth and then add the Nutella to the cream cheese mixture, and continue beating until combined. It is best to have the Nutella and the cream cheese at room temperature to get them to mix beautifully. Smooth the Nutella mixture over the base and scatter the chopped hazelnuts on top to cover. Chill for at least four hours or overnight. The cheesecake is best served straight from the fridge, rather than at room temperature.

Maple roasted pumpkin with farro

There is something very satisfying about autumnal food and this maple roasted pumpkin with farro has a richness and depth that is just right for cooler nights and warm days – the essence of my favourite season. Summer has had a very long tail this year, and I am very much enjoying

the cooler weather we have recently been experiencing. My vegetable patch is still producing late summer vegetables and herbs (there will be a Japanese eggplant recipe in the near future!), and salads are still firmly on the menu, but this dish is a foretaste of the pilafs, casseroles, tagines and soups I will be making in the coming months. There's a dissertation in the waiting regarding farro, freekeh and spelt, and how these ancient grains, which were commonly eaten in the past, lost popularity, and then, in the beginning of this century, rose again in the popular consciousness as healthy, delicious, and worthy of eating. Richard Cornish, from Good Food gives a condensed version of this story better than I ever could. He says: "Centuries ago, Western civilisation had a midlife crisis and dumped a whole lot of wholesome and dependable grains for a newer, more glamorous species from the same genus – namely, wheat. We mostly stopped growing grains such as einkorn (*Triticum monococcum*), spelt (*Triticum aestivum spelta*) and farro (*Triticum turgidum dicoccum*) in favour of modern wheat varieties such as durum (*Triticum durum*). Freekeh is made from modern wheat varieties that are harvested green then roasted. Einkorn is still grown in parts of Europe on poor soils. In France, it is called petit epeautre, or "little spelt", and in Italy, it is called farro piccolo or "little farro". It can be cooked in a chewy pilaf or tossed through a salad with beans and tomatoes. Farro, sometimes called emmer, can be cooked as one would steam brown rice and added to salads, but is delicious made into farrotto, similar to risotto, or simmered in chicken stock with sauteed carrots and celery to make soup. Spelt is high in protein and quite commonly ground into flour and used in baking. Depending on how the grains are processed, they may require soaking before cooking. I love the flavour and the texture of farro and really like cooking with it. I can usually buy farro from a good deli or some health food stores. If you can't buy it, you could easily use brown rice as an alternative. Also, if you have a coeliac in your home it's important to know that farro is not gluten free, so brown rice would be an excellent substitute in this case. Serves 4

1 kg pumpkin, de-seeded and cut into 8 wedges. I recommend Kent or jap pumpkin, but butternut pumpkin will also work. 2 red onions, cut into wedges 3 cloves garlic 3 tablespoons olive oil 1 tablespoon maple syrup 1 cup farro 3 cups vegetable or chicken stock 1 tablespoon lemon juice 1/3 cup shelled pistachios, roughly chopped 1/3 cup currants 3 tablespoons finely chopped parsley and/or chives 100 g baby spinach leaves salt and pepper Preheat oven to 180 C. Line a flat baking tray with silicon paper. Lay the pumpkin wedges, onion wedges and garlic cloves in a single layer on the baking tray. Drizzle over 1 tablespoon olive oil, and season well with salt and pepper. Bake for 30 minutes. Remove from the oven and drizzle over the maple syrup and return to the oven for 5 – 8 minutes, or until the

pumpkin is well cooked and is a bit crispy and caramelised from the maple syrup. Set aside to cool to room temperature. Meanwhile bring 3 cups of chicken or vegetable stock to the boil and add the farro to the pot. Cook until the liquid is absorbed and the farro soft, but with some bite still remaining, about 20 minutes. Tip the farro into a medium sized bowl and pour over the remaining olive oil and the lemon juice. Stir gently but well to combine. Add the pistachios, currants and herbs and mix well. To serve, place two wedges of pumpkin on 4 plates. Divide the onion and garlic among the plates. Toss the spinach with the farro and place to one side of the pumpkin. Sprinkle with sea salt and pepper, and a little extra virgin olive oil, if desired. Serve as a vegetarian meal, or as a heart accompaniment to grilled lamb or chicken.

Lemony roasted potatoes for your Easter lamb

When I was a teenager I spent most of my Easter holidays travelling with my parents and siblings all over regional Queensland to compete in the Queensland Eisteddfod. My parents sang in a large and very good amateur choir, and the competition was always fierce, but good spirited. They also had strong connections within two of the other major choirs, which were from their home town of Ipswich, so there was much socialising and laughter amid the competition. But as a result, our Easter fare was very much what could be managed in a motel kitchenette, and snatched between the competition sessions. When my parents retired, and dad's health prevented him from singing or travelling, I started making an Easter Sunday lunch as a new tradition, which lasted until my own family began camping over Easter with a group of friends from our church. I am thinking of reviving the Easter Sunday lunch this year and these potatoes will be contenders for the menu. They are crispy, and lemony, and with the zing of dried and fresh herbs and a dash of chilli. The lemon slices turn almost jammy and are fantastically sweet and sour. For those of you who are eagerly anticipating the coming of spring, and for those of you who are looking forward to cooler weather of autumn, these potatoes work well with meat or fish cooked to suit your season. For me, it will be seven hour lamb. Serves 4 – 6 1 kg smallish potatoes, skins on (I prefer Desiree for their blushing pink skins), and cut lengthwise in half and then in half again to create wedges 2 medium sized lemons 4 cloves garlic, unpeeled 1 teaspoon dried oregano 1 teaspoon dried mint 1/2 teaspoon dried chilli flakes 1/2 teaspoon salt 2 tablespoons olive oil 1/3 cup fresh oregano leaves Preheat oven to 185 C. Line a shallow baking tray with silicon paper. In a medium sized bowl combine the juice of 1 lemon, the unpeeled garlic, dried oregano and mint, chilli flakes, salt, olive oil and

potatoes and, using your hands, mix until the potatoes are all coated with the mixture. NB. If you have a cut on your finger, as I did, get someone else to do this to save you from some stinging action! Cut the remaining lemon into 5 mm slices. Place the potato mixture on the tray in a single layer and put the lemon slices in among the potatoes. Cook for about 1 hour in the oven, until the potatoes are crispy and cooked through and the lemon one step away from burning. You might like to turn the potatoes a couple of times during the cooking to enhance their crispiness. Season with a little more salt, if needed, and a good grind of black pepper. Serve hot from the oven or at room temperature.

Tomato sauce, and leaving home

The greatest gifts you can give your children are the roots of responsibility and the wings of independence. Denis Waitley Over the summer both of my boys have moved out of home and into the world of shared living. It's a very quiet house without them, and I miss them, but I am enjoying seeing them over coffee, or for Sunday lunch, and watching them embrace the freedoms and responsibilities of young adulthood. They are both well equipped to manage, able to do household chores (after much training in their formative years!), and both good cooks; but I still get the occasional phone call looking for suggestions for dinner ideas. This tomato sauce is a killer recipe to have in the repertoire, because it works well on its own, but also can be the base for many delicious variations by adding other ingredients. It's also inexpensive and can feed a hungry horde when tossed through some pasta and served with green salad and crunchy garlic bread. Makes about 2 cups

750 g ripe tomatoes
2 cloves garlic, crushed
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 teaspoon brown sugar
1/2 teaspoon salt
3 or 4 sprigs of fresh thyme
black pepper

With a sharp knife make two shallow cuts in one end of the tomatoes, making a cross. Put the tomatoes into a medium sized, heatproof bowl. Boil a jug of water and then pour over the tomatoes. Leave for 1 minute, and then take them out of the water, and peel away the skin, beginning from the cuts. It should slip off very easily. Chop the tomatoes roughly and add to a medium sized sauce pan with all the other ingredients, except the balsamic vinegar, and then add a good grind of black pepper. Bring to the boil over medium heat on the stove, and simmer for about 15 minutes, until thick and a bright red. Use a fork to fish out the thyme stalks and discard them. Add about 1 teaspoon of the balsamic vinegar and stir through. Serve with pasta, and shaved parmesan on top. This amount of sauce will accommodate 500 g pasta, in the Italian way, that is, a slick coating, not lots and lots of sauce. Here's a few variations that I

recommend: (other suggestions most welcome)

Beef curry with yoghurt and black pepper

This recipe is one I contributed to a cookbook created by my playgroup as a fundraiser and community builder when my children were small. The book was called "Life made easy" and it was full of simple, delicious recipes and household tips for busy families with young children. Those playgroup days bring back a wash of happy memories; a group of delightful and caring mothers and fathers and our kids, who met together in a church hall and did life together, when it was easy, and when it was really tough. The curry is mild but full of flavour, and is a good way to introduce spice to the uninitiated. You can make it ahead of time, it freezes very well, and it is economical too – a winner on all fronts. Serves 4 – 6 1 kg chuck steak, cut into 4 cm chunks 2 large onions, diced 2 tablespoons vegetable oil 6 cloves finely diced garlic 1 teaspoon powdered ginger 1/2 teaspoon dried chilli flakes (you can add a bit more if you like heat in your curries) 1 tablespoon sweet paprika 2 teaspoons salt 1 teaspoon coarsely ground black pepper 400 ml natural yogurt 1/2 cup fresh coriander, roughly chopped Preheat oven to 175 C. In a large, flameproof casserole dish with a lid, heat 1 tablespoon of oil over high heat on the stove top and brown the beef in small batches until well caramelised, then put aside in a deep dish. Add the remaining oil and cook the onions and garlic over medium heat until they are soft and starting to brown, about 8 minutes. Meanwhile whisk the yoghurt together with the spices until well combined. Add the beef to the casserole dish and then stir in the yoghurt mixture. Bring to a simmer and then remove from the heat. Cover the dish tightly with foil and then the lid. Bake in the oven for 1 1/2 hours. Carefully remove from the oven, take off the foil and stir well (it looks not so appealing at this stage). Put the lid back on and bake for another 30 – 45 minutes, or until the meat is very tender, and the sauce a dark reddish brown. Stir well before serving sprinkled with the fresh coriander, with rice, poppadoms and maybe a sambal of green chilli, cucumber and some more coriander.

Pumpkin and haloumi bruschetta

Some of my favourite things are combined in these tasty bruschetta; perfect for serving as a snack, or to pass around among friends with a chilled glass of wine. Sweet pumpkin, salty and squeaky haloumi, tangy lemon, crunchy almonds and fragrant oregano work wonderfully

together to top the toasted slices of bread. Use the best olive oil you can afford to drizzle over the top because it will release a fruity perfume as it touches the warm haloumi and pumpkin, making the bruschetta irresistible. Enough waxing lyrical; go make them! Makes 16

1 medium-sized french bread stick 600 g Kent pumpkin 250 g haloumi cheese, sliced into 16 pieces 1/4 cup oven roasted almonds, roughly chopped a handful fresh oregano or marjoram 1 lemon good olive oil sea salt and freshly ground black pepper Preheat oven to 200 C. Cut the pumpkin into thin wedges, leaving the skin on, but with the seeds and membrane removed. Drizzle with a little olive oil and season with sea salt. Roast for 30 minutes or until golden and cooked through. Meanwhile, cut the bread stick diagonally into 16 pieces and toast on a griddle pan on both sides until golden and crisp. When the pumpkin is cooked, carefully remove the skins and break up into chunks in a medium sized bowl. In a medium pan heat a tablespoon of olive oil and cook the haloumi on both sides until it is golden. It should take about 2 minutes per side. To assemble, place the pumpkin and haloumi on top of the bruschetta and season with black pepper. Top with the fresh oregano and the almonds and the zest of the lemon. Lastly drizzle over a little more olive oil (I use a beautiful lemon-infused olive oil for this) and serve straight away.

Grilled peaches with thick yogurt and lime syrup

"you are ever the only one i want to give all the peaches in my heart to the only one by whom i want them bruised." Sanobar Khan A ripe peach, headily perfumed and heavy with sweet juice, is one of the delights of summer. I have been thinking over the last few days of friends in the United States who are experiencing the worst blizzard in many, many years, and the contrast between their world at the moment; blanketed in white, freezing cold, and resolutely indoors, and mine, which is blue-skied, hot and humid, and celebrating the outdoor life. This dish exemplifies that world, and I hope it brings a little sunshine to those who are huddled indoors today. It works beautifully as a dessert, or a brunch dish, but depends on having great peaches and good quality yoghurt. There is very little done to the ingredients, because they are so spectacular – just a little magic woven to bring them all together. In Australia, now is the time when peaches are at their absolute best, so a perfect time to make this little bowl of sunshine and light. Serves 4

4 large, beautifully ripe peaches 500 g thick Greek yoghurt (not the sweetened variety. Tang is required here to balance the lime syrup) 1 tablespoon butter 3/4 cup water 2/3 cup caster sugar 1 medium-sized lime 1 vanilla bean, split in half lengthwise and

the seeds scraped out First make the lime syrup, In a small saucepan place the water, sugar, a few large pieces of lime zest (use a vegetable peeler to do this, but make sure there is no white pith on the zest – it is very bitter), and the vanilla bean and seeds. Bring to the boil and boil for 2 minutes. Take off the heat, and when it is at room temperature, remove the vanilla bean and add the juice of the lime. Set aside until ready to serve. You can do this a day ahead and store in the fridge until about an hour before needed. When ready to serve, carefully spoon the yoghurt into four lovely glasses. Halve the peaches and carefully remove the stones. In a medium sized, non-stick fry pan heat the butter until it begins to bubble. Place the peach halves, cut side down, in the pan and cook for about 3 –4 minutes on medium heat. Take off the heat and place on a dinner plate, cut side up, in a single layer, and pour over half the syrup. Carefully turn the peaches over and spoon the syrup that is in the plate over the peaches. Turn them over one more time and cut each peach half into three or 4 wedges. Top each glass with a few peach pieces and serve. Pass the remainder of the peaches around, along with the left-over syrup, so people can top up their glass with lime infused, peach wonderment.

Roasted cauliflower with pomegranate, almonds and mint

I have my colleague Rachael to thank for planting the seed that became this recipe. She has been extolling the deliciousness of roasted cauliflower and brussel sprouts for some time, and although brussel sprouts are a bridge to far, I was attracted to the idea of roast cauliflower, and thought it might get a look-in, although previously only eaten with the accompaniment of cheese sauce at our place. I thought that a pairing of roasted cauliflower and pomegranate would be delicious. Little did I know that this is a classic combination in the cuisine of Israel. After looking at a simple host of recipes for roasted cauliflower and pomegranate salad I came up with my version, which has the seemingly always included cauliflower, pomegranate, mint and tahini, but some variations that suit my taste. I hope you enjoy! Serves 6 as an accompaniment

1 head of cauliflower, broken into florets
60 ml olive oil
1 teaspoon each of dried mint, oregano and cumin seeds
sea salt and black pepper
3/4 cup flat leaf parsley, roughly torn
3/4 cup fresh mint, roughly torn
1/3 cup roasted almonds, roughly chopped
1 pomegranate
1/4 cup currants

Dressing: 2 tablespoons lemon juice
3 tablespoons greek yoghurt
1 tablespoon tahini

Preheat oven to 200 C. In a medium sized glass bowl gently toss the cauliflower with the olive oil and the spices, and season well with salt and pepper. Place in a single layer on a baking tray lined with silicon paper, and roast for about 40 minutes,

until the cauliflower is well cooked and a little charred in places. While the cauliflower is cooking make the dressing by whisking all the ingredients together until smooth, and season with a little salt, to taste. Cut the pomegranate in half and de-seed one of the halves. There are lots of methods to do this. I recommend turning the half upside down over a small bowl and squeezing it firmly to dislodge most of the seeds and juice, and then invert the skin and flick out the remaining seeds with your fingers. Messy but delicious. Cut the other half into wedges for serving with the salad. When cooked, take the cauliflower out of the oven and let cool for 5 minutes. Combine and gently toss together the cauliflower, parsley, mint, almonds, pomegranate seeds and currants. Serve straight away with the dressing and the pomegranate wedges passed separately. Great on its own or with grilled fish or lamb.

Cherry pie (she CAN bake a cherry pie, Billy boy)

Oh, where have you been, Billy Boy, Billy Boy? Oh, where have you been, c harming Billy? I have been to seek a wife, s he's the joy of my life, She's a young thing a nd cannot leave her mother. Can she make a cherry pie, Billy Boy, Billy Boy? Can she make a cherry pie, c harming Billy? She can make a cherry pie, q uick as a cat can wink an eye, She's a young thing a nd cannot leave her mother. Traditional folk song As soon as I had the idea to take advantage of the beautiful cherries that are available in my part of the world at the moment, the folk song 'Billy boy' has been going round and round in my head. I learned it as a child, singing in my school choir, and it came rushing back from the school-room to my present consciousness and took up residence! This free-form pie is a neat way to show off the luscious cherries, juicy and tart, with only a tiny sprinkle of sugar added. The pastry is short and crumbly, but easy to make, and needs no pie dish and acrobatics with the rolling pin to construct. I've been doing some research into pies, particularly the strong American tradition of making and serving pies, which dates from the earliest settlers who adapted their own pie recipes to the local ingredients available in the New World, whereupon they seem to have become a significant national food, with apple, pumpkin and cherry pies all favourites. When I was in New York last year I went to the most beautiful bakery called Two Little Red Hens and had the best apple pie I have ever eaten. This pie is a little homage to that experience, but I could not hope to make a pastry as delightfully flaky as I ate there. Enjoy this pie warm or at room temperature and with a drizzle of cream or a dollop of vanilla ice cream on top. Serves 8 700 g fresh cherries, halved and pitted 2 cups plain flour 125 g butter, chilled and cut into small cubes 1/4 cup caster sugar, plus a little extra 2 egg

yolks 1/3 cup almond meal cream or ice cream, to serve Preheat oven to 180 C. Combine the flour, butter, sugar and egg yolks in a food processor and process until the mixture looks like coarse breadcrumbs. Carefully add 1 – 2 tablespoons icy cold water and whizz until the pastry forms into a dough. Turn out onto a lightly floured surface and knead lightly. Wrap in cling film and rest in a cool place for about 20 minutes. Roll out the pastry into a circle and, using a dinner plate as a guide, cut out a neat circle about 30 cm in diameter. Place the pastry on a baking tray lined with silicon paper. Sprinkle the pastry with the almond meal, to within about 5 cm of the edge. Tumble on the cherries and then carefully turn over the pastry to cover about 5 cm of the filling. Sprinkle over a little sugar over the pastry and the filling and bake for 35 – 40 minutes. Serve warm or at room temperature. Will keep for a couple of days, but best eaten on the day it is made.

Summer greens with cous cous

“A well-made salad must have a certain uniformity; it should make perfect sense for those ingredients to share a bowl.” Yotam Ottolenghi This delicious salad sparkles with summer flavours and textures, and I do believe that it makes perfect sense for all of them to be there; in the bowl, on the plate, and in the mouth. Crisp salad leaves, fresh herbs, lemony dressing and summer green vegetables, sweet and fragrant. We have a vibrant and very productive herb garden so at our place the large quantity of herbs is easy to gather. They really make the dish, so don't scrimp on them. I like to pass soft feta cheese separately, so that people can add what suits their palate. Serves 6 – 8: 250 g Israeli cous cous 500 ml chicken or vegetable stock 3 small zucchinis, or 1 medium sized zucchini, chopped into small pieces 150 g sugar-snap peas, whole 1 bunch asparagus, cut into 5 cm lengths 3 cups mixed salad leaves (about 100g) 1 1/2 cups roughly chopped fresh herbs – chives, dill, mint, flat leaf parsley 2 tablespoons olive oil (I use a lemon infused olive oil) 2 tablespoons lemon juice sea salt and freshly ground black pepper 150 g soft feta cheese In a medium sized saucepan, bring the chicken or vegetable stock and 1/2 tablespoon olive oil to the boil over high heat. Sprinkle in the cous cous and turn the heat down to a simmer. Cook, uncovered for 10 – 12 minutes, or until the liquid is almost all absorbed. Take off the heat, cover, and sit for 3 or 4 minutes. Turn out onto a large plate and separate the grains gently with a fork. Leave to cool. In the same saucepan (saves washing up!) bring lightly salted water to the boil. Add the zucchini, peas and asparagus and cook for 2 minutes. Drain, and refresh by running under some cold water. When the cous cous is at room

temperature toss it in a large bowl with the chopped herbs, the remaining olive oil and the lemon juice. Season to taste with the sea salt and pepper. Gently fold in the cooked vegetables and the salad leaves. Serve straight away, with the feta passed separately. This is really beautiful with pan fried fresh snapper or salmon and a glass of pinot gris.

Tangelo cake

"I don't know why, but the meals we have on picnics always taste so much nicer than the ones we have indoors." – Five Go Off in a Caravan This is a perfect springtime cake. It is buttery and deliciously citrus-sy, but it's not a fragile edifice that can't travel in a picnic basket to a park, or a riverbank, or shady spot overlooking the beach. When I was thinking about creating the recipe I had in mind something like an old-fashioned maderia cake, but brighter in flavour, and not quite so heavy in texture, and I think I succeeded. I love tangelos and wanted to use them in this cake, but it would also be delicious to make it using oranges. The icing is not too overpowering, and you could even serve it plain – with a spoonful of Greek yoghurt yogurt and some fresh tangelo pieces, rather than as a traditional iced cake. We ate it with a cup of tea, while playing a game of Scrabble, on what was an unaccustomed lazy Saturday afternoon. I hope, if you make this cake, it will help to make the occasion special too. Serves 8-12

Cake: 250 g butter, softened 250 g sugar 1 teaspoon vanilla extract/paste zest of 2 tangelos (or oranges) 4 eggs 250 g self-raising flour, sifted 100 ml fresh tangelo juice (or orange juice)

Icing: 250 g icing sugar 1 tablespoon soft butter 50 ml tangelo, or orange juice (approximately) zest of 1 tangelo (or orange)

Preheat oven to 170 C. Grease and line the base of a 22 cm round cake tin. In a medium-sized bowl beat together the butter, sugar, vanilla and zest until creamy and light. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well with each addition. Add the flour and tangelo juice and mix until well combined. Carefully turn out of the bowl and into the cake tin, smoothing the top to make it level. Bake for 50 – 55 minutes, until a thin skewer inserted into the middle of the cake comes out clean. Turn out of the tin onto a cake rack and cool completely, before icing. The cake will keep for 3 – 4 days, if it lasts that long! To make the icing, combine the icing sugar and butter, and beat together, adding enough tangelo juice to achieve a spreadable texture. Spread the icing over the cool cake and sprinkle over the zest in the centre.

Fresh asparagus with hazelnuts (and a soapbox)

Yesterday I found in my fruit shop some fresh asparagus. I eagerly grabbed two plump bunches, and some hazelnuts, and when I got home steamed the asparagus, made a browned butter and hazelnut dressing and was transported to heaven. Tender crisp, sweet and nutty, they were perfect. You might wonder why I am rhapsodising about fresh asparagus when it is available all year round. But this was the first asparagus available for many months that was grown here, and as I consciously only buy Australian asparagus, and only eat it during its season, it has been a long wait. In Australia, asparagus grown here is first available from mid-September, and by the end of January the season is pretty much over. So if you eat asparagus during the remainder of the year, it is most likely from Thailand or Peru. Think about the cost to our planet from the fuel expended to get asparagus here from Peru. Think about what a pittance the Peruvian and Thai farmers must be paid to enable us to purchase asparagus at a reasonable price. Think about whether you really need to have asparagus all year round – or pomegranate, or stone fruit, or strawberries. When we eat fruit and vegetables out of season we lose so much. We lose the anticipation of waiting for new season vegetables, and the delight when they appear in the fruit shop display; we lose that sense of having something special because it is only available for a limited time; we lose on price, because imported vegetables are often more expensive; and we lose on flavour – no vegetable that has been harvested, stored and flown here from the other side of the planet can taste anywhere as good as the same vegetable in the right season, grown less than 100 kilometers away. Take delight in fruit and vegetables when they are in season, most beautiful, and economical. Educate yourself and find out the provenance of what you buy. And learn the pleasure of waiting. You will be amply rewarded.

Serves 2

2 bunches fresh asparagus
1/2 cup hazelnuts
2 tablespoons butter
1 teaspoon lemon juice
sea salt

Preheat oven to 180 C. Roast the hazelnuts on an oven tray in a single layer for 15 minutes. Tip them out onto a clean tea towel and fold the tea towel in half to cover the nuts. Roll your hands vigorously over the tea towel to dislodge the hazelnut skins. Rub any remaining skins off with your fingertips, then roughly chop the hazelnuts. Fill a large frying pan with about 2 cm of water, season with salt and bring to the boil. Place the asparagus in a single layer and cook for about 3 – 4 minutes, until bright green and tender. Meanwhile bring a small pan to a high heat, add in the butter, and cook until the butter foams and begins to brown a little. Toss in the hazelnuts and then the lemon juice. Remove the asparagus from the water and place on a serving dish. Pour over the hazelnut butter and serve immediately. Beautiful with fish or chicken, or even on its own with some good chewy bread to mop up the butter.

Carrot salad with coriander, chilli and sesame

According to Tennyson, in the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love; mine, however, turns towards thoughts of salad. I love them all – green salad, Greek salad, Caesar salad, Cobb salad; salads with roasted beetroot, salads with spinach and cous cous and quinoa; Asian salads, potato salads and Middle Eastern salads. I love the simplicity of tossing beautiful fresh ingredients together to make a delicious salad. It's quick and easy, and as the weather warms up, is the perfect accompaniment to whatever we are having for dinner. It also usually means less time in the kitchen and more time for relaxing in the cool of the evening. This salad takes the humble carrot and makes it a star, by adding chilli, coriander, lime and sesame, and a tangy citrus dressing. It was a spectacular spring day today, and every mouthful was a pleasure as we ate it for lunch, with the sun shining, a light breeze in the air, and us in short sleeves and bare feet for almost the first time this season. We counted our blessings, grateful to live in such a beautiful place. Serves 4

Salad: 500g carrots 1 long red chilli 3 kaffir lime leaves 2 tablespoons sesame seeds 1 bunch coriander (cilantro) Dressing: 1 orange 1 lemon 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil 1 tablespoon dijon mustard sea salt and black pepper Use a vegetable peeler to peel long, thin ribbons from the carrots, discarding the core. Slice the chilli in half, remove the seeds and the membrane and then slice into very fine strips. Finely slice the lime leaves. Pick the leaves from the coriander and discard the stems, or save to make a curry paste. Place the carrots, chilli, lime leaves and coriander into a large bowl. In a small non-stick pan toast the sesame seeds until very lightly golden. Set aside 1 tablespoon of the sesame seeds for the dressing, and add the remainder to the other ingredients. Remove the zest from the orange and add to the salad. Just before serving add half the dressing and toss well. Turn on to a serving plate or bowl, with the remaining dressing on the side. To make the dressing, juice the orange and lemon, add the other ingredients plus the remaining sesame seeds and whisk together until well combined. Season to taste with sea salt and black pepper.

Heirloom tomatoes with a simple dressing

Unless you have tasted really beautiful tomatoes you might think this salad would be dull, flavourless and not worthy to grace your table. So many tomatoes are like that – lacking in flavour, almost chalky in texture, watery and unappealing. And with this dish there is nowhere for the tomatoes to hide. There has, however, been a resurgence in recent times of what people call "old-fashioned" tomato varieties, and ripening tomatoes on the vine, so it is possible

to get tomatoes that taste as tomatoes should, with a little careful selection. I found these beauties in my local fruit shop and leaped at the opportunity to make this salad. I think they are the beefsteak, or perhaps ox-heart variety, but the fruit shop just called them heirloom tomatoes. It's really important to serve at room temperature, and as it only takes about 5 minutes to make that should be no problem. Whatever you serve this salad with will be a hit. If you are in the northern hemisphere and coming to the end of summer, I can imagine some grilled prawns (shrimp), crusty bread and crisp salad greens, eaten while sitting outdoors in the early evening. If, like me, you are living in the southern hemisphere, eagerly anticipating warmer weather, I am thinking of some grilled lamb chops, with hummus and pomegranate molasses drizzled over the top, plus cous cous with currants and almonds for an outdoor lunch on the deck. Enjoy, wherever you are. Serves 4 as a side dish

2 large heirloom tomatoes, plus
1 beautiful, vine ripened tomato
a handful of basil leaves
1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
sea salt
a dash of good quality red wine vinegar

Using a microplane, or the finest side of a box grater, grate the vine ripened tomato into a small bowl. Strain through a sieve and pour the pinkish juices into a small jar with a screw top lid, discarding the pulp and the seeds. You should have a couple of tablespoons. Add the olive oil, the red wine vinegar and a good pinch of salt, screw on the lid and shake vigorously to combine. Slice the tomatoes quite thickly and lay them on a serving plate. Just before serving pour over the dressing and scatter over the basil leaves. You can make ahead of time, but don't refrigerate the tomatoes, as they will lose lots of their aroma and flavour if served cold.

Kale and farro salad – superfood extravaganza

I have been very reluctant to jump on the kale bandwagon, which seems to have exploded in my part of the world in recent times. Evangelists of green shakes full of pureed kale and other greens are everywhere, but I have failed to be compelled by their vocal praises of kale. However, after trying it a number of times in other ways, I have decided this ancient green is really delicious and I want to try to cook with it more. I won't bore you with information about its nutritional qualities, except to say it is really good for you. I was interested to discover that it was one of the most common green vegetables in Europe up to the end of the Middle Ages, and some cousins of kale, like the Italian cavolo nero, have been known and cultivated since 600 BC. My friend Toss makes a kale and quinoa salad, so I have her to thank for the genesis of this recipe. I thought I would mix it up a bit and use farro, my current favourite grain. If you can't

get farro, brown rice is nearly as good. The salad is nutty and chewy and has a little sweetness from red grapes and crunch from the fresh kale and almonds, plus sharpness from the simple lemon dressing. I eat it on its own for lunch, as it is filling and oh, so tasty, but it also goes really well with all sorts of grilled meat and fish for dinner. Serves 8 – 12

1 bunch curly leafed kale
500g farro
2 cups red seedless grapes, cut into halves
1 cup roasted almonds, roughly chopped
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 tablespoon butter
sea salt and freshly cracked black pepper

Dressing: 2 tablespoons lemon juice
1 teaspoon sugar
1/2 teaspoon Dijon mustard
pinch salt
3 to 4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Bring 1 L of lightly salted water to the boil in a medium sized saucepan. Add the farro and boil for 20 – 25 minutes, stirring frequently, until the farro is cooked, but still retains some resistance. Add the olive oil and butter, stir through, and cover the saucepan for 5 minutes. All the liquid should be absorbed. Meanwhile, finely slice the kale, halve the grapes, and chop the almonds. Take the lid off the farro and let it cool a little. Make up the dressing by combining all the ingredients in a small jar with a tight lid, and then shaking vigorously. In a large bowl, combine the kale, farro, grapes, almonds and dressing and toss well. Turn onto a serving platter and serve straight away. If you want to make the salad a little ahead of time, it works well. Just toss through the dressing as you are serving the salad.

Little lime madeleines

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory – this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me it was me. ... Whence did it come? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it? ... And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane. The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it. And all from my cup of tea. Marcel Proust (1871-1922) 'Remembrance of Things Past' New to me until recently, this traditional French cake was responsible for the

evocation of powerful memories in Proust's 'Remembrance of Things Past', a novel well known for its length, beauty and expansive exploration of the theme of memory. Never having studied French literature, I have not read it, but the short excerpts I have looked at while writing this post have entranced me and I now feel compelled to at least attempt this massive work. A summer project, as it is over 2 000 pages! However, my attention for the last few weeks has been on learning how to make madeleines and developing my own recipe for them. I love the buttery and citrus flavours of this little cake that is crisp on the outside and sponge-like on the inside. You need a special tin, that is easily available, to make these cakes, for at least half their beauty comes from their dainty shell shape. There is nothing especially difficult about making them, but, like all baking, measuring carefully is important. It is citrus season here so I was able to pluck a lime from the tree and use its zest in these madeleines and the heady scent of them filled the kitchen. You could use lemon or orange zest as an alternative. They are best served warm, with tea and lemon. Makes 12-16

2 eggs 1 teaspoon vanilla bean extract pinch salt 1/3 cup caster sugar 1 tablespoon lime zest 1/2 cup plain flour 70 g butter Icing sugar, to dust

Preheat oven to 175 C. Lightly grease the madeleine tray with a little of the butter. Melt the remaining butter gently in a saucepan or microwave and leave to cool. This is the most important thing to get right with this recipe. Failure in the form of chewy, sunken, sad looking madeleines awaits if the butter is too hot when added into the mixture. Otherwise it's a breeze. In a large mixing bowl beat the eggs, vanilla, salt, and sugar with electric beaters on the highest speed for about 5 – 6 minutes, or until the mixture is thick and pale. Add the lime zest and flour and mix well. With the beaters running drizzle in the melted butter and beat until it is well combined and the mixture now glossy and flecked with lime zest. Spoon into the little shells until just filled and bake for 12 – 14 minutes, or until lightly golden and slightly raised. Remove from the tin and dust generously with icing sugar before serving warm.

Tomato, eggplant and ricotta salad

I made this super quick salad to use some of the fresh ricotta I have been making for the last couple of weeks. Along with a green salad, grilled chicken, and crusty bread it made a delicious dinner on a weekday evening. It was so pleasurable to spread the ricotta on the bread, add a slice of eggplant and a few tomatoes squashed onto the top, and enjoy the textures and flavours in my mouth. Roasting tomatoes whole for a short while releases their sweetness and makes them absolutely delightful to eat – squishy and juicy and warm. This salad will serve 4 –

6 as a side, or 2 hungry vegetarians for lunch. Serves 4-6 1 medium eggplant, sliced 700g mixed small tomatoes, as many varieties as you can find. a handful of Italian parsley a few sprigs of fresh thyme Olive oil 250 g fresh ricotta cheese Sea salt and freshly cracked black pepper Preheat oven to 180 C. Place the eggplant slices on a baking tray lined with silicon paper, brush with a little olive oil and season with sea salt and black pepper. Place the tomatoes on another baking tray and drizzle over about 1 tablespoon olive oil, season with salt and pepper and add the thyme sprigs. Bake the eggplant and tomatoes for 15 – 20 minutes, until the eggplant is soft and golden, and the tomatoes soft, but still whole. Some of the smaller tomatoes may have split skins, but that's fine – their escaped juice will be added to the salad. Place the eggplant slices on the bottom of a serving platter and then tumble over the tomatoes, drizzling them with any of the sweet juices and olive oil in the pan. Sprinkle with the roughly chopped parsley and place the ricotta on one side of the plate with a knife to hand for people to serve themselves.

Ricotta and raspberry tarts

I was going to call this recipe "Rustic ricotta and raspberry tarts" but that seemed a little too alliterative, even to provide an excuse for pastry that did not turn out quite as it should. However, it was very delicious and a perfect vehicle for my latest obsession – home made ricotta. It was a revelation to me that just the combination of milk, cream, a little salt and some lemon juice made this creamy, beautifully soft, fresh cheese. I am sure that it will be a regular thing at our place from now on, because it was just so delicious and almost effortless to make. If you want to make it yourself I would recommend Martha Stewart's recipe which is concise, easy, and clearly explained. Otherwise, just use a good quality store-bought ricotta for these tarts. Just as they are, or jazzed up with some dark chocolate ganache drizzled over the top, they make a wonderful sweet treat. Very Enid Blyton and the Famous Five! If raspberries are not in season, or are outrageously expensive, then strawberries or blueberries would be good substitutes. Makes 8 tarts 1 quantity of my sweet pastry or 2 sheets store-bought frozen shortcrust pastry 500g fresh ricotta 3 tablespoons heavy cream 2 tablespoons icing sugar 1 teaspoon vanilla paste, or vanilla extract 500g fresh or frozen raspberries, or a combination of fresh raspberries, blueberries and strawberries Preheat oven to 180 C. Lightly grease 8 individual tart tins. I used 8 cm diameter shallow tins with removable bases. If you don't have individual tins you could just use a 20 cm diameter spring form tin and make one large tart.

Carefully cut out the pastry to fit the tins, line the tins with the pastry rounds and carefully prick the insides with a fork. Place in the freezer for 10 minutes before baking. Blind bake using your preferred method for 10 minutes and then remove whatever you have used to weigh down the pastry and return to the oven for another 5 -6 minutes, or until lightly golden. Remove from the tins and cool on a wire rack. In a medium glass bowl beat together the ricotta, cream, icing sugar and vanilla until smooth. If making ahead, you might need to beat the mixture again just before serving as it will thicken a little in the fridge. When ready to serve, fill the pastry shells with the smooth ricotta and top with the raspberries. You can fill a couple of hours before serving, but any longer and the pastry might suffer and become limp and soggy. Dust with some extra icing sugar or a drizzle of chocolate ganache if you wish, or serve just on their own in all their bejeweled and creamy glory.

Spiced salmon with green goddess dressing

Perfect for a simple Sunday lunch, this salad is rich with salmon and creamy avocado, balanced with touches of caramel and spice, and the clean bite of radishes. The recipe is based on one that I saw in the October 2014 issue of Delicious magazine. It's one of my favourite food magazines, because the recipes are almost always easily achievable for the home cook and make much of seasonal ingredients that are available locally. Here in Brisbane we can almost always get beautiful avocados, which feature in the wonderfully named green goddess dressing that is at the heart of the dish. The most accepted theory regarding the origins of this dressing points to the Palace Hotel in San Francisco in 1923, when the hotel's executive chef wanted to create something to pay tribute to actor George Arliss and his hit play, *The Green Goddess*. I have eliminated the anchovies, which are fish non grata at our place, and added a little more salt to compensate. Serve this salad with some fresh bread and a bright Sauvignon blanc for a gorgeous lunch with good friends. Serves 4

2 avocados 125 ml buttermilk juice of 2 lemons 1 garlic clove 1 long green chilli, de-seeded sea salt and black pepper 2 tablespoons cumin seeds 2 tablespoons ground coriander 1 tablespoon ground paprika 1 tablespoon soft brown sugar 4 salmon fillets (about 150 g each) 60 ml olive oil 4 baby cos lettuce 2 radishes, very thinly sliced

In a food processor blend together the avocado, buttermilk, juice of 1 lemon, garlic and chilli, until smooth. Season to taste with salt and pepper. In a pestle and mortar pound together the cumin, coriander, paprika and brown sugar until well blended. Heat a grill until very hot. Place the salmon on a tray lined with foil. Brush the salmon

with a little of the olive oil and then rub the spice mixture all over. Place under the grill and cook for 5 minutes, until the top is a dark caramel colour and the fish just cooked through. Cover loosely with more foil and rest for 5 minutes. To serve, place a good spoonful of the goddess dressing on the base of 4 plates and smear artistically in the manner of a professional chef. Add the lettuce leaves. Break up the salmon into pieces and place on the plate before adding a few pieces of radish. Whisk together the remaining olive oil and the juice of the other lemon and drizzle over the salad.

Hazel Warren's Anzac Biscuits

Anzac Day (25th April) was a special occasion this year for many Australians and New Zealanders because it was the centenary of the landing at Gallipoli in Turkey during the First World War, a defining campaign, although ultimately unsuccessful. My working life has been closely tied to commemorative activities related to the First World War, and so the last few weeks have been especially busy. My youngest participated in the Anzac Day march and service in our local area, playing in the Kenmore High band that led the march, and these photos were ones that I took on the day. It was moving and emotional experience, and I loved meeting some veterans and their families and hearing their stories. I was particularly taken with a distinguished naval veteran who insisted that his wife be included in his photo because "she is more decorated than me". She was wearing a single medal, and although she did not say so, my thought is that she must have been part of the resistance movement during the Second World War. All she and her husband would say is that the President of France thought she did a very good job in the war. Our family traditionally makes Anzac biscuits on Anzac Day and uses my mother-in-law's recipe. People are generally devoted to either chewy or crunchy Anzac biscuits and my husband's family are passionate crunchy advocates. For them there is no other way. I don't mind a chewy Anzac biscuit, but also love the crunchy variety. What was interesting to me is that a tea towel I purchased to use as a table runner in the lead up to Anzac Day, with a recipe for Anzac biscuits printed on it from an historic cookbook, replicated Hazel's recipe exactly. So maybe the original Anzac biscuits were meant to be crunchy! Your thoughts welcome on the crunchy versus chewy Anzac biscuits debate. Don't save these just for Anzac Day, and if they are new to you, try them out. They keep very well, and are great with a cup of tea or a glass of icy cold milk. Makes about 24 biscuits

1 cup rolled oats 1 cup plain flour 3/4 cup desiccated coconut 3/4 cup sugar 1 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda 2 tablespoons boiling

water 125 g butter 2 tablespoons golden syrup Preheat oven to 160 C. Line 2 large baking trays with silicon paper. In a small saucepan melt the butter and golden syrup together. In a large bowl combine the oats, flour, coconut and sugar and mix well. Combine the boiling water and bicarbonate of soda in a small dish and immediately tip into the melted butter and golden syrup. It should foam up a little. Pour into the dry ingredients and mix well. Roll spoonfuls of the mixture into walnut sized balls and place well apart on the baking trays, as they will spread as they bake. Bake for about 20 minutes until they are golden brown. Take out of the oven and carefully transfer to a wire rack to cool. When they are completely cold store in an airtight container. Will keep for at least a week, if they last that long.

Baked Italian meatballs

A prosaic title for what is a super dish, quick and easy, full of flavour, and pretty much loved by all (at least in my family). It's so easy because the meatballs are simply prepared and then baked with a rich tomato sauce, with no need for cooking first. I like to make them on weeknights because they take only about 15 minutes to get into the oven, and then I can do other things while they are cooking. With pasta or garlic bread and a big salad, it makes a delicious dinner at the end of a busy day. Change the herbs to suit your taste and if you are really in a hurry, a good quality store-bought pasta sauce works very well instead of the home-made one. Never be concerned about taking short-cuts that don't compromise a healthy dinner, but save you time, so you can spend more time with your family, and keep your stress levels down, especially if you are a working parent.

margaretxx Meatballs: 500 g lean beef mince 1 slice of fresh bread, torn into small pieces 1 small onion, very finely diced 1 teaspoon dried oregano 1/2 teaspoon dried chilli flakes 1 tablespoon fresh basil, chopped 1 egg salt and pepper 150 g fresh mozzarella, sliced extra basil for garnish

Tomato sauce: 1 onion, finely diced 1 clove of garlic, crushed 1 small carrot, finely diced 1 tablespoon olive oil 1 teaspoon dried oregano 1 teaspoon brown sugar 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar 1 400g tin of chopped Italian tomatoes 2 tablespoons fresh basil, torn into shreds Sea salt and black pepper

In a medium sized sauce pan saute the onion, garlic and carrot in the olive oil until soft, about 5 – minutes. Add the oregano, brown sugar, vinegar and tomatoes and simmer for 5 minutes. Stir in the basil leaves. Season well with the salt and pepper, to taste. Set aside while you make the meatballs.

Preheat oven to 180 C. In a medium sized bowl combine all the meatball ingredients, except the mozzarella, and a good seasoning of salt and pepper. Mix together with your hands and then

form into 16 meatballs. Place into a ceramic baking dish that will hold them in a single layer, but not tightly packed. There needs to be room for the sauce to ooze around them. Pour over the sauce and cover with foil before baking in the oven for 45 minutes. Take off the foil and top with the cheese. Return to the oven until the cheese is oozy, but not browning. Serve with spaghetti, or with chewy garlic bread and a green salad. If you have teen-aged boys as I do, they also make an amazing filling for a meatball sub (with extra cheese, of course).

Welsh cakes, and why my name is not Myfanwy

picau ar y maen My mother's heritage was Welsh and she and my father were both talented amateur singers who were brought up in Ipswich, in Queensland, a town with a proud heritage of coal mining, Welsh immigration and eisteddfodau. As a child she went to a Welsh speaking church and one of my favourite memories is attending the centenary celebrations of that little church as a teenager and having numerous white-haired elderly ladies calling her "little Greta Griffiths" in their sing-song accents. When I was born my parents considered naming me Myfanwy, but chose the very English Margaret instead, citing spelling difficulties as the reason. All my adult life I have nursed a secret desire for a more interesting name and wished they had called me Myfanwy instead, despite my sister Bronwyn's assertion that no one can spell and many have difficulty pronouncing her very Welsh name. I comfort her by bringing up the Welsh names she could have been called – including one of my mother's friends, who was named Blodwyn. I love to hear Welsh spoken as it is ancient and beautiful and melodic and mysterious; and as Jan Morris states, in her book *Wales: The First Place* "The language itself, whether you speak it or not, whether you love it or hate it, is like some bewitchment or seduction from the past, drifting across the country down the centuries, subtly affecting the nations sensibilities even when its meaning is forgotten." We never ate Welsh cakes when I was growing up, but one of my closest friends from university is also Welsh, and Geraldine introduced me to this unique afternoon tea time treat, traditional, and for me, a wonderful link to my family heritage, along with competing in the Queensland eisteddfod and listening to Bryn Terfel with my father – even if my name is not Myfanwy. Serve Welsh cakes dusted with caster sugar, or spread with a little butter. Hot, warm or cold they are very delicious, especially with a cup of tea. Makes about 24

225 g plain flour 70 g caster sugar, with a little more for dusting (optional) 1/2 teaspoon mixed spice 1/2 teaspoon baking powder 100 g chilled butter, cut into cubes 50 g currants 1 egg a little milk, if needed In a food processor whiz together the flour, sugar, butter, spice and

baking powder until the mixture resembles coarse breadcrumbs. You can also do this by hand, rubbing the butter into the dry ingredients as you would when making scones. Tip out into a medium sized bowl and add the egg and currants. Knead lightly until the dough comes together and is similar in texture to a pastry dough. add a tiny splash of milk if it is too dry. Dust a work surface with a little flour and roll out the dough until it is about 15 mm thick. Use a round plain or fluted cutter to cut out the cakes. Cook on a griddle or thick based frying pan over medium heat, until golden brown, turning once. Don't have the heat too high or else you will have gooey insides to your Welsh cakes. A bit like a scone, and a bit like a biscuit, Welsh cakes have a very distinctive, slightly crumbly and not very moist texture and they are best eaten within a couple of days.

Plum tart

This luscious tart marries gently roasted vanilla plums with a crisp puff pastry and a rich creamy filling. With the last of the season's plums now available it seemed opportune to make this tart for an autumnal dessert. Find the recipe for the plums [here](#) , but you could also roast peaches or apricots the same way and make your tart using them. It's appeal rests on simple but excellent ingredients and the combination of contrasting and complementary textures – creamy, crisp and sticky. Serves 4- 6 8 – 12

sticky roasted plums 1 sheet of frozen puff pastry
125 g cream cheese 1/3 cup thickened cream 2 tablespoons icing sugar 1/2 teaspoon vanilla

Preheat oven to 190 C. Cut the puff pastry sheet lengthwise into 2 pieces and prick them all over with a fork. Bake in the oven until crisp and golden. Allow to cool on a rack. Meanwhile beat together the cream cheese, cream, vanilla and icing sugar until well combined and smooth. When you are ready to serve the tart, place the pastry on serving plates, spread generously with the cream cheese mixture and top with the plums, drizzling the thick sticky sauce over the top. It is best to eat it right away while the pastry is at its crispest.

Lemon pound cake (and the delights of New York City)

Last month I went on a grand adventure with two friends to New York. We attended the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and then spent a week exploring the city. It was an amazing experience in all respects and I grew very quickly to love New York – the city scape (look up! became my motto), the people I met, the outstanding galleries and museums, the

shopping, the distinct and colourful neighbourhoods, and the unspoken but compelling imperative to take each day and wring as much out of it as humanly possible. The food was also fabulous. We found great little restaurants wherever we went and the street food – pretzels, bagels and spicy lebanese lamb wraps, was delicious. While we couldn't find a coffee that measured up to our exacting Australian standards, I did have some wonderful tea experiences in tea houses that seemed to be newly springing up all over the place. And this brings me to pound cake. Several times I tried delicious lemon pound cake in cafes and coffee shops. Unglazed, glazed or thickly iced it was ubiquitous and I loved it and came home determined to make it myself. In my research I found that the name pound cake comes from the fact that the original pound cake contained one pound each of butter, sugar, eggs, and flour. It dates back to the early 18th century, and was favored because its ingredients were easy to remember: one pound each of four things. In the 19th century raising agents were added which made it a less dense cake, and most of the recipes I looked at also included yoghurt or sour cream or buttermilk to give even more tang and lightness. My version has lots of lemon in both the cake and the icing and I was really pleased with how it turned out. The texture was as I remembered, and it was delicious with the sharp lemony glaze drizzled on top. I cooked it in a bundt tin, but it can also be made in 2 loaf tins. It keeps quite well, but also freezes well, so would work well for school or work as a post-lunch treat. Makes 1 bundt cake or 2 loaf cakes

250g butter, softened
1 3/4 cups caster sugar
finely grated zest and juice of 2 lemons
5 eggs
3/4 cup greek yoghurt
1/2 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons baking powder
3 cups plain flour

Glaze: 1 cup icing sugar
1 – 2 tablespoons lemon juice

Preheat oven to 160 C. Grease the cake tin with a little butter and dust with flour. In a medium bowl beat the butter, sugar and lemon zest together until light and fluffy. Beat in the eggs one at a time until well combined. In another small bowl combine the yoghurt and lemon juice (you should have just over 1/3 cup of juice). Stir in the flour, salt and baking powder alternately with the yoghurt and lemon juice. The batter will be quite thick and lemony. Spoon into the tin and smooth the top. Bake for 45 – 50 minutes, or until a thin skewer inserted into the cake comes away clean. Cool in the tin for 10 minutes and then turn out onto a cake rack until quite cool. Ice with the glaze and serve in slices with tea or coffee. To make the glaze mix together the icing sugar and lemon juice until smooth. If you want the icing to be thicker add a little less lemon juice. You can also make it very thin by adding a little more juice – whatever suits your taste and aesthetic sensibilities.

Rich flourless chocolate cake

Cake baking is best when it can be deeply enjoyed – no pressure of time; no interruptions; and no requirement that it turn out perfectly. Just relaxed time in the kitchen and the bringing together of beautiful ingredients to create something wonderful. This chocolate cake was the result of a holiday afternoon baking session. The house was filled with the rich aroma of dark chocolate and coffee, and it was a gorgeous way to spend time on a rainy day. It's a very simple cake to make, but really needs the best ingredients – dark chocolate with at least 60% cocoa solids and real dutch process cocoa, organic eggs, real vanilla extract, and a really good espresso. It is very rich so a small slice is plenty. Serve it for dessert with some thick cream, and a perfect flat white on the side. Serves 10 – 12

200g almond meal 250g dark chocolate 185g butter 1/3 cup dutch process cocoa 60 ml espresso 1 teaspoon vanilla extract pinch salt 6 eggs 1 1/4 cups caster sugar

Preheat the oven to 160 C. Line the base of a 22 cm diameter spring form tin with silicon paper, and lightly grease the sides with a little butter. In a medium sized glass bowl melt the chocolate, butter and cocoa over a saucepan of simmering water. Add the espresso, vanilla and a pinch of salt and stir until silky smooth. In another medium sized bowl whisk together the eggs and sugar until well combined. Stir in the almond meal and then the chocolate mixture. Pour carefully into the prepared tin and bake for 45 – 50 minutes. The edges should look a little crispy and the centre should be just set. After 10 minutes carefully remove the outside of the tin and leave to completely cool. The middle of the cake will be fudgy and squidgy and sumptuous – and a rich, dark brown. Serve in smallish slices with a little thick cream on the side.

Sweet potato wedges with thyme salt

My family fell in love with sweet potato wedges long before they became a cafe staple, principally because roast sweet potatoes were also a family favourite. I wanted something that was a little more healthy, and these oven baked wedges were perfect. They only use a little bit of olive oil, are seasoned with salt infused with fresh thyme, and dipped in tangy greek yoghurt for a smooth and creamy finish. Serves 4 – 5 as a snack or a side

1 kg small orange, fleshed sweet potatoes 2 tablespoons olive oil 1 tablespoon sea salt (Maldon is my favourite) 5 – 6 sprigs of fresh thyme 4 tablespoons greek yoghurt

Preheat oven to 195 C. Peel the sweet potato and cut lengthwise into quarters, or even sixths, if they are fatter. Toss in a medium sized bowl with the olive oil until well coated and then place in a single layer on a baking tray

that has been lined with silicon paper. Bake in the oven for 25 – 30 minutes, until the sweet potato wedges are cooked and crispy and slightly caramelised on the edges. Meanwhile, in a pestle and mortar, grind the salt with the thyme sprigs. The leaves will disintegrate and you can pick out the stems. You'll be left with a pale green finely ground powder that smells heavenly. When the sweet potato is done, turn onto a serving plate and sprinkle with some of the salt. Serve immediately with the yoghurt on the side. The left over salt will keep if kept in an airtight container.

Figs with honey, yoghurt and toasted almonds

Figs are one of the most beautiful fruits. Unctuously sweet and perfumed, they are also tender and very luxurious. Unless you have a fig tree they are an extravagance as they are so expensive, but for the short season when they are available, as an occasional treat there is nothing better. Give me figs over chocolate any time! They are one of the most ancient of fruits, and it is thought they might have been the very first agricultural crop, with fig tree fossils found in the Jordan Valley dating from thousands of years ago. They are certainly mentioned in Roman writings and in the Bible. The simpler the treatment of fresh figs, the better, and so, in this recipe, with just honey, yoghurt and lightly toasted almonds you can make a wonderful breakfast or brunch dish for the love of your life. Serves 2 3 fresh, just ripe figs 4 tablespoons greek yoghurt 1 tablespoon honey (a floral one is best) 1 tablespoon lightly toasted flaked almonds a few fresh rosemary or thyme flowers, if you have them, for garnish Slice the figs in half, lengthwise and place three halves on each of two beautiful plates. Drizzle over the honey and then a couple of tablespoons of the yoghurt. Sprinkle over the almonds and flowers, if you have them. Serve straight away.

Ricotta and tomato tart

The beauty of late summer, aside from a welcome relief from constant humidity and long, hot, sweaty nights, is the abundance of tomatoes that ripen almost before our eyes. There are a great variety of tomatoes available now – yellow pear tomatoes, vine ripened red tomatoes, green heritage varieties, cherry tomatoes and luscious roma tomatoes. I have used a number of varieties in this tart that brings together crisp pastry, creamy, herbed ricotta and gently roasted tomatoes. It's a delicious light lunch for four served with a green salad and some

chewy bread. I like to pile the top of the tart with fresh basil leaves as I serve it, warm rather than piping hot. I have so much basil this time of the year, it doesn't even feel like a luxurious thing to do this.

1 1/2 sheets of frozen butter puff pastry 250 g soft ricotta cheese 2 tablespoons fresh herbs, finely chopped (any combination of chives, parsley, oregano, basil and thyme that you have to hand) 40 g finely grated parmesan cheese sea salt and freshly ground black pepper 3 large, ripe red tomatoes, or 250 -300 g mixed tomatoes a handful of fresh basil, to serve

Preheat oven to 200 C. In a medium bowl mix together the ricotta, fresh herbs, and parmesan, and season well with salt and pepper. Place the full sheet of pastry on a sheet of silicon baking paper on a flat baking tray. Cut the half sheet of pastry into 4 strips and place around the edges of the full sheet of pastry, pressing down lightly to join them together. Use a sharp knife to make some decorative diagonal marks on the pastry edges. Carefully spread the ricotta filling onto the pastry, right up to the edges. Thickly slice the tomatoes, or if using a mixture of tomatoes slice small ones lengthwise and round tomatoes into slices and place all over the ricotta filling, quite close together. Bake in the oven for about 30 minutes, until the pastry is golden brown and the ricotta filling lightly browning around the edges. serve warm with a salad and fresh, crusty bread. Printable version: Ricotta and tomato tart

Cranberry and pecan sugar cookies

Sweet and tender and crumbly, these sugar cookies are based on what I think is a traditional American recipe – although there seems to be an almost endless variety of sugar cookie recipes available, both in recipe books and online. It is hard to say for certain the true provenance, although I did read that the recipe can be traced back to the mid 1700s in Nazareth Pennsylvania where German Protestant settlers created a cookie that came to be known as the Nazareth Sugar Cookie and which is the official cookie of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. But at their heart they all seem to be a rich, buttery biscuit, with either icing piped or sugar sprinkled on top. I wanted to try to develop a recipe based on this concept, because the other great thing about them is that the dough can be kept in the freezer and the cookies made to order when friends drop by for tea. So here is my take, using dried cranberries and pecan nuts (very American!) The basic biscuit mixture can be varied with a host of other flavours – ginger and chopped macadamia nuts; currants and orange zest; white chocolate buttons and pistachios; chopped dates and ginger; chopped glace apricots and lemon zest, are all delicious options. Makes 30 – 40 cookies

250 g butter, softened 2/3 cup soft icing mixture

(confectioner's sugar) 2 egg yolks 1 teaspoon vanilla extract pinch salt 2 cups plain flour 3/4 cup dried cranberries, cut in half 3/4 cup pecan nut pieces caster sugar, extra, for dusting In a medium sized mixing bowl beat the butter using an electric beater until soft and creamy. Add the sugar and continue beating until the mixture is well combined. Add the egg yolks, vanilla and salt, and mix well. Using a wooden spoon stir in the cranberries and pecans and then fold through the flour until a soft dough is formed. Wrap the dough in cling film and put in the refrigerator for about 30 minutes until it is quite firm. Divide the dough into two pieces and roll each one quickly into a fat sausage shape. You might need to dust your hands with a little extra flour to stop the mixture sticking to your hands or the bench top. Wrap tightly with more cling film and put back in the fridge for about an hour. At this point you can also put the dough into the freezer. It will keep well for three or four weeks, and you can whip up a batch whenever the mood strikes. When you are ready to make the cookies, preheat the oven to 165 C. Unwrap the dough, sprinkle with about 1 tablespoon caster sugar all over the outside, and, using a sharp knife cut into rounds and place about 1 cm apart on a baking sheet that you have lined with silicon paper. Cook for about 20 minutes, or until lightly golden. Cool on a wire rack and store in an airtight container. They will keep for 4 or 5 days. Printable version Cranberry and pecan sugar cookies

Flatbread with smoked olives, brie and prosciutto

Flatbreads have ancient origins, with the simplest and earliest forms just a mixture of some sort of flour, water, and sometimes salt, kneaded together, patted flat and fried over a fire. I love flatbreads, and have a weakness for chapatis, toasted pita bread, and tortillas. I've tried lots of recipes and this one is my absolute favourite – inspired a little from a Jamie Oliver recipe, and a little from the back of an Atta flour packet. It uses a couple of raising agents, so it isn't a true flatbread, but the end result is very light in texture and the bread soft and almost fluffy. There is also a delicate sourness that comes from the yoghurt, and that's what I like most about it. Paired with delicious smoked olives, soft and creamy brie and some salty prosciutto, it makes a perfect starter or pre-dinner snack. The flatbread can also be used to mop up a curry, smear with hummus or tzatziki, roll around a spicy meatball with tabbouleh, or serve as a base for a one person sort-of-pizza. They freeze well, too, so can be kept on standby for after-school teenager's snacks. Makes 12

500g self-raising flour, plus a little extra 3 teaspoons sea salt 1 tablespoon baking powder 500g greek yoghurt 1 tablespoon butter,

melted Smoked Sicilian olives, brie and thinly sliced prosciutto, to serve In a medium sized mixing bowl combine the flour, salt, baking powder and yoghurt and bring together to form a soft dough. Turn out onto a board or bench top which is lightly dusted with the extra flour and knead lightly. Form into a ball and then cut into 12 equal pieces. Form each piece into a ball and then roll out flat with a rolling pin to form a rough circle, about 10cm in diameter. Heat a heavy based griddle pan until quite hot. Don't add any oil to the pan. The flatbread will not stick as long as you don't try to turn it too early. Cook the flatbreads on the griddle, turning once after a minute or so, or when there are nicely browned marks from the ridges of the pan all across the surface of the bread. As you take each flatbread out of the pan, brush one side with a little of the melted butter. Keep warm while you cook all the flatbreads and then serve. Printable version Flatbread with smoked olives, brie and prosciutto

Gnudi with pumpkin, burnt butter and sage

One of my cooking resolutions for this coming summer is to learn how to make pasta. It's been on my to-do list for a couple of years and now is the time. Over summer our busy life slows down a little and I usually have a holiday break. Relaxation, and relaxed cooking and eating is more the norm and there's more time to potter in the kitchen, experimenting and trying out new recipes. Market research is underway for a good, but not too expensive pasta maker to make the resolution a reality. In the meantime, however, I am experimenting with gnocchi and gnudi, and having a ball. Gnudi, until recently, was unknown to me. After seeing a recipe in a magazine I did a little research and discovered gnudi is Italian for 'nude' and describes a very soft pillow of ricotta, a little flour and some subtle flavourings that would normally be wrapped in pasta to form ravioli or tortellini, hence the 'nude-ness'. Very quick and easy to make, and joyfully nostalgic of puddling with play-doh when my children were small, gnudi are also just delicious. The gnudi recipe is just slightly adapted from the one in *delicious* (September 2014 issue) and the pumpkin and burnt butter a classic combination, but a gorgeously nutty and sweetly appropriate accompaniment. Serves 4

Gnudi: 400g fresh ricotta cheese 100g plain flour 1 egg, lightly beaten 40g finely grated parmesan cheese finely grated zest of 1/2 lemon 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground nutmeg pinch white pepper

Pumpkin and burnt butter sauce: 600g pumpkin cut into 1 cm cubes olive oil 2 tablespoons pine nuts a handful of fresh sage leaves 100g butter 1 teaspoon lemon juice sea salt and black pepper

In a medium sized bowl combine all the ingredients for the gnudi until mixed together. Turn out onto a lightly floured board or

bench top and knead very lightly for a minute until a soft dough is formed. Do not over-knead or else the gnudi will become very tough and rubbery. Divide the dough into 4 portions and roll each portion out into a sausage shape, about 1 cm in diameter. Using a sharp knife cut each sausage into 2 cm pieces. Press down the top of each gnudi with a fork to leave little indentations in the top. Place the gnudi in a single layer on a lightly floured tray in the freezer for about 15 minutes to let them firm up a little. (While they are resting, get the pumpkin and burnt butter sauce cooking – see below) When the pumpkin is ready cook the gnudi. Bring a large pan of slightly salted water to the boil and then drop the gnudi into the boiling water in 2 or three batches. They will be cooked when they rise to the top and float on the surface of the water and will only take a couple of minutes. Gently remove with a slotted spoon and keep warm until they are all cooked. To serve, divide the pumpkin into 4 serving bowls, gently add the gnudi and then sprinkle over the pine nuts and sage. Last of all drizzle over the burnt butter sauce. Goes very well with a glass of verdhelo or pinot gris. To make the pumpkin and burnt butter sauce, place the pumpkin in a shallow roasting tray with a little olive oil, season well with salt and pepper, and roast at 180C for about 20 minutes, or until soft and a little caramelised around the edges. In a medium frying pan heat 1 tablespoon of oil until hot and quickly fry the sage leaves until bright green and crisp. Drain on paper towel and set aside. Then add the pine nuts to the oil and cook until light brown. Do not take your eyes off them. A non-watched pine nut will always, but always, burn! Drain the nuts on another piece of paper towel and set aside. Wipe out the pan and then add the butter, over medium heat, until it starts to go a lovely nutty brown. Add the lemon juice and it's done. Printable version [Gnudi with pumpkin, burnt butter and sage](#)

Chocolate self-saucing pudding (best ever)

Chocolate self-saucing pudding is the ultimate winter comfort food – fudgy and rich and warming. There are lots of recipes available for this pudding, as it is an Australian staple. My recipe however, has a little more cocoa than the standard ones, because I love the chocolate to predominate. Try to get some dutch process cocoa; it's really superior in taste. The pudding is best served piping hot with cream or vanilla ice cream, and is a perfect finale to a family dinner. At our place I like to make it when we are having a roast dinner and put it into the oven just as we sit down to eat our lamb. Then it's ready just at the right time for dessert. Serves 6

1 cup self-raising flour
1/3 cup caster sugar
3 tablespoons cocoa
1/2 cup milk
45 g butter, melted,

plus a little extra 1 egg 1 teaspoon vanilla sea salt 1 cup brown sugar 3 tablespoons cocoa 1 cup boiling water Heat oven to 170 C. Grease the base and sides of a 6 cup capacity pudding dish, either rectangular or oval, with the extra butter. In a medium-sized bowl combine the flour, caster sugar and 3 tablespoons of cocoa. In a jug whisk together the milk, melted butter, egg and vanilla with a pinch of salt. Don't miss out the salt – it enhances the flavour of chocolate immeasurably. Pour the milk mixture into the dry ingredients in the medium-sized bowl and beat together with a wooden spoon until well combined. Spread the pudding mixture into the dish. In another small bowl mix together the brown sugar and remaining cocoa, and then sprinkle over the top of the pudding mixture. Pour over the boiling water, drizzling onto the back of a spoon, first, so as to cover the pudding evenly. Bake for 30 minutes, or until the pudding is cooked. The sauce will sink and the pudding rise to the top (a wondrous experience for children). Dust with icing sugar and serve hot, with cream or ice cream. Printable version: Chocolate self saucing pudding

Grilled portabello mushrooms with polenta

Earthy, richly satisfying, and deeply warming on a windy winter's day, these marinated and grilled portabello mushrooms with polenta are simply delicious. I love the almost meaty flavour of the portabello mushroom, and because they are robust in texture, they respond well to grilling. The marinade is greedily soaked up, and prevents the mushrooms becoming dry and wizened. I grilled the polenta, but the mushrooms would be equally gorgeous with a generous serving of soft polenta as the base. Serves 4 8 – 12 good sized portabello mushrooms, about 500 g 1/4 cup best quality red wine vinegar 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil 1 plump garlic clove, crushed 1 teaspoon fresh thyme leaves 2 tablespoons Italian parsley, finely chopped sea salt and black pepper 1 cup polenta 1 L chicken or vegetable stock 2 tablespoons butter 1 tablespoon olive oil handful of Italian parsley, extra, to serve 75 g shaved parmesan Wipe the mushrooms gently to remove any earth and then slice in half. In a glass bowl place the vinegar, olive oil, garlic, thyme, parsley, a good grind of black pepper and a pinch of sea salt. Mix together and then gently toss through the mushrooms until they are well coated. set aside for about an hour. Meanwhile, bring the stock to the boil in a medium saucepan. Sprinkle in the polenta, and then whisk continually as it thickens. When it is done it should be like very thick porridge, but with no lumps, and should take about 5 – 6 minutes. Whisk in the butter until fully melted and incorporated and then pour into a 25 cm x 30 cm shallow baking tray that you have

oiled with the extra olive oil. Set aside until cool and set, which should take about 1 hour. Heat a grill pan, or the bar-be-que grill and over a medium heat, grill the mushrooms until they are golden brown and well cooked, turning to make sure all sides are cooked. Take the mushrooms off the grill and keep warm. Turn out the polenta onto a sheet of silicon paper. This should not be a moment for breath holding, as it doesn't stick to the pan. Carefully slice into pieces about 5 cm x 3 cm and then grill for about 5 minutes each side. It shouldn't stick if you have the consistency correct. I did make it once where the polenta was a bit soft and, well, suffice it to say, the grill was a sea of collapsed and burning polenta, and the result not pretty, although delicious! Serve the polenta with the mushrooms on top, and the extra parsley and parmesan scattered over for garnish. Printable version: Grilled portabello mushrooms with polenta

Orecchiette with salsa verde

This recipe is a whisper of springtime green in the middle of a wintry June. We still have herbs a-plenty in the garden at our place, even some basil that is remaining sweet, though it should have gone to seed long ago. The herbs called to me to make something bright and fresh and satisfying. Salsa verde, the result, is full of basil, mint and parsley, and spiked with capers, pickled baby cucumbers, lemon and olive oil. It is marvelous when served with orecchiette, the perfect pasta for it. The little indentations in the pasta catch the salsa verde and provide bursts of deliciousness with every mouthful. With a few pieces of creamy soft bocconcini and some fresh baby herbs on top, you will be transported to early September and the beginning of spring. Serves 4

2 cups basil leaves
1 cup flat leaf parsley
1/2 cup mint leaves
1 clove garlic
1 tablespoon capers
2 tablespoons cornichons, or other small gherkins
zest and juice of 1/2 a lemon
150 ml extra virgin olive oil
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
500 g orecchiette
125 g bocconcini, torn into small pieces
a handful of tiny basil, parsley, and mint leaves, for garnish

In a food processor combine the parsley, mint, garlic, capers, cornichons, lemon zest and juice, and the olive oil and process until well combined, but still a bit chunky, rather than very smooth. Season to taste with the salt and pepper and set to one side. Bring a large saucepan of lightly salted water to the boil and then add the orecchiette and cook for 8 – 10 minutes, or until al dente. Drain the pasta well and then tumble onto 4 serving plates, or shallow pasta bowls. Drizzle over the salsa verde and top with the bocconcini and fresh herbs. Serve immediately with your favourite white wine. Printable version: Orecchiette with salsa verde

Lime and ginger cheesecake

Today, to finish our long weekend in style, I made this lime and ginger cheesecake – my take on the classic recipe made with cream cheese, condensed milk and lemon juice. What makes this recipe a bit different is the use of ginger biscuits and pecan nuts in the crumb crust, which adds a little bit of spicy heat in contrast to the sweet filling. It's such a simple recipe and a great one for kids to try when they first start cooking, because a good result is almost guaranteed, and no baking or using a stove is necessary. All three of my kids made it successfully when they were around 10. I was also really excited recently to find some gluten free ginger nut biscuits that tasted fantastic (there's still a lot of gluten free, wheat free, dairy free, taste free products out there, unfortunately) at my local supermarket. When there is a coeliac in the family, dessert making becomes quite challenging, and I am always on the lookout for ways to adapt dessert recipes to suit those who need to eat gluten free. When combined with pecan nuts and melted butter these biscuits make a really good crumb crust for pies and cheesecakes, and they are now a staple at our place. If you don't need to eat gluten free, just use regular ginger nut biscuits. Serves 10 – 12 150 g ginger nut biscuits 75 g pecan nuts 100 g butter, melted 250 g cream cheese, at room temperature 395 g tin of condensed milk grated zest and juice of 2 medium limes extra strips of lime zest for garnish In a food processor, process the biscuits, pecan nuts and butter until they form a coarse crumb. Press into the base of a 22 cm round spring form tin that has been lightly greased with a little extra butter. Put in the refrigerator to set while you make the filling. In a medium sized bowl beat together the cream cheese, lime zest and condensed milk until very smooth. Gradually beat in the lime juice, a little at a time. Pour the filling into the tin and smooth the top with a spatula. There will be little flakes of lime zest visible all through the filling, promising bursts of tanginess in every mouthful. Return to the refrigerator and chill for at least an hour. Just before serving sprinkle the top of the cheesecake with some strips of lime zest. I went nuts because we have a lime tree that is bearing prolifically, but even a small pile of zest in the middle of the cheesecake looks very pretty. The cheesecake will keep for a couple of days, covered, in the fridge. Printable version: [Lime and ginger cheesecake](#)

Potato, leek and apple soup

In a couple of weeks two colleagues of mine are walking 100 kilometers non-stop in the Oxfam trailwalker challenge . They need to walk the 100 km within 48 hours as a team of four, and the

money they raise will help to overcome poverty and injustice around the world through Oxfam's programs and services. Their team is named "Keen Beans" and you can donate to their team here . I helped them out last week by cooking soup for a soup kitchen at work, which was lots of fun, except that I had a very busy week in the lead up and ended up cooking 120 serves of soup the night before! My valiant oldest son stayed up to help me chop up ingredients but it was a very late night (actually 2 am, if the truth be told). However, I loved every minute of it and soup has not palled at our place, even after that experience. This potato and leek soup, with a hint of apple and topped with spicy chorizo and pepitas was on the menu this weekend. The apple gives a faint undercurrent of sweetness and the crunchy toppings were a perfect foil to the smooth and creamy soup. Hearty and warming, it's just what a hiker needs at the end of a chilly walk in the bush. Serves 4

1 large leek, white part only, finely sliced
1 kg potatoes, peeled and chopped into small cubes
1 clove garlic, crushed
1 Pink lady apple, peeled, cored, and chopped into small cubes
2 tablespoons olive oil
1L chicken stock
2 bay leaves
1 sprig rosemary
300 ml light cream
sea salt
125 g chorizo, diced
4 tablespoons pepitas
1 teaspoon coriander powder
1/2 teaspoon cumin powder
1 teaspoon olive oil, extra

In a large saucepan, saute the leek, potato, garlic and apple in the olive oil until the leeks are softened, about 5 minutes. add the chicken stock. bay leaves and rosemary and bring to the boil. Turn down the heat and simmer for around 25 minutes, or until the potatoes are very soft. Heat oven to 180 C. While the soup is cooking toss the pepitas with the coriander, cumin and olive oil in a small bowl until they are well coated. Turn on to an oven tray lined with silicon paper and cooking the oven for around 10 minutes. The pepitas will become crispy and infused with the spicy oil. In a small non-stick pan, cook the chorizo until it is crispy . When the soup is done, remove the bay leaves and rosemary and process the soup using a stick blender or food processor, until it is really smooth. If you want to be a bit fancy you can pass the soup through a sieve to get a super smooth final result. Return the soup to the pot and add the cream. Bring almost to boiling point, check the seasoning and add salt to taste. Serve at once with the chorizo and pepitas sprinkled over the top. Printable version: Potato, leek and apple soup

Brie and rocket salad with pomegranate dressing

This recipe is based on a well-known creation of Donna Hay , who publishes a wonderful food magazine and is one of my favourite cooks and cook book authors. She makes beautiful food using everyday ingredients – fresh, simple and creative – and her photography is spectacular.

Her recipe uses dried cranberries in the dressing, but pomegranates are in season and the moment and their jewel-like colour and explosion of tart and sweet flavour seemed to me to be a perfect alternative to cranberries. It's crispy, and creamy and bright – and superb as a light lunch or starter before a richer main course. We eat this salad with a glass of riesling, the perfect accompaniment. Serves 4 2 cups baby rocket 120 g crisp flatbread 250 g brie, cut lengthwise, into thin slices 1/3 cup pomegranate seeds and juice (1/2 a medium sized pomegranate) 2 tablespoons olive oil 1 1/2 tablespoons good quality red wine vinegar sea salt and black pepper Place the pomegranate seeds and juice, the olive oil, and the red wine vinegar in a small glass jar. Cover and then shake until well mixed. Season to taste with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper. On four plates, layer the flat bread and brie and then place the rocket on top. Carefully spoon some of the dressing on top and drizzle a little more onto the plate. Serve immediately. Printable version: Brie and rocket salad with pomegranate dressing

Spiced lamb with cous cous and tzatziki

The perfect week night dinner, this lamb with cous cous and tzatziki is full of flavour, but only takes about 15 minutes to get onto the table. At our place Tuesday is a massive day, starting with band rehearsal at 7:30 am, school, afternoon music lessons, evening choir practice, a long day of lectures for the university students, and an always busy day at work for me. We heave a collective sigh of relief when we get to the end of it! I am loving cooking with lamb sirloin at the moment. It's quite expensive, but there is no waste at all, and because it is lean, it's a healthy, delicious and low fat choice of meat. 100 – 120 g per person is enough, unless you have growing, athletic teens in your household – we've all been conditioned to think that we need more meat than that for dinner, but we really don't. You could also serve a big, crispy green salad with this meal. A glass of pinot would be a perfect accompanying wine, along with some Stan Getz for music. Serves 4 400-500 g lamb sirloin (this is probably 2 pieces) 2 teaspoon ground cumin 2 tesapoon ground coriander 1 teaspoon sea salt 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper 1 teaspoon smoked paprika olive oil Tzatziki (use this recipe or good quality store bought) and herby cous cous , to serve Before you start the lamb, prepare the cous cous and tzatziki and set to one side. Mix the spices, salt and pepper together in a small bowl, until well combined. Lay the lamb sirloin onto a piece of silicon paper and sprinkle the spices on both sides, patting onto the meat with your fingers, and making sure the whole surface is coated. Heat 2 tablespoons olive oil in a pan until quite hot. Pan fry the lamb for 3 minutes per side, for

medium, or to your liking. Take off the heat and rest for 3 minutes. Slice the lamb into 1/2 cm strips and then serve on top of the cous cous, with tzatziki on the side.

Grilled pears with ricotta, pecans and runny honey

This simple, but beautiful recipe was inspired by the abundance of fresh pears in my part of the world now that autumn is fully upon us. The mornings and evenings are chilly and we are looking around for something warm to eat in the morning. This dish is a great alternative to porridge or eggs for breakfast. I used beurre bosc pears, with their intriguing mottled brown skin, and heavy juiciness; perfect for grilling until soft, but still able to hold their shape. What a wonderful way to start an weekend autumn morning. Serves 4

2 large beurre bosc pears
11/2 tablespoons butter, melted
1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
250g firm ricotta cheese
4 teaspoons runny honey
2 tablespoons pecan nuts
grated zest of 1 lemon

Preheat the grill of the oven to 200C. Slice the pears lengthwise into 6 slices each. Place on a tray and brush generously with the melted butter. Sprinkle over the cinnamon and grill until the pears are lightly golden and soft, about 5 or 6 minutes. Meanwhile, toast the pecan nuts in a dry pan for a couple of minutes and then chop into small pieces. Warm the honey until it is runny (I do this in the microwave for about 20 seconds). Divide the ricotta between 4 serving plates. Place 3 slices of pear on each plate, sprinkle over the pecan nuts and lemon zest, and then drizzle with honey. Serve straight away, on their own, or with slices of toasted brioche.

Lime drizzle cake – the cake to make when you really want cake

When life gives you lemons, make lemonade. When life gives you flour, butter, sugar and eggs, preheat the oven. One of the advantages of occasionally working at home is that at lunchtime you can decide that the time is right to make a cake, get up from your desk, and get started. I was thinking this yesterday after a busy morning at my desk and then I came across a post from a gorgeous blog called Bliss in images , titled “For goodness’ sake let’s eat some cake” . It expressed just what I was thinking – it’s cake o’clock – and I couldn’t help myself. Out came the ingredients and 45 minutes later there was cake. The best thing about this cake is that it can be eaten almost straight from the oven – there’s no icing, just a tangy, sour-sweet syrup that gets poured over the hot cake and soaks in, making the cake moist and citrusy and delicious. The next best thing about this cake is that it is prepared in a food processor and takes only a

few minutes to go from ingredients to mixture to oven. The only bad thing about this cake is that it disappears far too quickly every time. Make a 20 cm round cake and serves 8 – 10

100 g pecan nuts, finely chopped 150 g butter 1 cup sugar finely grated rind of 3 limes 1 1/2 cups self-raising flour 1 teaspoon vanilla extract, or paste 1 egg 1/2 cup milk 2 tablespoons verjuice

Lime syrup: 3 tablespoons sugar juice of 3 limes Preheat oven to 180 C. Grease a 20cm, deep, round cake tin and line the base with silicon paper. In a food processor, combine the butter, sugar, flour and lime rind. Process together until it resembles fine breadcrumbs. Add the vanilla, egg, milk and verjuice and process until a smooth batter is formed. Don't overdo the mixing or else a tough cake will be the result. Gently mix in the pecan nuts with a wooden spoon or spatula. Spoon the batter into the cake tin and bake for 35 – 40 minutes, or until lightly golden and the cake springs back when pressed gently with your fingertips. Meanwhile mix together the lime juice and sugar and stir gently until the sugar has dissolved. When the cake is cooked, take out of the oven and after 5 minutes, carefully turn out onto a serving plate. Drizzle over the lime syrup, a little bit at a time, so that it soaks into the cake. Serve warm or cold, with whipped cream or a dollop of greek yoghurt on the side.

BBQ corn with lime, chilli and coriander

This is a killer recipe, full of the big, bold flavours of chilli, lime and coriander combined with sweet, fresh corn. It's exactly the sort of food I wanted to try and highlight when I started this blog. It doesn't have any bells and whistles in either ingredients or technique, but tastes fantastic and is viscerally satisfying to eat. I used a griddle pan to cook the corn but you could easily add this to a BBQ lunch and cook it on the grill; the vegetarians in your life will call you blessed, and the meat eaters will fight to add some to their plate. Resist the temptation to add butter. With the other flavours it's not necessary and your arteries will thank you. Serves 4-6

4-6 cobs of corn, husked and de-silked 500 ml milk 1 heaped teaspoon dried chilli flakes 1 large lime, cut into 8 wedges 1 bunch fresh coriander, roughly chopped a little olive oil 1 long, red fresh chilli, finely sliced sea salt Place the corn in a large saucepan and pour over the milk. Add the dried chilli flakes. Cover and bring to the boil. Simmer for 5 minutes and then take off the heat. Meanwhile, heat a griddle pan, or the grill on your BBQ. Using tongs, remove the corn from the milk and gently pat dry using absorbent kitchen towel. Drizzle over a little olive oil and rub into the outside of each cob of corn. Cook on the griddle for about 5 minutes, turning frequently, until some of the corn is nicely charred. Sprinkle over the chilli and coriander and

serve at once, with some slices of lime for each person to squeeze generously over the corn before eating. It's great straight from the grill , or served warm.

Custard kisses

I have been working my way through my mother's recipe book, revisiting memories of her baking biscuits and cakes for our family, and looking for recipes to tweak, develop or share just as they are. I have four siblings and we are all close in age with only seven years between the youngest and oldest, so there was a lot of baking in my childhood. Mum made biscuits frequently (I was 19 before I ate a Tim-Tam), and cakes for our birthdays. We had a number of complex rules around who got what bits to taste when mum was baking. If it was your birthday you got the bowl. The beaters and the spoon were then given out on a first in, best dressed basis, and whoever missed out on cake batter would then get the icing bowl. For me, there was nothing better than sitting under the kitchen table licking the lemony, sweet leftover icing from the bowl. Along with square dance biscuits (recipe lost and mourned), custard kisses were a real favourite for all of us. They are similar to the more well known melting moment, but are flavoured with custard powder in the biscuit and the icing, rather than vanilla and passionfruit. I like to make them quite small because they are very rich and buttery. If you were having an afternoon tea party, they are perfect as a foil for finger sandwiches, lemon curd tartlets and scones. Break out the vintage china and a frock and you're all set. Makes 16 biscuits

250g butter 1/2 cup icing sugar 1 teaspoon vanilla extract 1 3/4 cups plain flour 1/2 cup custard powder

Icing: 1 cup icing sugar 1 tablespoon custard powder 1 tablespoon soft butter approx 1 tablespoon milk

Heat oven to 170 C. Line 2 cookie trays with silicon paper. For the biscuits, combine all the ingredients in a food processor and process until just combined to a dough. This is important because if you go too far the biscuits will be tough and coarse-textured. Roll teaspoonfuls of dough into small balls and place on the tray with about 1 cm between them. Gently press them down using the tines of a fork, leaving little indentations on the top of the biscuits. Bake for about 15 minutes, or until lightly golden. take out of the oven and cool completely on a cake rack. When cold, sandwich together with some of the icing. Store in an air-tight container. The custard kisses will keep for 4 – 5 days. To make the icing beat all the ingredients together in a small bowl, adding just enough milk to give a fairly stiff icing.

Pasta la vista, baby

Pasta is the meal of choice for all three of my kids if I ask them what they would like for dinner. I guess it's the same for many households across the country – and it's quick, easy to prepare, and, if not covered with a creamy sauce or loads of cheese, pretty healthy, too. This sort-of-sauce is a bit different from the usual bolognaise, tomato and basil, pesto or carbonara that we normally have. I wanted something with a real kick, and lots of texture and crunch, but which still allowed the pasta to be the star ingredient. It's made of bacon, garlic, parmesan, breadcrumbs, parsley and lots of dried chilli, pan fried until really crispy and tossed through the cooked pasta. It might seem very pared back for those who are used to lots of sauce with their pasta, but I love the way really good quality pasta tastes and it is so often lost when it is swimming in oceans of creamy sauce. So try this for something a bit different. Get the best quality pasta that you can afford and serve it with a peppery rocket salad like this one , and a glass of pinot gris for a satisfying dinner. And when people ask you what it is – use the accent.

Serves 4 400g spaghetti (best quality that you can afford) 100g bacon, finely diced 1 handful fresh parsley 1 chewy bread roll 30g parmesan cheese 2 1/2 tablespoons olive oil 1 teaspoon (or more if you like things really hot) dried chilli flakes 1 clove garlic, chopped 1/3 cup tomato passata Bring a large pot of water to the boil, season lightly with salt and cook the pasta until al dente. Meanwhile, in a food processor, process all the other ingredients, except for the olive oil, until they are finely chopped and well combined. Heat the olive oil in a non-stick pan and tumble in the breadcrumb mixture. Stir gently and cook until it is crispy and golden, about 5 – 6 minutes. When the pasta is cooked, drain well and then toss through the breadcrumb mixture, the tomato passata and the last bit of the olive oil. Serve straight away.

Smashed peas with fennel and mint

These beautiful little morsels are very easy to make, but look and taste as if they took a whole lot of effort and skill. Peas are gently simmered in a little stock that has been flavoured with onion, garlic and fennel, then mashed up and piled onto toasted bread rubbed with fresh garlic and spread with some soft feta cheese. Fresh mint and snow pea sprouts finish them off and make them look just a little bit fancy. Miss 12 is on the adventure of a lifetime this month, singing in concerts and competing in an international choral festival in Italy. There's just a little bit of family envy here at home, as the rest of us are in the middle of the much more prosaic round of work, study and exams. Making this recipe and catching up at the end of another busy day was not as glamorous as a gondola ride in Venice, but satisfying and delicious

nonetheless. Makes enough to serve 8 – 10 for a snack, or 6 for a first course

500g fresh or frozen peas 1 tablespoon olive oil 1 small onion, finely diced 1 baby fennel bulb, finely sliced and diced 1 clove garlic 3/4 cup vegetable stock 1 tablespoon butter salt and pepper 1 long bread stick, cut into 1 cm slices 150g soft feta cheese a handful of fresh mint, snow pea sprouts, and the fennel fronds, for garnish

In a small saucepan heat the olive oil and gently fry the onion, the fennel, and 1/2 the garlic clove, finely diced, for 3-5 minutes, or until the onion is softened, but not coloured. Add the vegetable stock and turn up the heat. When the stock is boiling pour in the peas and cook for 5 minutes. Take off the heat, add the butter and season well with the salt and pepper. Use a stick blender to make a chunky mash of the peas. Do this carefully or else you will end up with pea puree – delicious, but not what is called for in this recipe. Toast the slices of bread under a hot grill and then spread each piece with a little feta cheese. Pile on spoonfuls of the pea puree and top with some mint, a snow pea sprout and a few fronds of fennel. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Carrot cake – seventh time's a charm

This classic – the carrot cake – is simple to make, full of sweetness, spices and walnuts, and covered with a glorious cream cheese icing. I've been making it since I was about twenty (a very long time) so why it took me seven goes to get it cooked and photographed and onto this blog is beyond me! If you want to read this sad and sorry tale of food blogging then head to the bottom of this post. Otherwise, forge ahead, make this toothsome concoction for your family, friends or workmates, and enjoy their smiles of satisfaction. Makes a 20 cm round cake, and serves 8 – 12

3/4 cup dark brown sugar, firmly packed 1 lemon 1 1/2 cups self-raising flour (make it gluten free by substituting gluten free flour – it works well)) 1 teaspoon grated cinnamon 1/2 teaspoon grated nutmeg pinch salt 2 cups grated carrot 1 cup chopped walnuts 2 eggs 3/4 cup canola oil 1 medium sized banana, mashed 250 g cream cheese 3/4 cup icing sugar

Preheat oven to 180 C. Grease a 20 cm round cake tin and line the base with silicon paper. In a large mixing bowl combine the brown sugar, grated rind of the lemon, flour, cinnamon, nutmeg, salt, grated carrot and walnuts. In a small bowl whisk together the eggs, oil and mashed banana and then combine with the dry ingredients and mix well with a wooden spoon. Spoon into the cake tin and smooth the top. Bake for 35 – 40 minutes, or until the top springs back when lightly pressed and a skewer, gently inserted into the middle of the cake and removed, comes out clean. Turn out of the cake tin and cool on a wire rack. When completely

cold, ice with the cream cheese icing. Keeps for 3 days in an airtight container. To make the icing beat together the cream cheese, the juice of the lemon and the icing sugar, until thick and glossy. The cook, the cake, her blog and her disasters First attempt: Recipe testing – looks good, tastes good, family eats cake. Second attempt: Bake cake, ice cake, get ready to photograph cake, it rains, family eats cake. Third attempt: Bake cake, realise plain instead of self raising flour used, cake is actually pudding, family try to eat cake but can't, dog eats cake. Fourth attempt: Bake cakes in muffin tin in hope of good result, forget they were in the oven, burn cakes, throw cakes away. Fifth attempt: Bake cake, cake sticks to bottom of tin, cake collapses, cook despairs, family eats cake. Sixth attempt: Bake cake, ice cake, take photos, bad photos, cook rages, family eats cake. Seventh time's a charm: Bake cake, ice cake, take photos, photos OK, cook writes blog post, family eats cake, family vows not to eat carrot cake again.

Buttermilk chicken with crunchy fennel slaw

This recipe is my take on American southern fried chicken, where chicken pieces, usually on the bone, are marinated in buttermilk, coated with crumbs and deep fried. I've gone for a much lighter approach by pan frying in a little oil and butter, but used the buttermilk, along with whole-grain mustard, to marinate chicken breasts, and Japanese panko breadcrumbs as my coating. The result is almost unbelievably tender chicken, and the subtle aniseed-like fennel and sweet apple in the slaw are a food marriage made in heaven. I've come slowly towards fennel, as in my childhood, aniseed was a studiously avoided flavour. I was the child who peeled off the layers of licorice in licorice all-sorts and left them for my father to eat, while gobbling up the sweet candy layers. Ouzo is still a bridge too far, but a baby fennel bulb, sliced very thinly, is now a taste I adore. The dressing on the slaw is also very light and uses buttermilk and Greek yoghurt rather than mayonnaise, so no guilt is necessary. If you are making ahead, don't add the dressing until just before serving. The purple cabbage will share its colour with the dressing and turn it a pinky-purple. Pretty, but it's nice to see all the bright colours of the carrot and parsley as well as the deep purple cabbage. This makes a great meal for a Friday night dinner and movie. Serves 4 4 small chicken breasts, about 150 g each 1/2 cup buttermilk 1 teaspoon wholegrain mustard 100 g panko breadcrumbs (in the Asian foods aisle in most supermarkets) sea salt and black pepper 1/4 cup canola oil 1 tablespoon butter Place the chicken breasts in a glass dish with the buttermilk and mustard and stir to coat well. Cover and leave in the fridge for about 30 minutes to marinate. Put the breadcrumbs onto a plate and then lift the chicken

out of the marinade and coat well with the crumbs. It's good if you can do this a little ahead of time and put the chicken back into the fridge for about 20 minutes. Heat the oil and butter in a shallow, non-stick frying pan until sizzling. Cook the chicken over a medium heat for 6 – 8 minutes each side, or until the coating is crispy and golden and the chicken cooked through. The cooking time does depend a little on how thick the thickest part of the chicken is. Season with salt and pepper then slice the chicken horizontally into 4 or 5 pieces and serve with the slaw. Fennel slaw: 2 cups finely sliced purple cabbage 1 cup finely sliced baby fennel (this is about 1 bulb) 1 cup julienned carrot (about 2 medium carrots) a handful of flat-leaf parsley, roughly chopped 1 sweet, red apple, julienned and tossed with the juice of 1/2 lemon 1/3 cup buttermilk 2 tablespoons Greek yoghurt 1 teaspoon wholegrain mustard Combine the cabbage, fennel, carrot, parsley and apple in a medium-sized glass bowl. In another small bowl mix together the buttermilk, yoghurt and mustard. Just before serving, toss the dressing through the slaw.

Creamy rice pudding – childhood revisited

Rice pudding is one of those comforting, nostalgic desserts that remind us of our mothers and home, particularly if our family is connected somewhere in the past to the United Kingdom. It's perfectly suited to autumn, and the more hearty food of this season. I love it on its own, with just the subtle flavouring of vanilla, but it also shines with berries, or jewel-like pomegranate seeds, or sweetly poached apricots. It is not at all difficult to make, but it does require some time and devoted attention to make sure that it does not stick to the bottom of the pan, or burn. I like to make it on a Saturday or Sunday morning when I am not in a hurry and the rest of the household is still sleeping, and then serve it gently warmed for dessert that night. No matter how much I make it always disappears, if not for dessert, sometime between dinner and the morning! Serves 4 150 g arborio rice 1 L full cream milk 1 vanilla bean, split lengthwise 50 g caster sugar Place the rice, milk and vanilla in a large saucepan and bring gently to the boil. Simmer for 30 – 40 minutes until the milk is absorbed and the rice soft and squidgy. Stir every couple of minutes to make sure no rice sticks to the bottom of the pan. When the rice is done, then and only then, add the sugar and stir through. Remove the vanilla bean just before serving. Serve warm, with poached fruit or fresh pomegranate seeds and enjoy the appreciative silence that descends at the table as the pudding is eaten.

Sugar plums poached in verjuice

Sugar plums are beautiful, sweet little plums that have their short season in late summer and early autumn. I could not resist buying them when I saw a box for sale in the fruit shop. They are delicious to eat fresh, because their skin is not at all bitter, but are also gorgeous poached. I felt like Maggie Beer as I got out the verjuice, vanilla and raw caster sugar to cook them this afternoon. I split the plums in half and prised out the seeds, but you could cook them whole if you wanted. Serve them with thick cream, or on your breakfast granola, or just on their own. You could even make a fruit crumble with them. Endless possibilities. Serves 4

500g sugar plums, washed
1/3 cup raw caster sugar
1/3 cup verjuice
1 vanilla bean

Split the plums in half and carefully take out the seeds. In a shallow pan place the caster sugar, verjuice, vanilla bean and plums and bring to a gentle simmer. Cook for 5-10 minutes, or until the plums are soft but not falling apart and the liquid a little syrupy. Eat warm or at room temperature, with thick cream or greek yoghurt.

Zucchini, mint and corn fritters – farewell to summer

“Summer afternoon—summer afternoon; to me those have always been the two most beautiful words in the English language.” Henry James It’s officially the first day of autumn in our part of the world. We love autumn and the beginning of a different season, but we’re not quite ready to let glorious, long summer afternoons go yet. It still feels summery to us and summer fruits and vegetables are still what we feel like eating. These light and delicate fritters, full of zucchini, pops of sweet corn, mint fresh from the garden, and spicy, green chilli in every mouthful, fit the bill very nicely for lunch today. All too soon the evenings will close in early and the morning chill will make getting out of bed a challenge, but for now we cherish the remaining summer days and the last produce of the season. Serves 4

375 g zucchini (about 2 medium-sized)
2/3 cup self-raising flour (if you want to make a gluten free version, just substitute gluten free flour)
2/3 cup polenta
2 eggs
1 1/2 cups milk
2 tablespoons melted butter
4 cobs fresh corn
200 g firm feta cheese
1/2 cup finely sliced fresh mint
1 long green chilli, very finely diced
olive oil, for shallow frying
sea salt
1 punnet cherry tomatoes
extra fresh mint
200g creme fraiche

Grate the zucchini and place in a colander. Sprinkle with salt and leave for about 20 minutes for the juices to drain away. Meanwhile, in a medium sized bowl, whisk together the flour, polenta, eggs, milk and melted butter to make a smooth batter. Finely dice 150 g of the feta cheese. Using a sharp knife, carefully cut the kernels away from the corn cobs. Add the corn, chilli, mint

and the diced feta to the batter and combine. Squeeze as much liquid as possible from the zucchini and mix into the batter. In a large frying pan heat a small amount of oil. Drop tablespoonfuls of the mixture into the pan and cook until golden brown on the underside. Carefully turn over and when fully cooked, take out of the pan, drain on absorbent paper and keep warm while you cook the other fritters. Serve with the tomatoes and creme fraiche after sprinkling the fritters with the remaining feta and mint.

Crunchy ginger slice – vintage baking

Trawl through any old C.W.A. recipe book from the 1960s onwards and you'll most likely find a version of this slice. It's a classic, and for good reason. There is something about ginger that elevates any dish in which it is included. I first ate a version of this slice made by one of my oldest friends, and she got the recipe from her mother, who got it from her mother. I love recipes that are handed down from one cook in a family to a cook in the next generation. With the current popularity of all things vintage, I thought I'd share this very vintage recipe with you, and encourage you to bake it and eat it with a cup of tea in a real teacup, in your garden, giving thanks for all the cooks in your life and the recipes they have handed down to you. My heartfelt thanks go to Toni, her mother and grandmother. Makes 24 pieces

Biscuit base: 250g butter 3/4 cup Caster sugar 1 cup self-raising flour 1 cup plain flour 1 teaspoon ground ginger

Topping: 80g butter 1/4 cup golden syrup 1 tablespoon ground ginger 2 1/4 cups icing sugar

Preheat oven to 180 C. Lightly grease a 20 cm x 30 cm slice tin. In a medium sized bowl beat the butter, sugar and ginger until light and fluffy. Add the flours and mix well to combine. Turn into the tin and spread evenly, pressing the mixture lightly with your fingers until it is even. Bake in the oven for 20 – 25 minutes, until lightly golden. Take out of the oven and straight away spread with the topping. When cold, cut into slices and store in an airtight container for up to 5 days.

Topping: Put the butter, ginger and golden syrup into a small sauce pan and warm gently until the ingredients are melted and well combined. Add the icing sugar in 2 batches, stirring well to remove any little lumps. You should time the making of the icing so that it is ready just before the slice comes out of the oven. (It takes about 5 minutes to make)

Avocado slammer salad

When I made this avocado and rocket salad, my eldest son suggested I call it avocado slammer

salad, because of the lemon wedges and little pile of salt on the plate. And when we eat it, it has a certain slammer-like quality – take a wedge of avocado, sprinkle on salt, squeeze over some lemon juice and dressing and then smash onto a piece of flat bread, add some rocket and into the mouth. So good on a hot summer's afternoon with a glass of cider! It's just as good served on a plate for each person (and a little more refined), and that's how I've written the recipe below, but I have to say, we more often eat it the former way. It takes but moments to prepare, although it does depend on a gorgeous smooth and ripe avocado to be really great. There's a funny cartoon I've seen with a drawing of seven avocados in a row and underneath them Day 1 – not ripe, Day 2 – not ripe, etc. until you get to the last one which reads Day 7 – gone bad. Like all jokes there is an element of truth in it. Where we live, though, avocados are at their absolute best now so we are making the most of them. Serves 2 for lunch or 4 before dinner

1 ripe avocado, halved, peeled and the seed removed
100g rocket
1 tablespoon white wine vinegar or verjuice
2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
1 lemon, cut into wedges
sea salt and black pepper, to taste

Crisp flat bread or crackers, to serve

In a small bowl whisk together the white wine vinegar or verjuice and olive oil. Place the avocado halves on two plates, then divide the rocket and place next to the avocado. Carefully spoon the dressing into the hole left by the seed and drizzle a little on the plate. Season well with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper and serve right away, with lemon wedges and flatbread. No cooking, hardly any mess, delicious taste, happy you.

Zucchini with currants and pine nuts

When I was growing up zucchini was the most uninspiring green vegetable served at our table. My mother, bless her, would boil it until it was very soft and then serve it with a little butter and salt and pepper – squishy, flaccid, and bland. It was the way most people cooked green vegetables in the 1970s. It wasn't until much later that I realized that zucchini had flavour, and that it was delicious! I've been growing zucchini in the garden this summer and we have had a surfeit of this sweet and tender vegetable. I remembered reading a recipe in a very old Gourmet Traveller magazine for zucchini with currants and it was from that idea this recipe was born. Much of the everyday food I cook for my family is simply grilled meat with vegetables, so any recipe that makes vegetables more appealing is on my watch list. I think this fits the bill – the sweet, spicy currants and slightly astringent dressing make the zucchini something special, and it works well served hot or warm. You could even cut the zucchini a bit smaller and toss

through pasta with a little fresh ricotta cheese. Serves 4 1/4 cup olive oil 1 onion, finely chopped 1 clove garlic, crushed 1/2 cup currants 600 g zucchini, cut into chunky pieces about 5 cm long 1/4 cup red wine vinegar 2 teaspoons sugar 2 tablespoons pine nuts 1 tablespoon fresh mint, finely sliced zest of 1/2 lemon sea salt and black pepper In a medium sized fry pan over low heat, cook the onion, garlic and currants with the olive oil, for about 5 minutes, until the onion is soft. Turn the heat up and add the zucchini. Cook for another 5 minutes, tossing the zucchini around to cook it evenly. Add the vinegar, sugar, pine nuts and mint and cook for another 2 – 3 minutes. Season well with sea salt and black pepper. Turn onto a serving plate and scatter over the lemon zest. Serve hot or warm.

Tomato, basil and prosciutto on sourdough (or, sort of BLT)

Hot summer's day, vine ripened tomatoes, basil explosion in the vegetable garden and a loaf of fresh sourdough. All the elements were aligned in our house today to make this oh, so simple, but so delicious lunch. It's nothing more than really lovely tomatoes gently roasted with a little olive oil, salt, pepper, garlic and thyme squashed onto toasted sourdough. Sprinkle over some fresh basil leaves and a slice or two of paper thin prosciutto and it's ready to eat. Miss 12 is a passionate tomato lover and declared that she could have eaten the whole pan of them with no difficulty at all. We remarked that if one is to have a long term food weakness, then tomatoes is a much healthier option than chocolate ice cream or cheese! Serve this up for your family for lunch and watch it disappear. I've given quantities for 2 people but it is easy to double or even triple the recipe to feed a crowd. Serves 2 4 slices of a chewy sour dough bread 8 – 10 truss tomatoes (bigger than cherry tomatoes but smaller than a regular tomato was the size I used. If all you can find are cherry tomatoes, then just use double the amount) 1 tablespoon olive oil sea salt and black pepper 4 sprigs thyme 2 whole cloves of garlic, unpeeled handful of fresh basil leaves 4 slices paper thin prosciutto Preheat oven to 180C. Place the tomatoes in a shallow roasting tray and drizzle over the olive oil. season with sea salt and black pepper and tuck the thyme sprigs and garlic cloves in around the tomatoes. Roast for about 15-20 minutes until the tomatoes are soft, but not collapsed. Meanwhile toast the bread in a griddle pan. Place 2 slices on each plate and then gently rub the top of each slice with one of the roasted garlic cloves, after cutting it in half. A wonderful aroma will fill the kitchen as the warm garlic meets the toasted bread. Place 2 plump tomatoes on each piece of bread and scatter over some basil leaves. Place the prosciutto on the side and drizzle over any of the juices from the tomato pan.

Eat straight away. It will be messy, but worth it.

Passionfruit panna cotta

In love. There are no better words to describe my feelings about this panna cotta. Creamy, silky smooth, delicate, and flavoured with intensely fragrant passionfruit syrup, it fulfils all I could ever desire in a dessert. It's also simplicity itself to make, and perfect for summertime. The passionfruit syrup can be made a day ahead and then the panna cotta whipped up in the morning. Because it is quite rich I like to serve it in a variety of beautiful little glasses, so that everyone can choose the size that suits them. On our recent holiday at the vineyard we watched the sun set over the vines ate a delicious lamb tagine, and then sat outdoors in the cool of the evening lingering over our panna cottas, talking of love and life and the joy of friendship. Bliss.. Serves 6-10, depending on serving size 600 ml pure cream 150 ml milk 1/2 cup sugar 3 teaspoons powdered gelatine (10g) 125 ml passionfruit syrup (recipe below) Put the cream, milk and sugar into a medium saucepan and gently bring to a simmer. Do not boil. Meanwhile, in a medium bowl add 50ml hot water to the gelatine and stir with a fork until completely dissolved. When the cream has reached simmering point, take off the heat and pour over the gelatine, mixing well. Mix in the passionfruit syrup and let cool a little before pouring into serving glasses. Put into the refrigerator to set, which will take a couple of hours. Serve plain, or with a little extra passionfruit syrup or fresh passionfruit pulp drizzled over the top. Passionfruit syrup: put the pulp of 8 passionfruit, 1/2 cup sugar and the juice of 1 lemon and 1 lime into a small saucepan. Bring to the boil and simmer for 5 minutes. Strain through a sieve, using the back of a spoon to extract as much syrup from the seeds as possible. Keeps for 3 days in the refrigerator. Makes about 150ml.

Caramel apples with rosemary

Our annual pilgrimage to the Granite Belt for New Year's always inspires me to cook, as our dear friends who live there love food, own a winery, and are great fun to be with. The area is the main stone fruit and apple growing area in Queensland, and so apples, plums, peaches and cherries are all on offer from orchard stalls. This recipe brings together caramel and apples, with the earthy aromas of rosemary, which add savoury notes to the overt sweetness of the dish. They must be eaten hot, when the caramel is at its most unctuous and the apples soft,

yet holding their shape, and are excellent on their own or with thin cream or vanilla ice cream on top. Serves 4 4 large, red eating apples (Pink Lady would be my first choice) 2/3 cup caster sugar juice of 1 lemon 60g butter 7cm piece of fresh rosemary sea salt Core, halve, and slice the apples into wedges (8 per apple) and put into a bowl with the lemon juice. Toss to cover the apples and prevent them from browning. Heat the butter in a large, non-stick frying pan over a medium heat until it starts to bubble. Tumble in the apples and the rosemary and add a tiny pinch of salt. Sprinkle over the sugar and cook until the apples are soft but still holding their shape and the caramel a dark golden brown. Remove the rosemary and serve immediately with the caramel poured over the apples.

Happy Christmas

Wishing you a happy Christmas with precious family and friends. I look forward to sharing more recipes in 2014 and learning from and being inspired by the wonderful food writers and cooks I meet online. Bless you. Margaret Here's a roundup of some of the recipes that made it onto our summertime Christmas table. We feasted long and well and made much of our time together. Rocket, apple and parmesan salad Roasted balsamic onions Lemon and thyme shortbread Nectarines, prosciutto, mozzarella and mint Lemon and gin jellies

Nectarines, prosciutto, mozzarella and mint

I've been thinking a lot over the last week or so about what to feed my family this Christmas time, experimenting with ideas and recipes old and new. We need joyful, bright food this year, to counter the almost savage sadness of another empty place at the table. My sister-in-law Lesley died quite suddenly in August of this year, of melanoma, and the intensity of the loss is still fresh for all of us. She was brave and bright and funny, and fought hard to overcome numerous struggles with her health until cancer finally defeated her. She loved her family and especially loved Christmas, and it is hard to imagine the day without her. Somehow, doing things a little differently seems to be the best way to begin a new chapter for our family, while still honouring the traditions of our past. So this year there may not be her favourite pudding and no Earl Grey tea, but we will hang her ornaments, and carefully save one piece of Christmas wrap to be used over and over. We will be gentle and comforting to each other, and know deeply that although there is sadness now, joy will come again. I came home from

work today to an unusually quiet house, which gave me time to put this salad together for dinner and trial it for a Christmas dish. It could be aptly named "Christmas on a plate", both because of the flavours embodied in it and its jewel-like colours. The sweet, juicy nectarines, salty prosciutto and creamy fresh mozzarella, topped with piquant mint are a combination that really works well, and as an added bonus, it took no more than 5 minutes to make. I can see it as part of our Christmas Eve dinner, where we gather to eat the best of summer produce, drink champagne and play board games. We'll remember Lesley as she was when well, be thankful she was part of our lives, and aspire to live with something of her enthusiasm and passion.

Serves 4 4 ripe and juicy nectarines, sliced into wedges 8 very thin slices of prosciutto (ask at the deli for it to be sliced super thin) 150g of fresh mozzarella, torn into pieces handful of fresh mint leaves finely sliced zest of 1/2 lemon Arrange the nectarines, mozzarella and prosciutto on a serving platter and then scatter over the mint and lemon zest. Serve straight away with fresh bread, grilled meat or chicken, or just enjoy before dinner with a glass of sauvignon blanc, good friends and music. (I recommend The Idea of North Christmas album for this time of year)

Roasted balsamic onions

Onions are an integral part of my cooking, and their sweet, aromatic flavour adds depth and intensity to so many dishes. But in this dish they shine on their own. I saw something like this on Nigella Lawson's Nigellissima Italian themed cooking show, and have been itching to make a version of my own ever since. We grow our own basil and at this time of year I have a ridiculous amount of this sweet, fragrant herb to use in my cooking. Even making pesto once a week does not keep on top of it, so any new recipe I can think of that uses basil is welcome. These onions are really delicious with grilled lamb or chicken and good crusty bread to soak up the juices.

Serves 4 1 kg red onions, peeled and quartered 2 tablespoons olive oil sea salt and black pepper 1 tablespoon good quality balsamic vinegar 1 tablespoon brown sugar small bunch thyme good handful basil leaves Preheat oven to 180C. Place the onions in a roasting dish large enough to fit them in a single layer. Add the thyme (saving a few sprigs) and olive oil and toss to coat. Season well with salt and pepper and roast, uncovered for about 1 hour, turning occasionally, until the onions are soft and starting to blacken slightly at the edges. Pour over the balsamic vinegar and brown sugar and then carefully stir through until well mixed. Place back in the oven for a further 5 minutes. Carefully pick out the thyme and let the onions cool a little, before piling into a serving bowl and scattering with the basil and the remaining thyme leaves. Serve

straight away.

Granola – breakfast bliss

When I decided to make my own granola I looked at lots of recipes and found several that I liked, but they all seemed far too sweet for my taste, so I made up my own recipe that was loosely based on one by David Lebowitz via Nigella Lawson via Andy Fairfield with a large twist of me. It is full of nuts and dried fruit – so not really low in fat or sugar – but has lots of goodness, energy and fibre. A smallish serve with Greek yoghurt and some sliced banana or fresh berries is a fabulous breakfast and will sustain all morning. 4 1/2 cups rolled oats 150g whole almonds, roughly chopped 130g pecan nuts, chopped into small pieces 1/2 cup shredded coconut 1/2 cup sunflower seeds 1/2 cup sesame seeds 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon 1 teaspoon ginger 1/2 teaspoon sea salt 1/3 cup honey 1/3 cup brown sugar 1/4 cup butter 2 cups dried fruit – your favourites. I used cranberries, apricots and sultanas in equal measure Preheat oven to 160C. In a large mixing bowl stir together the oats, almonds, pecans, sunflower seeds, sesame seeds, spices and salt. In a small saucepan combine the butter, honey and brown sugar and cook gently over a low heat until the butter is melted. Pour the mixture over the oats and with a large spoon stir until the oats are well coated with the mixture. Turn onto a large baking tray, which has been lightly brushed with vegetable oil, and spread out until the mixture is a quite thin layer. Bake in the oven for 30 minutes, turning the mixture every 5 –6 minutes, until golden brown. Don't be afraid to let the mixture turn quite dark – just shy of burning. It gives the granola great crunch and a caramel twist to the nuts. Cool completely, and turn into a large bowl. Stir through the dried fruit, and store in an airtight container.

Apple, lime and cinnamon water

Oh, to be in Queensland in the springtime. Warm days; long, sunny afternoons fading to soft twilight; jacarandas smudging the landscape with purple; and the garden full of new growth. I wanted to make some fruit waters as a refreshing alternative to soft drink and this combination is one that I love. The apple, cinnamon and lime add subtle flavour and fragrance to the water and the jug can be topped up whenever needed with more water and ice. You could also try lemon, mint and finely sliced fresh ginger; or blueberries, strawberries and a vanilla bean. Perfect for a lazy Sunday afternoon! Makes at least 2 litres 1 Pink Lady apple 1 lime 1

cinnamon quill Large jug of water, with ice Chop the apple in half, then in quarters and carefully cut out the core. Slice into wedges. Slice the cheeks off the lime. Fill the jug with water and ice and add the apple slices, lime and cinnamon quill. Leave to sit for about 15 minutes for the fruit to begin imparting flavour into the water. Top up the jug as needed with more water and ice. Enjoy!

Mushroom risotto

Some people might look at a recipe for risotto on this blog and rage at me, "This is not simple food! Risotto is complicated" But, at the heart of the matter, risotto is a simple dish – rice, stock, flavourings and love. People get all caught up in how to make the perfect risotto and end up not cooking this fabulous family dish that is delicious and also quite economical. My only non-negotiables in the making of risotto are to make sure the rice is well coated with the olive oil before adding the stock, and to always, but always, add some butter just before serving to accentuate the creamy texture. Put on some jazz and stir away while drinking a pre-dinner glass of white wine. You'll feel great and your family will love the end result. Serves 6

1 medium brown onion, finely diced
2 cloves garlic, crushed
1 stalk celery, very finely diced
2 tablespoons olive oil
100 ml dry white wine
2 cups arborio rice
500 g mixed mushrooms, sliced – portabello, swiss brown and field mushrooms all work well
1 – 1.25L hot chicken or vegetable stock
zest of 1 lemon
50g butter, cut into small cubes
50g finely grated parmesan cheese
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
3 tablespoons finely chopped parsley
4-6 sprigs fresh thyme

In a large pan heat 1 tablespoon olive oil and add the onion, garlic and celery. Saute until the onion becomes transparent, about 3-4 minutes. Add the rice and stir for another couple of minutes until the rice is shiny and well coated with the olive oil. Add the stock gradually, a ladleful at a time, stirring frequently and adding more stock as all the liquid gets absorbed by the rice. Meanwhile, in a non stick pan over high heat, cook the mushrooms with the remaining oil and a couple of sprigs of thyme until golden. Season well with salt and pepper and set aside. After about 15 minutes the risotto should be almost ready and all the stock used. It needs to have just a little bite left and be a bit soupy in consistency. Turn off the heat, and stir through the butter, parmesan and parsley. Cover tightly and let sit for a couple of minutes. Call the family to the table and then just before serving stir through the mushrooms and adjust the seasoning, if necessary. When serving, scatter a little lemon rind and the remaining thyme over each serve. This risotto is great with a good white wine – perhaps a Riesling.

Cinnamon palmiers

Crisp, cinnamon scented, buttery pastries and excellent coffee were what was called for at our place today. Treats are most needed when exam season begins. The wickedly rich chocolate ganache we had with them might have been a little too indulgent, but then chocolate always makes studying easier! Palmiers are a traditional French pastry, often called elephant's ears because of their shape. I have added cinnamon to my recipe for a different taste. You can make your own puff pastry, but I don't have the time for such a complex exercise so I use a simple flaky pastry made with sour cream (bless you Maggie Beer, there is no other pastry so fine). It's just as good to use a good store-bought puff pastry. Serve palmiers with coffee or hot chocolate, or make an impressive dessert by serving them with fresh fruit – mandarins, oranges or berries work well – and chocolate ganache. Makes about 20

1 sheet of good quality store-bought puff pastry, or 1 batch of sour cream pastry
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1/3 cup demerara sugar, or coffee sugar

Preheat oven to 180 C. Lightly flour your bench top and lay on it the puff pastry, or, roll out the sour cream pastry until it is about 3 mm thick and forms a rectangle 35 cm x 30 cm. Sprinkle generously with the cinnamon and about 3/4 of the sugar. Roll up from the longest side until you get to the middle and then do the same from the other side. Using a sharp knife, cut into thin slices, sprinkle with the remaining sugar, and lay carefully on a baking tray lined with silicon paper (see the picture below). You will have to work quickly so the pastry doesn't get too soft and difficult to handle. Put tray in the fridge for about 10 minutes and then bake for 20 minutes in the oven. Remove from the baking tray when cool enough to handle and cool completely on a wire rack. Store in an airtight container. Keeps for 2 or 3 days. Serve with coffee, hot chocolate, or for dessert with fresh fruit and chocolate ganache.

Blood orange punch

Summer is on its way in my part of the world, bringing with it warm days, still-cool evenings, and life bursting out in the vegetable patch. It's the most marvellous time of year to be in the garden, where every small effort of planting and watering brings excellent returns at the table in the form of sweet salad leaves, fresh herbs and tiny new vegetables. I made a punch with blood orange juice and mint on the first really hot afternoon of the season last weekend. Blood oranges are only available for a short season and they have a distinctive flavour, like a normal orange but with a sweet and delicate twist, plus deep ruby flesh and juice. You could make this

punch with normal orange juice, or even lime juice, but the colour of the blood orange juice has no substitute. Makes 1.5 litres 1/4 cup sugar 1/4 cup water 1/2 vanilla bean 1 1/2 cups blood orange juice (4-5 oranges) 1 L sparkling mineral water a handful of fresh mint leaves ice First make a sugar syrup. In a small saucepan combine the sugar, water and vanilla bean. Bring to the boil over a high heat and simmer for 3 minutes. Remove from the heat and chill until you are ready to make the punch. Juice the oranges and combine with the juice, mineral water and mint leaves in a large jug filled with ice. Leave the vanilla bean in as it looks wonderful and continues to impart its delicate flavour and aroma. Serve immediately in tall glasses. Best drunk sitting in garden in the cool of the afternoon, with someone you love.

Sweet potato pie

After ten days in Papua New Guinea spending time with some amazing women who live and work with the local people there, I came home to my family ready to do one of the things I most love, cooking something delicious for them. Sweet potato is common in PNG so I was inspired to make this sweet potato and feta pie. Lightly spiced with cumin seeds, it's a simple lunch or light dinner dish and uses the easiest of all pastries – filo – as the base. We enjoyed the pie with a green salad and a Friday night movie (Star Trek, the newest version). Bliss! Serves 4

1 kg orange sweet potato (kumara), peeled, and diced into 1 cm squares
2 tablespoons olive oil
sea salt and black pepper
1 teaspoon cumin seeds
200g soft feta cheese, cut into small cubes
5 sheets filo pastry
1 tablespoon butter, melted
1 tablespoon fresh oregano sprigs

Preheat oven to 180C. Toss the sweet potato in the olive oil so that all the pieces are lightly coated. Roast the sweet potato in a single layer on an oven tray lined with silicon paper until tender and lightly golden. In a medium sized bowl combine the roasted sweet potato, cumin seeds and feta cheese and season well with salt and pepper. Brush the inside of a 20cm in diameter pie dish with a little of the melted butter. Working quickly, brush each layer of filo pastry with the melted butter and line the pie dish. It doesn't matter if the edges are a little rough – it's meant to be rustic looking. Spoon in the sweet potato and feta mixture and then return to the oven for 15 minutes, until the pastry is brown and crispy. Serve hot or warm, with the oregano scattered over the top of the pie.

Tangelos and oranges with lime and vanilla syrup

Tangelos have a short season which makes them all the sweeter, to me, at least. I just love the intense citrus taste that is like an orange, and like a mandarine, but also uniquely tangelo. I'm salivating even as I write this. When I made this ultra simple dish, I wanted to celebrate the beauty of fruit in season – so I simply segmented the tangelos and oranges and then drizzled over a simple little sugar syrup infused with vanilla and lime, just enough to add subtle flavour but not to overwhelm. My dad used to love to eat any fruit that had been cut up for him, and we ate this dish after Sunday lunch and thought of him. I also think a small serve of this dish on the side of a panna cotta would make a classy dessert for a casual dinner party. My middle son, who is a very good cook, suggested that a sprinkling of micro basil over the top would also be a nice touch. (He loves the fancy styling of contemporary chefs, and often rates my plating skill)

Serves 4

3 tangelos, peeled and any stray bits of pith peeled off
3 navel oranges, peeled and segmented with a very sharp knife
1 large, juicy lime
1 vanilla bean, split and seeds removed
1/2 cup caster sugar
3/4 cup water

Place the sugar, water, vanilla bean and seeds in a small pan and bring to the boil. Boil for 2 minutes and then take off the heat to cool. Place the tangelos and mandarines on a serving plate. Zest the lime and add to the syrup along with its juice. Take out the vanilla bean, and put it aside to dry. You can then add it to a container of sugar and it will become headily vanilla scented. Spoon the syrup over the fruit and let sit for about 15 minutes before serving, to let the flavours meld. Serve on its own, or with panna cotta, or on pavlova, or with yoghurt for breakfast. Endless possibilities!

Yoghurt cream with strawberries

Strawberry season has started early where I live and these beautiful, luscious, sweet and juicy strawberries were just begging to be eaten. I read in a wonderful book by one of my favourite authors, Helene Hanff, of 84 Charing Cross Road fame, a 19th century quote about strawberries – “Doubtless God could have made a better berry than the strawberry, and doubtless He did not” . When they are as perfect as the strawberries we ate yesterday I must agree. The yoghurt cream I topped them with is very versatile and works with any soft fruit, but is especially good with berries. It's not sweet, as it is made with greek yoghurt, but the syrupy, slightly crunchy sugar topping is all that's needed to satisfy. For the best effect make it a couple of hours before you want to eat it. Serves 6

300 ml thickened cream
1 cup thick greek yoghurt
1 teaspoon vanilla paste or vanilla extract
1/2 cup soft brown sugar
2 tablespoons demerrara sugar (raw sugar also works fine)
2 punnets of ripe berries (500 g)

In a medium bowl whip the

cream until soft peaks form, Stir in the greek yoghurt and vanilla and mix well. In pretty glasses or small glass bowls tumble in the berries, which have been cut into bite-sized pieces. Top with generous spoonfuls of the yoghurt cream and then distribute the brown sugar over the top. Finally, sprinkle over the demerrara sugar and then put in the fridge for a couple of hours. The brown sugar will become slightly syrupy and the demerrara sugar will retain a little crunch. Yum, yum.

Simple pizza dough

We make pizza fairly often at our place – with teenaged boys in the house, it's a real crowd pleaser. However, pizza, like pasta, presents challenges when one member of the household is a coeliac and needs to have a strict gluten free diet. Most of the meals I cook work for the whole family and a gluten dinner for all is the norm. But pizza and pasta – not so much. There's a fabulous locally made gluten free pizza base that my son eats and when we have pasta I just make two pots of pasta and divide the sauce between them, mainly because gluten free pasta is so expensive we'd all be eating baked beans for the rest of the week if the whole family ate it! I wanted to learn to make my own pizza bases, starting with a regular dough (having failed miserably at all attempts to make a gluten free bread, I'm leaving a gf pizza base to another time) and I think this one is pretty good. It makes two good sized pizzas, and with a salad, an excellent Saturday night dinner. I love potato and rosemary as a pizza topping – it's really pared back, and more what a real Italian pizza is meant to be like. If, however, your taste runs to super supreme, or even ham and pineapple, this dough will also be great. Suggested music to knead by – Vivaldi's "Spring" from The Four Seasons, or a bit of Michael Buble, if you like to sing and cook. Makes 2 pizza bases 400 g strong , unbleached flour 2 teaspoons salt 2 teaspoons yeast 1 cup warm water 3 tablespoons olive oil In a large bowl mix together the flour, salt and yeast. Make a well in the centre and add the warm water and olive oil. Take off your rings, put down the spoon and use your fingers to mix the ingredients to a soft dough. It will be all over your fingers, but not for long. With your other hand scatter about a tablespoon of flour onto a clean bench top and scrape all the dough onto the bench. Knead the dough for about 10 minutes, adding little bits more of flour if it is too sticky. It should end up being quite soft and elastic. Put the dough into a clean bowl that you have swirled a little olive oil onto the base and sides (no more than a couple of teaspoons), cover with plastic wrap, and leave in a warm place for about 30 minutes, when it will have about doubled in size. Turn the dough out onto the bench, again

scattered with a little flour. Divide into two pieces and roll out into a rough circle – it does not need to be perfect – life's too short. Place on a tray and top with your favourite toppings. Cook in a very hot oven for about 10 minutes and eat right away. My friend Toss has a wood-fired pizza oven, and if you do too, cook your pizza however long it takes to be just right – it will take less time because of the heat of the oven.

Potato and pea salad with hazelnut dressing

This salad is not much like the mayonnaise flooded, stodgy version of potato salad familiar to many. It has a nutty hazelnut and mustard dressing that has a great bite and contrasts with tender potatoes and crunchy peas. It's perfect for when sugar snap and snow peas are in season. It can be served warm, or at room temperature. At our place this goes with a pan fried salmon steak or grilled chicken and a glass of pinot gris. Serves 4 – 6

100g snow peas (mange-tout) 150g sugar snap peas 500g Kipfler or red skinned potatoes 50g snow pea sprouts, ends trimmed 2 shallots, finely sliced Dressing: 3/4 cup hazelnuts 1/2 cup olive oil 2 tablespoons sherry vinegar 1 tablespoon dijon mustard Preheat the oven to 180 C. Roast the hazelnuts for 5 minutes and then wrap in a clean tea towel. Rub vigorously on the bench top until the dark skins fall off. Discard the skins and finely chop the hazelnuts. Cut the potatoes into wedges and then boil, steam or microwave until tender, but not too soft. Bring a pot of water to the boil, add a pinch of salt and then cook the snow peas and sugar snap peas for 1 minute. Drain immediately and rinse under cold water to refresh. In a jar combine all the dressing ingredients and shake well. Place the cooked potato in a bowl and pour over 3/4 of the dressing. Gently toss the potatoes with your hands until well coated with the dressing. Turn onto a serving platter with the peas, sprouts and shallots and then drizzle over the remaining dressing. Serve straight away, while the potato is still warm and the peas tender crisp.

Sweet potato soup – winter joy

Pumpkin soup is ubiquitous as a winter time meal in my part of the world so I thought I'd mix it up a bit and try a sweet potato soup instead. Lots of spices and a bit of heat make this soup a little different and it would be a good introduction for the uninitiated to Indian style flavours, as it's not too hot. I serve it with plain yoghurt on the side and crispy bruschetta for dipping. It is quite a thick soup, but you can add a little more stock to get the texture you like. Snuggle up on

the couch and enjoy on a winter's night – perfect for a Sunday night supper with a movie.

Serves 4 – 6 1/4 cup oil 3 teaspoons cumin seeds 1 teaspoon ground turmeric 1 teaspoon ground coriander 1 teaspoon dried chilli flakes (use 1/2 a teaspoon if your chilli tolerance is very low) 1 onion, chopped 2 cm piece of fresh ginger, grated 3 cloves garlic, crushed 1 kg orange sweet potato, peeled and chopped into chunks 2 stalks celery, finely sliced 2 tomatoes, chopped 1.25L vegetable stock sea salt and black pepper 1/2 cup plain yoghurt, to serve

Heat the oil in a large saucepan and add the spices, onion, garlic and ginger. Cook, stirring all the time, until the spices release beautiful aromas. Be careful not to let them burn. Add all the other ingredients except for the stock, and cook for 3 –4 minutes until the sweet potato is coated in the spice mixture. Add the stock and simmer gently, covered, for about 30 minutes, or until the sweet potato is very soft and you can easily squash it with a wooden spoon. Blend the soup in a food processor, or with a stick blender, until it is smooth. If you like add a little extra stock or water to get the consistency you prefer. Taste and season with salt and pepper. Serve hot with toasted bruschetta or crusty fresh bread with the yoghurt passed separately for everyone to add a spoonful to their soup. It will keep for 3 – 4 days in the refrigerator and also freezes well.

Feta and oregano dip

I know it's easier to just head to the supermarket and buy dips, but for flavour, value and culinary satisfaction, I often choose to make my own. This dip comes together really quickly and is creamy and salty and herby and a bit spicy all at the same time. We ate it with crispy pita bread, but it would also be great smeared on crackers and followed up with a kalamata olive chaser. Makes about 1 cup

250g feta cheese, chopped into cubes 1 tablespoon cream 1 tablespoon plain yoghurt 2 – 3 tablespoons chopped fresh oregano 1/2 teaspoon dried chilli flakes 1 tablespoon olive oil black pepper

Put all the ingredients into a food processor and season well with the black pepper. Process until all the ingredients are combined. I like mine to be a little chunky but you can make it as smooth as you like. Spoon into a serving bowl. I like to sprinkle a few extra chilli flakes and drizzle a little more olive oil on the top. Serve with pita crisps or crackers. It will keep for about a week in the fridge.

Lemon and pine nut muffins

There was a bit of nose wrinkling at our place when I first floated the idea of lemon and pine nut muffins, but when they were ready; warm, sticky with lemon glaze, and topped with lightly toasted pine nuts, there was no shortage of testers, and plenty of positive feedback. I love the sweet nuttiness of pine nuts and they marry with lemon very well. I scattered a few tiny thyme leaves over the top of my muffins and lavender petals would also be stunning for both their fragrance and soft colour. Makes 12 muffins 2 1/4 cups self-raising flour 3/4 cup raw caster sugar 125g butter, melted 1 cup milk 1 teaspoon vanilla extract 2 eggs finely grated zest of 2 lemons Glaze: Juice of 2 lemons 1/2 cup sugar 1/4 cup lightly toasted pine nuts Preheat oven to 180 C. In a large bowl combine the flour, lemon zest, and sugar. In a small bowl mix together the melted butter, milk and vanilla and then, using a fork, add the eggs and mix until well combined. Add the milk mixture to the dry ingredients and mix quickly with a fork until just combined. Do not over mix. The end result should look a little lumpy – it's the secret to a tender muffin. Spoon the mixture into a 12 hole muffin tin lined with paper cases. Bake in the oven for around 20 – 25 minutes, until the muffins are well risen and lightly golden. While they are baking mix together the sugar and lemon juice. As soon as the muffins come out of the oven spoon the lemon and sugar mixture over the top of each one and then sprinkle each muffin with a few pine nuts. They are delicious warm or cold, and will keep for a couple of days in an airtight container.

Baby capsicums stuffed with feta and herbs

Sometimes I need to seize the moment and make something delicious just because I see an item at the fruit and vegetable shop that screams, "Buy me!". These baby capsicums did just that. I scraped out the core and the seeds, stuffed them with marinated feta and heaps of herbs and roasted them for about 15 minutes in a hot oven. We ate them with chewy sourdough for lunch and they were really good. They'd be excellent as part of a tapas selection, or passed around before dinner with a glass of reisling. The quantities in the recipe are pretty flexible, so experiment with what you have on hand. Pine nuts would be a good addition as would a little garlic, some lemon zest or a few finely chopped kalamata olives. Serves 2 for lunch or around 4 for tapas 6 baby capsicums (bell peppers) 120g marinated feta 3 tablespoons fresh herbs, finely chopped – the usual chives, basil, oregano, flat leaf parsley went into mine freshly ground black pepper Preheat the oven to 180 C. Run a sharp knife around the stalk of the capsicums and remove the cores then scrape out the seeds with a teaspoon. In a small

bowl mash up the feta and the herbs with a fork until they are combined, but leaving the feta still a little chunky. Season with freshly ground black pepper. Fill up the cavities of the capsicums with the feta and herb mixture and then place on a baking tray lined with silicon paper in the oven. Cook for 15 minutes. Serve them hot or warm, spread on sourdough, or just on their own.

Baked rhubarb with vanilla meringues

Rhubarb is the flavour of the month, it seems. Our family are rhubarb lovers, and I often poach it with raspberries for us to put on our morning meusli or yoghurt. It tends to turn schmooshy, which doesn't matter for breakfast, but I wanted to try roasting it in the oven to see if I could get gorgeously tender rhubarb that held its shape for a dessert recipe. It worked wonderfully well, and I think I'll be doing it this way more often. Everything about the combination of meringue and vanilla yoghurt cream with rhubarb works for me. Still a little tart, the rhubarb is a great foil for the sweet meringues. The colours are pretty and delicate and as a dessert it is satisfying without being too rich. All of the elements in this dessert can be made ahead of time so it is a great dinner party dessert. Think also of Sunday lunch with family and friends, or dinner with someone special and go make it. Serves 6

500g trimmed rhubarb, cut into short lengths
1/2 cup caster sugar
juice of 1/2 a lemon
250 ml (1 cup) cream
250 ml (1 cup) greek yoghurt
2 teaspoons vanilla paste
2 egg whites
2/3 cup caster sugar
pinch salt

First, roast the rhubarb. Preheat oven to 180 C. Put the rhubarb in a single layer in a glass or ceramic oven-proof dish. Sprinkle with the sugar and squeeze over the lemon juice. Cover with aluminium foil and roast for 15 minutes. Take out of the oven and if the rhubarb is soft and the liquid quite syrupy, then take out of the oven. Otherwise, return to the oven for a couple more minutes. Leave to cool to room temperature. Turn the oven down to 120 C. In a clean bowl beat the egg whites and the salt until they become frothy and then keep beating while gradually adding the sugar. Beat until the meringue is glossy white and the sugar dissolved. Stir through 1 teaspoon of the vanilla paste and then pile spoonfuls onto a baking tray lined with silicon paper to make 6 meringues. Bake in the oven for 1 hour and then turn off the heat and leave them to cool in the oven. You can easily make the meringues a day in advance as long as the weather is not too humid and you store them in an air tight container. To make the yoghurt cream, beat the cream in a bowl until soft peaks form. Stir in the yoghurt and 1 teaspoon vanilla paste until well combined. Cover with plastic film and refrigerate for about 1 hour. This yoghurt

cream is just great with any poached fruit and it is a slightly lighter alternative to whipped cream. You can make this several hours in advance, too. When you are ready to serve place the meringues on dessert plates, spoon over a generous blob of yoghurt cream and top with the rhubarb. I like to spoon the juices around the meringue so that they are floating in a sea of tart/sweet pinkness.

Roasted capsicum soup with spiced oil

It is time for soup in our part of the world and this roasted capsicum soup with spiced oil is a wonderful change from the usual pumpkin or potato and leek soup that are favourites in our family. The capsicums are roasted and then gently simmered with some tomatoes, garlic and vegetable stock. Roasting capsicums makes them incredibly delicious. It's a messy job peeling off the skins once they have been roasted, but it is not at all difficult and the result is so good it makes sticky fingers completely worthwhile. My sister taught me the method of tempering a little olive oil with chilli and mustard seeds as a way for everyone to add their preferred amount of heat to a dish. In this soup it adds fantastic pops of spiciness along with the slight sweetness of the capsicums in every mouthful. It looks so vibrant and fresh and tastes wonderful. Serve it with thick, crusty bread for a simple Sunday night supper or Saturday lunch. Serves 4

4 large, red capsicums (bell peppers) 1 clove of garlic 1 440g tin of whole, peeled tomatoes 1 1/2 cups vegetable stock Sea salt Spiced oil: 2 tablespoons best quality olive oil 2 teaspoons mustard seeds 1 heaped teaspoon dried chilli flakes Preheat oven to 180 C. Put the capsicums on an oven tray and roast for about 40 minutes until the skins are beginning to blacken. Take them out of the oven and as soon as they are cool enough to touch without burning your fingers peel off the skins. They should slip off very easily. Carefully remove the seeds and then chop up the capsicums and place in a medium saucepan. Add the tomatoes, finely chopped garlic and the vegetable stock and break up the tomatoes with a spoon. Simmer for about 15 minutes and then, using a stick blender, or in a food processor, whizz until fairly smooth. Season with a little sea salt and serve with the spiced oil on the side for everyone to add according to their taste.. To make the spiced oil, warm the olive oil with the mustard seeds in a small pan until the mustard seeds start to pop. Add the chilli flakes and a good grind of black pepper and sea salt. Cook for a couple of minutes. Take off the heat and serve warm with the soup.

Peanut butter biscuits for an autumn afternoon

The weather has turned in my part of the world and my thoughts have turned to food that warms the body and the soul. These peanut butter biscuits are quite plain in their appearance and are made with simple ingredients that would be in many people's pantries. My recipe is based on one from a Women's weekly biscuit cookbook that I tweaked for my taste. This cookbook was a staple for my generation – most of my friends had a copy, and all were well used! This recipe is also so low tech and easy that you don't even need electric beaters, just a wooden spoon for mixing. The biscuits are nutty and tender, and just the thing with a cup of hot chocolate on an autumn afternoon. I used to make them for school lunches, but alas, there are so many kids with nut allergies nowadays, we save these for home. Makes about 24 biscuits

125g butter, softened
Finely grated rind of 1 lemon
1/3 cup caster sugar
1/3 cup brown sugar
pinch of salt
1/3 cup crunchy peanut butter
1 1/4 cups plain flour
1 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

Preheat oven to 160 C. In a medium sized bowl beat together the butter, lemon rind, sugars salt and peanut butter, using a wooden spoon. Add the flour and bicarbonate of soda and mix together to form a fairly stiff dough. Roll spoonfuls of the mixture into walnut sized balls and place onto a baking tray that you have lined with silicon paper. Press down and flatten the balls with the tines of a fork. Place in the oven and cook for 10 – 15 minutes until lightly golden. Remove from the oven and when they have cooled a little, place on a rack until cold. Store in an airtight container. These biscuits will keep for around 5 days.

Chocolate cake for serious chocolate lovers

Chocolate cake speaks to me of home – birthdays, happy smiles on children's faces, and the comfort of good conversation with a well loved, old friends. I suppose the first cake I ever made was a chocolate cake and my love affair with them has continued ever since. This cake is both fudgy and rich, but not too much. It has buttermilk in the cake to lighten it, which is a good thing considering the icing is fairly over the top. I like to use a Dutch process cocoa because it has a discernably richer flavour than normal cocoa and a glorious colour. A pinch of salt is also mandatory in all chocolate desserts to make them taste really delicious. This particular chocolate cake has become a firm favourite at our place, and I hope it becomes one for you too. Serves 8 – 10

1/2 cup water
80g butter
3 tablespoons dutch process cocoa
1 cup self raising flour
1 cup sugar
2 eggs
1/3 cup buttermilk
1 teaspoon vanilla
pinch sea salt

Icing: 1 cup icing sugar
100g dark chocolate
250g cream cheese

Preheat oven to 165 C. Grease a 20 cm

round cake tin and line the base with silicon paper. Combine the water, cocoa and butter in a small saucepan over low heat and heat until the butter melts and then stir until the mixture is smooth. Take off the heat and cool. In a large bowl combine the flour, sugar and salt. In a separate small bowl mix together the eggs, buttermilk and vanilla. When the chocolate mixture is lukewarm add it and the buttermilk mixture to the flour and sugar and mix well until smooth and glossy. Pour into the cake tin and cook in the oven for 35-40 minutes, until a thin skewer inserted into the centre of the cake comes out clean. Turn the cake out onto a cake rack to cool. When the cake is completely cold, cut it into three layers and then sandwich together and cover the top and sides with the icing. Make the top layer a little thicker so you can swirl it about about and get that eat me right now look. Icing: To make the icing, melt the chocolate and then mix together with the cream cheese and icing sugar until it is smooth and glossy. This cake will keep for several days and does not need to be refrigerated, unless the weather is really hot. Enjoy it for afternoon tea in the garden, or as an after dinner indulgence.

Sweet chilli sauce – with a kick

Chillis were on special at the shops this weekend, and all sorts were available – long red ones, bird's eye, Scotch bonnets, Jalapenos, green chillis and more. I bought a heap of long, red chillis and set to work making sweet chilli sauce. My recipe is based on one from an old Donna Hay cookbook, but I add lots more chilli. It has a decent kick (or, Kung pow!!, as my daughter put it) and I was really glad I didn't include the seeds, but the flavour is really yummy, and much better than the store bought variety. It goes well brushed onto simply grilled chicken, and as a dipping sauce for Vietnamese vegetable roll-ups or spring rolls. There's also always the option to pour some over a block of cream cheese and smear on crackers – a truly Australian use of this Asian sauce! Makes about 1 1/2 cups

16 long, red chillis, de-seeded and sliced finely
2 cups sugar
1 cup white vinegar
1 cup water
a good pinch of sea salt

Place all the ingredients in a medium sized saucepan and bring to the boil. Lower the heat and simmer for about 25 minutes until the chillis are soft and jewel-like and the sauce sticky. Pour into a sterilised bottle and store in the fridge.

Honey glazed carrots

This recipe exemplifies what I mean when I talk about simple food. Only the lightest touch of

cooking is given to these sweet little Dutch carrots, but that is all that is needed. Naturally delicate, Dutch carrots are just beautiful when steamed until tender and then glazed with butter and a drizzle of honey. It's worth the time it takes to very thinly peel the carrots and carefully trim them. I love the just-pulled-from-the-ground look they have with the little green tops still attached. After we took these photos, we scoffed the lot just on their own, but they are a wonderful accompaniment to a Sunday roast, or as a side dish with an evening meal. You can cook everyday carrots this way too, but you should try the Dutch carrots next time you see them at the fruit and vegetable shop. I am sure that any under ten year old in your life will be entranced by them, if they can snatch them away from the grown-ups! Serves 4 500g Dutch carrots (3 medium sized bunches) 1 tablespoon butter 2 teaspoons honey sea salt Trim the tops off the carrots, leaving about 2.5 cm (1 inch) remaining. Either wash well, or very thinly peel the carrots. Pay careful attention to getting any little bits of dirt out of the tops. Steam or cook in a microwave until just tender – about 3 – 4 minutes. Put the butter and honey in a medium-sized frying pan and heat until the butter begins to sizzle slightly. Carefully toss the carrots in the honey and butter until well coated and shiny. Tip onto a serving platter and drizzle over any glaze left in the pan. Season with the sea salt and serve.

Herby vegetable soup

This soup is one of the easiest I have ever made, and it also only takes about 20 minutes to prepare and cook. It tastes fresh and clean, and leaves a warm glow inside, the way a good soup should. The most humble vegetables – carrots, leeks and zucchini – when combined with good quality stock and lots of fresh herbs straight from the garden, become something quite special. This is a super soup for this time of year, after a morning in the garden, or a walk in the crisp, autumn sunshine. It would also work really well in the springtime when the fresh, new vegetables are just becoming available. You could add a few asparagus spears for a spring-like flavour or maybe some tiny new broad beans. At our place we like this soup served with fresh, crusty bread and a generous spoonful of pesto on the top to stir through. Serves 4 1 leek, finely sliced 1 small clove garlic, crushed 1/2 tablespoon olive oil 1 cup diced carrot 1 cup diced zucchini 1 cup fresh or frozen peas 1/3 cup risoni 1 L good quality chicken or vegetable stock 3 tablespoons fresh herbs – dill is a must, but any combination of basil, chives, a little mint, thyme that you have to hand will work well sea salt and freshly ground black pepper 4 tablespoons of pesto and good crusty bread, to serve In a large saucepan, over low heat, cook

the leeks and garlic in the olive oil until they have softened a little. Add the stock and bring to the boil. Add the carrot, zucchini and risoni and simmer for about 8 minutes. Add the peas and cook for a couple more minutes, until the risoni is cooked. Take off the heat, stir in the fresh herbs and season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve immediately in warm bowls with a spoonful of pesto on top of the soup and crusty bread on the side.

Lamb burgers with good things

Saturday lunch requires something easy and tasty, as the weekend mornings are often full of busyness and household chores. These lamb burgers fit the bill at our place, and they are packed with wonderful ingredients like garlic, pine nuts, chilli and cumin. Served on turkish bread with roasted capsicum, hummus and a minty fresh greek yoghurt, they are a universe away from a fast food burger and a million times better. You can roast your own capsicums and make your own hummus, but good quality store bought ones are great too, and then pulling these burgers together is a breeze. Your family will love them and be ready for a fun-filled Saturday afternoon. Serves 6

500 g lamb mince
1 egg
1 onion, finely chopped
1 clove garlic, crushed
1 finely chopped long red chilli
1 teaspoon cumin seeds
1 tablespoon chopped parsley
sea salt and black pepper
1 tablespoon pine nuts
1/2 cup greek yoghurt
1 cup fresh mint leaves
1/2 cup hummus
1 cup roasted red capsicum, cut into strips
2 cups fresh rocket leaves
6 turkish bread rolls, or 1 turkish pide cut into 6

In a medium bowl, mix together the mince, egg, onion, garlic, chilli, cumin seeds, parsley, pine nuts and a good seasoning of sea salt and black pepper. Form into 6 portions and shape into rounds with your hands and then pan fry over medium heat in a non stick pan for about 6 minutes per side, until cooked. While the burgers are cooking, finely chop the mint and stir through the greek yoghurt. Serve the burgers on the rolls with the hummus, capsicum, minted yoghurt and rocket. It will be messy, but glorious.

Sesame snaps – a snappy snack

This treat is very easy to make and although not something to eat every day, it satisfies the occasional (or frequent) cravings we all have for sweet things. It's quite nutty in flavour because of all the sesame seeds. It's also gluten free, so great to take to a party if you or someone in your family is a coeliac or eats gluten free. I like a small piece with a cup of tea, or with nuts and dried fruit as a snack. Because it involves making a caramel with sugar, I wouldn't

let young children make it, although my kids, when they were smaller, were fascinated by the process of sugar turning into caramel. Enjoy! Makes about 24 pieces (around 3 cm square) 1 cup caster sugar 100g sesame seeds Put the sugar into a small saucepan over a low heat. Do not stir but swirl the pan occasionally until the sugar melts and turns a golden caramel colour. Using a metal spoon, stir through the sesame seeds until they are well mixed in. Quickly tip out onto a metal tray lined with silicon paper and smooth out to about 3 mm thick with a palette knife. When cold, break into irregular pieces and store in an air tight container.

Caramelised onion tarts

Caramelised onion is a wonder food. The humble onion, when cooked slow and long to release its natural sugars transforms into a sticky, sweet and savoury taste sensation that adds incredible flavour and richness to a simple host of foods – steak, roast beef sandwiches, root vegetables and more. In this recipe I celebrate caramelised onion as the star ingredient, rather than the bit on the side. These little tarts, topped with caramelised onion and some crumbled feta, are perfect for late afternoon drinks, a party, or even for lunch if you make them a little bigger and serve with a salad. I can't take credit for the pastry recipe, although I wish I could. it comes from Maggie Beer's book *Maggie's Table*, and it is absolutely the easiest and most impressive pastry I have ever made. You can buy this book online , although it was published quite a while ago. I have a copy of the original hardback edition and I love it. I include the recipe here because you simply must try it, even if you have never made pastry, or hate making pastry, or feel like a failure every time you make pastry. This is your carpe diem pastry moment.

Caramelised onion Makes approximately 2 cups 6 large red onions, peeled and thinly sliced 3 tablespoons olive oil 3 tablespoons water a few sprigs of thyme 1/3 cup brown sugar 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar sea salt and freshly cracked black pepper Put the onions, thyme, olive oil and water into a large saucepan over a low heat and cook, covered, for 1 hour. Stir once or twice during this time. After then the onions should be soft and just starting to brown. Add the brown sugar and balsamic vinegar and season well with the salt and pepper and continue to cook for another 30 minutes until the onions are dark, caramelised and richly sticky. It will keep for about a week, in an airtight container in the fridge.

Sour cream pastry 250 g plain flour 200g chilled butter, cut into cubes 125 ml sour cream Heat oven to 180 C. To make the pastry, dice the butter, then pulse with the flour in a food processor until the mixture resembles fine breadcrumbs. Add the sour cream and continue to pulse until the dough starts to incorporate

into a ball. Wrap the dough in plastic film and refrigerate for about 20 minutes. Roll the chilled pastry out until 3 mm thick. Cut into rounds using a fluted scone cutter. I used one that was 7 1/2 cm in diameter, but you could make smaller or larger ones to suit your taste. This amount of pastry will make about 24 rounds that size. Place the pastry on a tray and cook in the oven for about 15 minutes, or until the pastry is nearly done. It will puff up in a miraculous way. Quickly take out of the oven and top with generous spoonfuls of the caramelised onion then put back in the oven for another 5 minutes. Serve hot or warm, topped with a little feta and a sprinkling of fresh herbs – thyme or chives.

Apple crumble – made with love

Simple food does not always mean quick to prepare, cook and serve. Simple food for me, is a celebration of natural flavours, seasonal produce, a lack of artifice and loads of love. This apple crumble takes some time to prepare – the apples are peeled, cored and sliced by hand before gently stewing – but the result is worth the time it takes. Granny Smith apples are the best choice with their tartness a real asset when made into a crumble, with its crunchy, sweet topping. There are most likely hundreds of crumble recipes, but this one is our family's favourite. No rolled oats, no cinnamon, no almonds; just butter, flour, brown sugar and vanilla. With autumn weather bringing cool, crisp mornings, and the daylight hours shortening, the season for warm puddings is at hand. There would be a riot at our place if apple crumble was not accompanied by custard, but it's also great with just a bit of cream or vanilla ice cream.

Serves 6

1 kg Granny Smith apples
juice of 1 lemon
1/3 cup sugar
1/4 cup water
100 g chilled butter, cut into small cubes
3/4 cup self-raising flour
1/2 cup brown sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla
pinch salt

To make the apples, peel, core and slice each apple into 8 pieces. Place in a medium saucepan with the lemon juice, sugar and water and simmer gently for about 8 – 10 minutes, or until the apples are soft but some still hold their shape. Put into a shallow, ovenproof dish. I use a rectangular enamel dish I picked up somewhere and I love its old-fashioned look. When the apples are done, preheat the oven to 180 C. To make the crumble, place all the ingredients into a food processor and process until the mixture looks like fine breadcrumbs. Spread the topping over the apples and place in the oven for 25 – 30 minutes, until the crumble topping is golden brown and crisp. Apple crumble is best served straight from the oven, but is also very good when warm.

Roasted beetroot with hazelnuts and thyme

Until I was in my twenties, the only beetroot I had ever eaten was tinned and sliced, served on a hamburger and my first experience of roasted, fresh beetroot was a revelation. This way of cooking them seems to bring out their natural sweetness and nuttiness, and they taste wonderful. Hazelnuts provide a satisfying crunch and the feta a welcome creaminess. I am by way of becoming a thyme addict. It is the easiest of all the herbs I have ever grown, and it marries incredibly well so many foods. Adding it here enhances the earthiness of the beetroot and its perfume is heady and attractive. I fish out the stalks when the beetroot is done and add some more fresh sprigs when I serve them and they look gorgeous against the ruby red beets and white feta. Serve with a spicy rocket salad and some grilled lamb, or for lunch with crusty bread. Serves 4 – 6 as a side dish

750 g beetroot (smaller ones are nicer for this dish) 2 plump garlic cloves 3 tablespoons good quality olive oil Sea salt and black pepper Small bunch of fresh thyme 1/3 cup toasted hazelnuts 50 g soft feta or mild goats cheese, crumbled Preheat oven to 180 C. Peel the beetroot, trying to take only the thinnest amount of the skin off, as all the best nutrients are close to the skin. You'll get very pink fingers, so you might want to wear gloves to avoid curious glances for the rest of the day. Cut the beetroot into small wedges and place in a glass bowl. Add the olive oil, about 10 – 12 springs of thyme, the two garlic cloves (no need to peel them, as their flavour will permeate the beetroot) and season well with salt and pepper. Mix well with a large spoon to coat the beetroot evenly. Tip into a roasting pan, cover with aluminium foil, and roast for 1 1/2 hours. Check after an hour and give the beets a toss to make sure they are not sticking to the pan. When the beetroot is done, carefully pick out the thyme stalks and then place the beetroot on a serving platter. Sprinkle over the toasted hazelnuts, cheese and then scatter with a few more sprigs of fresh thyme. Serve hot or at room temperature.

Apricot crostata

Crostata is a traditional Italian tart, usually filled with jam, but sometimes with ricotta cheese, nuts and poached fruit. The pastry is silky smooth, and the jam filling sweet and fruity. We make dried apricot conserve at our place as the filling, but you can use any not-too-sweet, good quality jam. Don't be put off by the idea of making your own apricot jam for this tart as it is simplicity itself. I've included the recipe below, if you want to do that, and have the time. With several days holiday for Easter, it was a perfect occasion for us to make it. Crostata works

beautifully as a dessert with cream or ice cream; or for morning or afternoon tea. Serves 10 – 12

2 cups (300g) plain flour 1/2 cup (75g) icing sugar 150g chilled butter, cut into cubes 2 egg yolks 2 cups good quality apricot conserve

Firstly, make the pastry. Place the flour, icing sugar and butter in a food processor and whizz it up until the mixture looks like fine breadcrumbs. Add the egg yolks and 1/4 cup icy cold water and process until the mixture forms a smooth dough. Scoop out of the bowl, wrap in cling wrap and let it sit for about 20 minutes. If it is a really warm day, put it in the fridge. Preheat the oven to 180 C and grease a 23 cm spring form tin, or fluted flan tin with a removable base. Form 1/2 the pastry into a ball and place between 2 sheets of silicon paper. Roll out until it is about 5 mm thick and then line the base and sides with the pastry. If you are using a spring form tin, the pastry should come about 2 cm up the side of the tin. This pastry is quite easy to work with, so if your usual experience of this task involves collapsing pastry and tears, take heart and forge ahead. Spread the jam evenly across the base of the tart. Now roll out the remaining pastry and cut it into strips. Carefully drape the pastry strips over the pastry in a lattice pattern, leaving a nice gap between the strips so that the jam can be seen, glistening and jewel like. It's not meant to be fancy, so don't worry too much if the strips aren't perfectly even. Trim any extra bits of pastry from the edges and bake in the oven for 35 – 40 minutes until the pastry is lightly golden. Serve warm or cool, on its own, or with vanilla ice cream or cream.

Dried apricot conserve This was the first jam I ever made and it is so easy and delicious. It never fails and will give you just the right amount of sweetness for this tart. It will make 4 cups, or 2 medium jars of jam, one for the crostata, and one for your breakfast toast.

250 g dried apricots 500 g sugar 1 lemon

Put the apricots in a medium sized glass bowl and pour over 250 ml of boiling water. Leave to soak for several hours or overnight. The apricots will become very plump and absorb almost all the water. Place the apricot mixture in a large saucepan and add another 250 ml of water. Bring to the boil and simmer very gently, covered, until the apricots are very soft and squishy. Now add the juice of the lemon and the sugar. Mix together well and then turn the heat up. Boil rapidly for about 10 minutes. If you have a sugar thermometer, it will most likely have a mark for when jam has reached setting temperature. Otherwise after 10 minutes, take a teaspoon of the jam, put it on a saucer and put it in the freezer for a couple of minutes. If it has begun to set, the jam is ready. If not, boil for a few minutes more and try again. Take off the heat when the jam is ready and pour into glass jars which have been warmed in the oven at 100 C to sterilise them.

Lovely lime curd

Both my husband's family and mine have a long tradition of growing citrus trees and making mouth puckeringly tart lemon and lime curd. The limes I used for this recipe were picked from the tree just before I made the curd. I have toned the amount of juice down a little in this recipe because most people can't quite manage our family's preferred level of sourness. If you have lemons, just substitute for the limes. Lime curd is very versatile and works well in tartlets for afternoon tea, as a filling in a sponge for a birthday treat, or just spread onto toast at breakfast. When I was growing up, my dad used to feed small pieces of fresh white bread spread with lemon curd to Purdy, our Irish Setter! It was her absolute favourite 'people food' and she always knew when mum was making a batch by the heady aroma of freshly squeezed lemons in the kitchen. Makes 2 cups 125g butter 125g sugar 3/4 cup freshly squeezed lime juice 4 eggs Place the butter, sugar and lime juice in a small saucepan over a very low heat and cook until the butter is just melted. Meanwhile, in a medium bowl, whisk the eggs thoroughly. When the butter is melted, pour the warm mixture into the beaten eggs, whisking all the time. Return the mixture to the pan and bring gently to the boil, whisking all the time. It should suddenly start to thicken just at the point it starts to boil. Remove from the heat and strain through a sieve into a glass jar. Before using the jar, make sure it is clean and dry. (I like to put jars through the dishwasher to sterilise them before use). Lime curd will keep in the fridge for about 2 weeks, if it lasts that long.

Chicken with ginger and star anise

This dish is full of bright, clean flavours – chilli, ginger, and coriander – but it also has complexity and depth because of the subtle aniseed flavour and caramel overtones in the broth. We love the textures and flavours at our place, especially the slurpability of the noodles, the crunchy fried shallots and the tenderness of the gently poached chicken. It's so good for you it almost feels medicinal to eat this. On a rainy, miserable Sunday it certainly lifted our spirits. Serves 4 500g chicken breast tenderloins (this should be 8 tenderloins) 1 L chicken stock (use home made or good quality liquid stock. Don't use stock cubes, because their flavour is too salty and artificial) 2 whole star anise 2 tablespoons soy sauce 1 whole red chilli, deseeded, and finely shredded 3 cm long knob fresh ginger, peeled and finely julienned 2 shallots, finely sliced on an angle 1 bunch coriander, roughly chopped 50g fried shallots 200g sugar snap or snow peas 400g udon noodles Bring the chicken stock, soy sauce, 1/2 the chilli,

the ginger, shallots and star anise to a simmer in a large pan. The liquid should be about 3 cm deep. Place the chicken pieces in the pan and simmer gently for three minutes. Meanwhile, place the noodles in a medium sized glass bowl and pour enough boiling water over the noodles to cover them. Let the noodles sit for 3 minutes in the water and then drain well. Turn the chicken pieces over and add the peas to the broth. Cook for another three minutes. To serve, divide the noodles into 4 deep bowls, and then place the tenderloins on top of the noodles. If you like you can slice the chicken on an angle into pieces first. Carefully ladle the broth over the chicken and noodles, making sure everyone gets their just serve of peas and the yummy ginger, fresh shallots and chilli. Sprinkle over the fresh coriander, fried shallots and the remainder of the chilli and serve at once.

Roasted pumpkin with feta, tomato and pine nuts

Pumpkin is a staple vegetable in my part of the world, used much more for savoury dishes than sweet. There are a number of varieties that I use in my cooking but my favourite is Jap or Kent pumpkin which has a yellow-orange flesh that is soft and dry and a nutty flavour with natural sweetness beautifully enhanced when roasted. In this dish the sweet pumpkin flavours are combined with salty feta, pinenuts, tomatoes and peppery rocket and is delicious served warm or at room temperature. Nutmeg is the perfect spice for pumpkin and is absolutely the best when grated freshly. Whole nutmegs are available in most supermarkets and I encourage you to try them. You'll never go back to pre-grated nutmeg! Serves 4 1 kg pumpkin, peeled, seeded, and cut into small cubes 1 tablespoon olive oil Sea salt and black pepper 1/4 nutmeg, finely grated 100g soft feta cheese, crumbled 50g small rocket leaves 100g semi dried tomatoes 1/4 cup pine nuts, lightly toasted Preheat oven to 180C. Toss the cubed pumpkin in a medium sized bowl with the olive oil and nutmeg. Season well with sea salt and black pepper. Place on an oven tray and roast until the pumpkin is lightly golden and quite soft, about 25 minutes. Put the rocket leaves on a serving platter and then scatter over the pumpkin, feta, semi dried tomatoes and pine nuts.

Cranberry and almond loaf

Scrumptious is the word I would use to describe this cake. It is rich and buttery but not heavy or stodgy, and the lemon and almond give subtle but distinctive flavour overtones. Cranberries

are one of my favourite dried fruits because although they are sweetened they still have lots of tang. The cake keeps well and is also a winning addition to school lunchboxes as a treat. It's also delicious served warm for dessert with a scoop of vanilla icecream on the side. 125g butter 185g caster sugar grated zest of 1 large lemon 3 eggs 150g greek yoghurt 60g almond meal 185g self raising flour 100g sweetened dried cranberries (craisins) Preheat oven to 150C. Grease and line a 25cm x 11cm loaf tin with silicon paper. Cream the butter, sugar and lemon zest until light and fluffy. Beat in the eggs one at a time until well combined. Fold in the remaining ingredients – yoghurt, almond meal, flour and cranberries. Spoon the mixture into the tin and smooth the surface with a spatula. Place in the oven and bake for about 1 hour, or until the cake leaves the edges of tin and a skewer inserted into the cake comes out clean. Cool in the tin for 5 minutes before carefully turning out onto a wire rack to cool. Eat while warm or cool. Keeps for three days in an airtight container and also freezes well.

Cous cous with currants and coriander

This fresh and fruity cous cous is a winner at our place. It goes well with tagines, or as an accompaniment to grilled lamb or chicken. I also like to offer it as an alternative to potato salad at a barbeque. Miss Eleven even takes it for her school lunch. I have also recently found a corn based cous cous alternative which brought great joy into my coeliac son's heart. Cous cous had not really been on our menu since he was diagnosed, but the corn version is delicious, although slightly different in flavour. Be bold with the coriander, as it is the ingredient that lifts this cous cous out of the ordinary. Serves 4 – 6 1 cup cous cous 1 1/2 cups boiling chicken or vegetable stock 1 teaspoon butter sea salt and black pepper 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil 1/2 cup currants 1/2 cup diced dried apricots 1/2 cup lightly toasted pine nuts 1 bunch coriander, roughly chopped Place the cous cous in a medium sized bowl with the butter, and pour over the stock. Cover with a plate and leave for about 5 minutes. Take off the cover, and fluff up the grains with a fork. Add the currants, apricots, pine nuts and season with sea salt and black pepper. Toss through the coriander and turn into a serving platter. Drizzle over the fruity olive oil and serve. If you want to make this salad ahead of time, follow the recipe above but leave out the pine nuts until just before serving, as they tend to go soft and their subtle crunch is a great textural component of the cous cous.

Instant raspberry gelato

Truly, this gelato takes less than five minutes to make and tastes absolutely amazing.

Raspberries, along with peas are, in the words of Jennifer Paterson of Two Fat Ladies fame, the true successes of the frozen food world. When combined with just a little icing sugar, the juice of a lime and a touch of cream, they are transformed into this gorgeous gelato. It only needs a few fresh berries, or some grated white chocolate or toasted coconut to create a dessert to win you rapturous praise from your friends and family. You can make it up to an hour ahead of when you need it and keep in the freezer, or just whizz it up after dinner and eat right away.

Serves 4 – 6 500g frozen raspberries juice of 1 lime 3 tablespoons icing sugar 3/4 cup thickened cream Put the raspberries, lime juice and icing sugar in a food processor and process until the raspberries look like ruby red grains of wet sand. Pour in the cream and continue to process until the gelato is smooth and the cream well combined. Scoop into bowls and serve topped with grated white chocolate, or toasted coconut, or a few fresh berries. If you want to make ahead of time it will keep in the freezer for about an hour before losing its creamy, soft texture.

The sisterhood of scones

As I was making these scones I remembered with love all the women who have had input into my scone recipe over many years. I thought of my grandmother who made a beautifully light pumpkin scone and taught me how to use just the right amount of flour when cutting out scones. I saw my friend Lyndal showing me how to use my hands to plump up and create perfect scone circles. I recalled my mother showing me how to use a knife to mix them together. I gave thanks for my friend Trish who first introduced me to lemonade scones. I also thought of the many, many times I have made them with friends – for afternoon teas, school fetes, wedding showers and church camps, sometimes hundreds at a time. I am so grateful for the women who have shaped not only my cooking, but who I am, through their influence, guidance, knowledge and love. Thanks to you all. Makes 12 scones 300g self-raising flour 2/3 cup pure cream 2/3 cup lemonade Jam and whipped cream, to serve Preheat oven to 200 C. In a large bowl place the flour, the cream and the lemonade. Mix very quickly with a knife until just combined. Scatter your benchtop with about 1 tablespoon of extra flour and turn out the scone dough on the bench. Very lightly knead until the dough is smooth and then press out with your palms to a thickness of about 3 cm. Use a scone cutter to cut out the scones, and then gather up the extra bits of dough, pat them together and continue cutting out until all the dough is

used up. You should get about 12 medium sized scones. Place in the oven and cook for 10-15 minutes, until golden. Serve warm or cold with jam and dollops of whipped cream.

Eggplant with crunchy parmesan and herbs

Eggplants are a favourite of mine and I find their deep, shiny colour, complex flavour and silky texture quite compelling. For two summers I have grown eggplants in my vegetable patch and they have yielded sensationally. The fruit of the variety I grow is generally long and slender, although sometimes a big, round eggplant appears. They are not at all bitter so preparing and cooking them is very simple. Topped with breadcrumbs, herbs, olive oil, garlic and parmesan, they make a great starter or component of an antipasto selection. You could make this recipe with the typical rounder eggplant variety. Just slice horizontally and then pile on the topping. Serves 4 as a starter 6 long slender eggplants (aubergine) 2 slices ciabatta 40g parmesan cheese 1 clove garlic 2 tablespoons finely chopped herbs (basil, flat leaf parsley and chives work well) 2 tablespoon olive oil sea salt and black pepper Preheat oven to 170 C. Put the bread, parmesan, garlic, herbs and 1 tablespoon of olive oil into a food processor and process until you have fine, pale green breadcrumbs. Slice the eggplants in half lengthwise and lay onto a baking tray lined with silicon paper. Pile spoonfuls of the breadcrumb mix onto the cut surface of the eggplant and press gently to help the breadcrumbs stick. Drizzle over the other tablespoon of olive oil and sprinkle over a good grind of black pepper and a pinch of sea salt. Place in the oven and bake for about 20 minutes, or until the crumbs are golden and the eggplant flesh soft and silky. Serve hot or warm.

Rocket, apple and parmesan salad

Summer is perfect for salads and many meals I make in this season revolve around a salad. It is easy, though, to slip into boring salad mode and turn out a perfectly nice, but ho-hum garden salad, just because it's what first comes to mind. It's no more effort to do something with a bit more creativity, it just needs a good idea. This salad brings together peppery, nutty, sweet and caramel flavours and some lovely contrasting textures, with Pink Lady apple as the star ingredient. There's hardly anything to it, but it just works really well. It's worth buying an unctuous, high quality aged balsamic vinegar for your pantry. It has such sweetness, complexity and depth of flavour and a little bit goes a long way. Serves 4 120g mixed baby

spinach and rocket leaves 1 Pink Lady apple juice of 1/2 a lemon 50g shaved parmesan cheese 1 tablespoon aged balsamic vinegar Sea salt and black pepper Thinly slice the apple horizontally, and then into thin slivers. (At our place we have a wicked gadget that my son uses to do this task. I'm too scared I'll chop my fingers off.) Place the apple slivers with the lemon juice in a small bowl and toss around to coat the apple with the juice. This is just so the apple won't discolour. Pile the salad leaves on a serving platter and top with the apple and parmesan. Toss gently and then season with salt and pepper. Sprinkle with the balsamic vinegar – if you have a theatrical bent I advise madly flinging the bottle around over the salad a la Jackson Pollock – and serve right away.

Smoked salmon heaven

This is almost too simple to be called a recipe – it's really just an open sandwich celebrating the beauty of smoked salmon combined with crunchy, flavoursome dark grain bread, smooth and luscious cream cheese and salty, astringent capers. So satisfying to make and to eat and far better for your body and soul than any fast food lunch could be. Makes lunch for 1 1 dark, grainy bread roll, or a couple of slices of rye bread 2 tablespoons cream cheese (I choose the lower fat version) 50g smoked salmon 1 – 2 teaspoons capers a few chopped chives for garnish Slice the roll in half. You can toast it if you prefer, or just have it fresh. Spread the roll (or rye bread slices) generously with the cream cheese and then top with the slices of smoked salmon. Sprinkle over a few capers and then the chives. Savour the gorgeousness, and if it's not a work day drink a glass of reisling with your sandwich.

Blueberry muffins

I confess that I have a love/hate relationship with muffins. A good muffin is a beautiful thing and I have eaten some spectacular ones. But a bad muffin is pretty disappointing. Case in point – most cafes serve muffins – but they are usually enormous, either dry or stodgy, and the flavourings, be they blueberries, apples or bananas, as stingy as if a small amount had been tossed into the mixture from a great distance with most landing on the kitchen floor. A good muffin however, is full of fruity goodness, not too large, not too sweet and has a texture that is slightly crumbly and moist at the same time. I think this recipe delivers a pretty delicious muffin experience. We are enjoying a wonderful season of blueberries this year and fresh blueberries

have been plentiful and inexpensive. They are the star of these muffins, which are also made lighter in texture by the use of buttermilk. Enjoy for breakfast, morning tea, or whenever the mood strikes. Makes 12 muffins

2 1/4 cups self-raising flour
3/4 cup raw caster sugar
120g butter, melted
1 cup buttermilk
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
2 eggs
finely grated zest of 1 lemon
125g blueberries, fresh or frozen

Preheat oven to 180 C. In a large bowl combine the flour, lemon zest, sugar and blueberries. In a small bowl mix together the melted butter, buttermilk and vanilla and then, using a fork, add the eggs and mix until well combined. Add the buttermilk mixture to the dry ingredients and mix quickly with a fork until just combined. Do not overmix. The end result should look a little lumpy – like a sponge cake you are ashamed of. Spoon the mixture into a 12 hole muffin tin. You can use paper cases to line the tin, or grease lightly with a little butter, whatever suits your style. Bake in the oven for around 20 – 25 minutes, until the muffins are well risen and lightly golden. They are delicious straight from the oven, but also very good warm.

Tzatziki, or, finding my inner Greek

It's a bold thing to suggest that any recipe for tzatziki is an original and I don't make that claim. It's a classic sauce/accompaniment that has its origins in Greece but versions also appear in Turkish, Cypriot, and Persian cuisines. I owe what I know about making great tzatziki to both the wonderful Jamie Oliver and the gorgeous George Calombaris . I've never used a recipe so writing this down was a challenge in itself. But, with the summer weather here in Australia the hottest it's been for many years, I was seeking something suitably cool and calming to make. We ate it with relish at our place. Makes about 2 cups

2 small cucumbers
1 cup greek yogurt
1 lemon
1 clove garlic
2 tablespoons fresh mint leaves, finely chopped
sea salt and black pepper
extra virgin olive oil

Grate the cucumbers into a small bowl and sprinkle with about 1 teaspoon of salt. Let it sit for a few minutes and then squeeze firmly in your hands to extract all the liquid. Place the cucumber in another bowl and discard the liquid. Finely grate about 1/4 of the garlic clove into the cucumber and then the zest of 1/2 of the lemon. Add the mint leaves and the yoghurt and stir until well combined. Season to taste with sea salt and black pepper and then spoon into a serving bowl. Grate a little more lemon zest onto the top and then drizzle with a little olive oil. Serve with bread or crackers or with a simple host of Greek dishes.

Bruschetta three ways

Bruschetta is an Italian dish, whose origin dates to as early as the 15th century. In its simplest form it consists of grilled bread rubbed with garlic and topped with extra-virgin olive oil, salt and pepper. There are innumerable variations, although tomato, basil and mozzarella is a favourite and probably the best known topping. I wanted to celebrate wonderful flavours in these three bruschetta toppings. They feature mushrooms, avocado and eggplant, with other bold flavours like basil, lemon, fresh red chilli and cumin seeds. Each recipe will make 4 – 6 bruschetta generously topped, depending on the size of your bread. I'd suggest a chewy sourdough or ciabatta. For a party, or for lunch; mixed and matched or just one type; they are a simple, healthy and very delicious way to eat the best of summer. It is a wonderful thing to harvest vegetables and herbs from your own garden, come inside, cook them, and then share with those you love. Even on a scorching summer's day it was a joyful experience to prepare them. At our place the bruschetta were a hit with all, and even a former mushroom avoider gave me a thumbs up. To cook the bread, heat a griddle pan until it is quite hot and then grill the bread on both sides until it is nicely charred, crispy on the outside, but still chewy inside. Slice a garlic clove in half and rub the toasted bread gently with the garlic. Then, choose your topping(s) and create something beautiful.

Mushroom bruschetta 500g mixed mushrooms – swiss brown, field mushrooms, or any other combination of fairly robust varieties 2 cloves garlic, crushed 1 teaspoon verjuice (or a squeeze of lemon if verjuice is not in your pantry) 1 teaspoon butter 1 tablespoon finely chopped chives 4 tablespoons pesto 1 tablespoon olive oil sea salt and black pepper Heat a large frying pan over a high heat. Slice the mushrooms and then cook quickly in the pan with the garlic and 1 tablespoon of olive oil. Stir frequently, until the mushrooms are golden brown and any juices evaporated. This should only take about 5 minutes. Add the verjuice or lemon juice to the pan and then the butter, and toss until all the mushrooms have their just coating. Finally, season with sea salt and black pepper and sprinkle over the chives. Spread the pesto on the toasted bread and then pile the mushrooms on top.

Avocado bruschetta 2 ripe, medium sized avocados 125g soft feta cheese, crumbled zest and juice of 1/2 lemon 1/2 green chilli, finely sliced sea salt and black pepper Scoop the flesh out of the avocados and place in a small bowl. Add the cheese, lemon zest and juice and mash together with a fork until combined, but not smooth, Season well with sea salt and black pepper and then top the toasted bread with the silky avocado and feta mixture. Scatter over the sliced green chilli and serve.

Spiced eggplant bruschetta 300g eggplant, chopped – I grow my own and they do not require slicing and sprinkling with salt before use to extract any bitter juices. If the eggplants you use are smallish, it is likely you won't need to either. If you are using

a large eggplant, I would err on the side of caution and salt it, drain and rinse before cooking. 2 cloves garlic, crushed 1 teaspoon whole cumin seeds 1 medium red onion, diced 2 tablespoons olive oil 4 slices prosciutto, chopped 2 tablespoons flat leaf parsley, finely chopped 1/2 red chilli, finely chopped sea salt and black pepper Heat 2 tablespoons of olive oil in a medium sized pan until quite hot and add the eggplant, garlic, cummin seeds and onion. Cook until the eggplant and onion are soft and golden brown, about 5 minutes. Add the prosciutto and cook for a further 2 minutes. Season with a small amount of salt and lots of pepper. Stir through the parsley and red chilli, pile onto the bruschetta and serve.

“I’m living in the seventies” mango ice cream

Anyone who grew up in Australia in the 1970s will most likely remember a variation of this ice cream dessert. It stands alongside no-bake cheesecake and a really weird salad dressing as the quintessential ways to use condensed milk, a core ingredient in many Australian kitchens of the day. The thing is, it tastes really fantastic (unlike the weird salad dressing!) especially when pimped up a bit with mango and blueberries. If your childhood summers were redolent with beach holidays, the prickle of sunburn, long afternoons in the pool playing Marco Polo, and mango Weis bars as a special treat, then this dessert will take you effortlessly back to those simpler days. Makes about 1 litre of ice cream 395g tin sweetened condensed milk 600ml thickened cream 3 medium sized mangoes (Bowen mangoes are the best, but that is, of course because I am a Queenslander) 1 lemon Blueberries or raspberries, to serve. Peel and dice the mangoes and place them in a small bowl. Take a cook’s break and suck every last bit of flesh off the mango seeds as your reward for making this dessert for your family or friends. Juice the lemon add add to the mango pieces. Use a stick blender to puree the mangoes. In a large bowl beat the condensed milk and cream until it is very thick and then beat in 2/3 of the mango puree. Pour into a freezer safe container and freeze until firm. This will take about 4 hours. However, the ice cream will be very hard if left for too long and will need to be put in the fridge to soften a little before serving if this is the case. To serve, scoop the ice cream into bowls, pour over the remaining mango puree and add a few blueberries or raspberries.

Lemon and thyme shortbread

Shortbread is a traditional Christmas-time treat and always makes an appearance at our place.

I wanted to try something a little different this year, so I added lemon zest and some fresh thyme to my usual recipe and sprinkled the shortbread with demerrara sugar before baking. The thyme and lemon might seem odd flavours to add, but they work surprisingly well, and the crunchy, slightly molasses flavoured demerrara sugar provides a satisfyingly crunchy contrast to the flaky biscuit. There really is no reason not to eat shortbread anytime of the year. It's much too delicious to only eat at Christmas. All that is needed is a good cup of tea and a good friend to share it with. Makes 24 squares 250g butter, cut into small cubes 1/3 cup soft icing mixture 2 cups plain flour grated zest of 1 lemon 1 teaspoon of fresh thyme leaves 1 tablespoon demerrara sugar Preheat oven to 160 C. Grease a rectangular slice tin, 19 x 29 cm. Place all the ingredients, except for the demerrara sugar in a food processor and process until the mixture comes together into a soft dough. Press gently and evenly into the tin and sprinkle with the demerrara sugar. Place in the oven and cook for 25 minutes, until lightly golden. While still quite warm mark into squares or rectangles. When cool, carefully take out of the tin and place on a cake rack until cold. Store in an airtight container for up to a week. It also freezes very well, so if restraint is not your forte you can put half in the freezer for another day.

Summer tomato pasta

This tomato pasta is a little bit unusual in that the tomatoes are not cooked but rely on the fresh, hot pasta to warm them and release their flavour. It is a wonderfully fresh and light dish and the combination of tomatoes, garlic, olive oil and basil is a winning one. It's perfect for Sunday lunch and at our place we serve it with a crisp green salad and some crusty, warm bread. The bread is almost essential as it is perfect for mopping up the leftover pasta sauce. My daughter is a wonderful helper in the kitchen, and enlisting her services to help prepare the tomatoes not only made the dish quicker to prepare, but was also lots of fun for both of us. Only the ripest and reddest tomatoes will do for this dish – try to get vine-ripened ones for the most luscious results. Serves 4 – 6 1 kg vine ripened tomatoes 1 clove garlic, very finely chopped handful of torn basil leaves, plus some extra whole leaves for garnish 1 teaspoon brown sugar 1 teaspoon sea salt black pepper 1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil 500g linguine or fettucini Parmesan cheese, to serve Cut the tomatoes in half. Scoop out the seeds and the fleshy part of the tomatoes and place in a seive over a bowl, to let the juices drain through. Cut up the rest of the tomatoes into small cubes. It's worth taking a little time to do this neatly as it does make the final result look much prettier. Put the cut tomatoes, garlic, torn basil leaves,

sugar, salt, olive oil and a really good grind of black pepper into another glass bowl and add the juice that has drained from the scooped out insides. Let the tomatoes sit for the flavours to combine and develop. Meanwhile, bring a large pot of lightly salted water to the boil and cook the pasta until it is al dente. Drain well and then add the hot pasta to the tomatoes. The heat of the pasta will release the wonderful aromas of the tomatoes, basil and garlic. Stir well and then tip onto a large serving platter, making sure that plenty of the bright red tomatoes are on the top. There may be some extra tomato sauce, depending on how juicy the tomatoes are. Carefully drizzle this over the top of the pasta, scatter with the extra basil leaves and then serve. It is best served warm, rather than piping hot. Serve with a good amount of freshly grated parmesan cheese, and another grind of black pepper.

Peach, avocado and persian feta salad

Summer for me means many things – hot, humid days, thunderstorms, swimming in the pool, holidays with my family, playing canasta and listening to great jazz, reading novels, walking on the beach. And summer food is a big part of what I love about this time of year. There's so many beautiful fruits and vegetables available, and I have more time to cook than in the busier times of the year. This salad typifies summer for me as it is light and fresh and makes the most of seasonal produce. This is another dish I made on our New Year's break in Stanthorpe. The peaches and avocado were extraordinary; the lime dressing tangy; the persian feta rich and creamy. It was a perfect salad for a warm summer's night. Serves 4

1 lebanese cucumber
1 baby cos lettuce
1 small oak leaf lettuce
2 ripe peaches
1 ripe avocado
50g persian fetta

Dressing: 25 ml lime juice
60 ml extra virgin olive oil
1 teaspoon dijon mustard
sea salt and black pepper, to taste

Cut the cucumber into quite thick slices (about 5 mm) and then cut the slices into quarters. Carefully tear away the lettuces from their hearts, carefully wash and dry them and then place the leaves on a serving platter. Scatter over the cucumber. Cut the peaches in half and prise out the stones. Slice each peach half into four pieces. Peel the avocado and cut into chunky slices. Place the avocado and peaches on top of the lettuce and cucumber. Crumble the feta cheese over the top of the salad. At the point of serving drizzle with the dressing. To make the dressing, put all the ingredients into a glass jar and shake well. This salad is best made just before eating – the avocado will discolour and the peaches won't be at their best if it sits for too long.

Smashed potatoes with parmesan

Potatoes are one of my favourite foods and I eat them many ways – simply boiled, in salads, mashed with butter and parsley, or roasted in the oven. They take on other flavours magnificently and I like to experiment with different vegetables and herbs to go with them. I also like trying different varieties of potatoes, as there are now so many types available, all with subtle flavour or textural differences. I'm going to experiment with growing potatoes this year so I can try some of the more obscure varieties. This way of cooking them results in the best of all potato experiences, I think. They are soft and fluffy inside and golden and crispy on the outside, with the subtle flavour of sea salt and rosemary permeating every mouthful. Serves 4 (but if there are teenagers in your household, I'd double the recipe!) 1kg small desiree potatoes sea salt and black pepper 1 tablespoon olive oil 1 teaspoon chopped rosemary 30g finely grated parmesan cheese Preheat oven to 200C. Cut the potatoes into quarters. Boil, steam or microwave until tender. Put the potatoes in a medium sized bowl, season well with sea salt and black pepper, and add the olive oil and rosemary. Toss well until the potatoes are well coated with the yummy oil and rosemary. Use a potato masher to gently smash some of the potatoes but leave some of them intact. Place in a baking tray lined with silicon paper and put in the oven for around 20 minutes or until the potatoes are golden brown and starting to go crispy. Take out of the oven and sprinkle over the parmesan cheese. Put back in the oven for 5 minutes to let the cheese melt and become crispy. Serve with whatever you are having for dinner. (Especially good with grilled meat and a fresh salad with a citrus dressing)

Sticky roasted plums

Each year we travel to the small country town of Stanthorpe to celebrate the New Year with our dear friends Ewen and Elissa. They own a vineyard and winery and our time there is spent eating beautiful food and drinking their wonderful wines, laughing at anything and everything and talking about the things that really matter. The area where they live is also well known for its orchards of plums, nectarines, cherries and peaches and they are blessed with generous neighbours who provide them with boxes of fruit from their trees each summer. These sticky baked plums are gently roasted in the oven after being drenched in a simple mixture of brown sugar, lemon juice and vanilla. They are soft and tart-sweet and their juices are a stunning deep ruby red. We ate them for dessert on New Year's Day with toasted panettone and greek yoghurt, as we sat on the verandah overlooking the vines. Bliss! Serves 6 1 kg plums 1/4 cup

lemon juice 1/4 cup soft brown sugar 1 teaspoon vanilla paste Preheat oven to 150 C. Carefully cut the plums in half and remove the stones. Place the plums, cut side up, in a baking tray lined with non-stick baking paper. Mix together the lemon juice, brown sugar and vanilla paste and pour over the plums. Place in the oven and bake for 20 – 30 minutes, or until the plums are soft and the pan juices syrupy. Serve them warm or cool. They taste great with greek yoghurt and toasted brioche or panettone.

Zucchini and mint salad – summer on a plate

Zucchini is a humble vegetable, and often overlooked because it is so easy to overcook it to a watery, mushy mess that tastes pretty blah. But, char-grilled on a griddle pan, tossed in a little olive oil, and then spiced up with chilli, loads of fresh mint, lemon zest and soft oozy feta cheese and zucchini is transformed into a star. This salad can be served warm or cool and tastes great either way. It would be a fabulous addition to a Christmas meal with the combination of bright green of mint and zucchini and red chilli. Serves 4 – 6 750 g zucchini – all green or a combination of green and yellow is also nice 1 large red chilli, finely sliced – you can choose mild or hot, depending on your love of chilli 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh mint, plus a few extra leaves 40 g soft feta cheese Extra virgin olive oil Sea salt and black pepper 1 lemon Heat a griddle pan until quite hot. Thinly slice the zucchini longways and then char-grill on both sides on the griddle pan for a few minutes, until the zucchini is well coloured and just softening. Place the zucchini in a bowl and add the mint and chilli. Season well with the salt and pepper and pour over 1 tablespoon of olive oil. Grate the zest of the lemon onto the zucchini and then the juice of half of the lemon. Carefully toss and then place onto a serving platter. Finally, crumble over the soft feta and scatter the extra mint leaves onto the salad before serving.

Grown-up's chocolate mousse

Silky, incredibly rich, and made with bitter dark chocolate slightly sweetened with honey, a little of this very grown-up mousse goes a very long way. However, it is very simple to make and only needs a good quality dark chocolate to make it shine. It is most important not to put the mousse in the fridge. The texture will end up being grainy and unappealing. Just make the mousse an hour or so before you need it and leave in a cool place. I absolutely love to serve it

with my salted caramel pecans because both the nuts and the slight saltiness of the caramel really enhance the taste of the chocolate. Serves 6 – 8, depending on how much richness you can take in one sitting 150g 70% cocoa solids dark chocolate 150 ml thickened cream 60g butter, chopped into small pieces 1 tablespoon honey First thing is not to freak out when you see the ingredients list and remember this is a special occasion dessert. Melt the chocolate in a bowl over a pan of simmering water. (You can cheat and do it in the microwave – just remember to use low heat or else the chocolate will burn) Let it cool a little and then stir through the honey and the butter until all the butter is melted and the chocolate is beautifully shiny. In another bowl whisk the cream until it is softly whipped. Pour the chocolate mixture into the cream and whisk together gently. The mousse will thicken and remain gloriously glossy. Set aside somewhere cool, but do not put in the fridge. To serve, spoon a generous tablespoonful per person onto a gorgeous plate (If you have the smarts make a quenelle) and serve a few pieces of salted caramel pecans on the side. I also sometimes serve in a tiny espresso cup with berries on the side.

Gin and lemon jellies – for weddings, parties, anything

Every summer we buy a bottle of really good quality gin and enjoy a regular gin and tonic in the late afternoon as the heat of the day is starting to dissipate. Turning a G&T into a dessert has long been on my to-do list and after a trip to Wellington in late November where I picked up some gorgeous duty free gin, and some vintage beakers in a quirky antique store, the time was ripe to get the creative juices flowing, recipe-wise. These lemon and gin jellies are the result. Super easy, super quick and super impressive, they were an instant hit at our place. Don't be put off by the leaf gelatine as it is really simple to use and readily available in any good deli. The jellies would be great for a summer dinner party dessert or anytime, really. Makes 8 serves 1/2 cup caster sugar 1/2 cup water 1/2 cup lemon juice 1/4 cup gin 3 leaves of gold strength gelatine Put the sugar and water in a small saucepan and bring to the boil. Boil for three minutes and then take off the heat. Fill a small bowl with cold water and put the gelatine leaves in to soak for a couple of minutes. Place the lemon juice, gin and sugar syrup in a jug. Lift the gelatine out of the water and squeeze out the excess water. Add to the gin mixture and whisk with a fork until the gelatine is dissolved. Pour into 8 shot glasses and refrigerate until set, which will take about three hours.

Pan fried haloumi with lemon and parsley

Haloumi is a slightly salty, semi-hard cheese that has its origins in Cyprus. It is at its best when cooked, and the Mediterranean flavours of lemon, parsley and olive oil are wonderful accompaniments. Good quality extra virgin olive oil and beautifully fresh lemons are the secret to really making this dish sing, so use the best that you can afford. This recipe is fantastic as a starter, or with drinks before a casual dinner with friends. I recommend a crisp sauvignon blanc or a gin and tonic. We are blessed to have close friends who own a vineyard – Symphony Hill – and they make a spectacular sauvignon blanc, which is one of our favourite wines, so I may be a teeny bit biased with that suggestion! Serves 4 as a starter, or with drinks. 180g haloumi finely grated rind of one lemon 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil 1 tablespoon finely chopped flat-leaf parsley freshly ground black pepper 1 lemon cut into wedges, to serve Cut the block of haloumi into 8 even slices. The size doesn't really matter and depends a bit on the shape of your piece of cheese but the pieces should be about 5 mm in thickness. Heat the oil in a non-stick pan until it is quite hot. Place the haloumi in the pan and cook on each side until golden. It should only take about 1 minute per side. Any more and you will have rubbery cheese. Take out of the pan and drain for a moment on absorbent paper. Place on a serving dish and sprinkle over the parsley and lemon rind. Season with a good grind of the black pepper and serve immediately with the lemon wedges on the side. Squeeze on some lemon juice, spear with a fork and eat up.

Wicked salted caramel pecans

Salted caramel seems to be the flavour of the moment and there's a reason why – it tastes so astoundingly good. If you have never tried it before you simply must, although it is really addictive and you might not be able to resist once you acquire a taste for it. These salted caramel pecans take only a few minutes to make, but will win you rapturous praise, guaranteed. If you are looking for a Christmas treat for friends or family they will fit the bill admirably, chopped into chunks and presented in a glass jar. I also like to break them up into small pieces and serve over vanilla ice cream. However, the sexiest way to eat them is with a bitter, dark chocolate mousse (recipe coming soon). Salt really enhances the flavour of chocolate which is why I think the salted caramel pecans with their sweet, nutty and salty notes go so well with it. 100g pecan nuts 100g caster sugar 1/2 teaspoon sea salt (Maldon is my preferred brand) Put the sugar in a small saucepan over a low heat and warm it gently, without stirring, until it

caramelises and turns a rich golden brown. Add the sea salt and swirl in the saucepan until it is well mixed in. Quickly put in the pecan nuts and stir until coated. Immediately pour onto a tray covered with a piece of silicon paper and spread out with a flat bladed knife. Leave until cool and the caramel hardened. Break into smallish pieces to serve. Store in an air tight container if there is any left over.

Char grilled asparagus with herbs

Spring and early summer is my favourite time of year, and fresh asparagus is one of the reasons why this is so. There is nothing so delicious as fresh asparagus (particularly if your childhood experiences of this vegetable involved a can opener, white bread and a toothpick) and this way of preparing it is spectacular. Like most vegetables when in season, asparagus needs only the lightest touch to make it irresistible. I serve the asparagus as a vegetable on the side with a summery lunch, as part of an antipasto platter, or with a softly poached egg. Go, make it now! Serves 4 2 large bunches of fresh asparagus a large handful of fresh herbs, finely chopped (parsley, chives and basil work really well) a good tablespoon of extra virgin olive oil juice and finely grated rind of 1/2 a lemon salt and pepper 30g feta cheese, crumbled Heat a grilled pan over a medium high heat. Do not add oil to the pan. I learned this tip from Jamie Oliver , and any tip from Jamie is a tip to remember, in my opinion. Place the asparagus in the hot pan and grill until the asparagus is lightly charred and bright green. This will take about 5 – 6 minutes. Take off the heat and pour over the olive oil and lemon juice. Shake the pan until all the asparagus is shiny and coated with the lemony and olive oil goodness. Place on a serving platter and sprinkle over the herbs, lemon rind, a little salt, a good grind of black pepper and the feta cheese.

Poached apricots with vanilla and star anise

Apricots are just amazing when they are gently poached; so much better than eating them fresh. They are sweet and juicy and tangy and speak to me of summer. I poached these apricots in a simple sugar syrup with vanilla, a strip of lemon rind and a star anise, flavours that go really well with the apricots. You can eat these warm or cool; for breakfast, brunch or dessert; with cream, thick yoghurt sweetened with honey, or with ice cream; on top of your muesli, or just on their own. Serves 4 750g fresh apricots 1/2 cup raw caster sugar 1 cup water 1

vanilla bean 1 star anise a strip of lemon peel (be careful to just use the peel, and none of the bitter pith) In a wide based pan place the sugar, water and star anise. Carefully split the vanilla bean in half and scrape out the seeds and then add the seeds and the vanilla bean to the other ingredients in the pan. Heat over a low heat until the sugar is dissolved. Wash and then cut the apricots in halves. Carefully prise out the seeds and then place the apricots in a single layer in the pan. Bring the liquid to a gentle simmer and cook the apricots for about 5 – 6 minutes until they are soft but still hold their shape. Be careful to keep a close eye while they are cooking otherwise you'll end up with apricot schmoosh. Leave the lemon rind, vanilla bean and star anise in the pan with the apricots while they cool as the flavours will continue to develop and become more intense. Eat them warm or cool.

Cranberry and wild rice salad

This is a delicious salad and a staple at our place at Christmas time. It's very colourful and full of contrasting textures and flavours. The nutty wild rice and the perfumed basmati rice are complemented perfectly by the crunch of almonds, the sweet chewiness of cranberries and the sharp, bright flavours of orange, ginger and coriander in the dressing. Serves 8 as an accompaniment 100g wild rice 100g basmati rice 130g dried cranberries 60 g toasted slivered almonds 2 spring onions (shallots) finely sliced 1/2 bunch chopped fresh coriander 1 knob ginger, about 3 cm long, peeled. 1/4 cup orange juice 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil sea salt and freshly ground black pepper Cook the wild rice and basmati rice separately according to packet directions. They need to be cooked separately because the wild rice will take longer to cook than the basmati rice. Put the cooked rice in the refrigerator until it is cool. Combine the rices, cranberries, almonds, spring onions and coriander in a serving bowl. Put the orange juice and olive oil into a separate small bowl. Use a Microplane or a fine grater to grate the ginger. Add to the olive oil and orange juice, season well, and whisk until well combined. Dress the salad and serve immediately.

Pikelets and memories

The first recipe I ever cooked was pikelets*. I was about ten and eager to help out in the kitchen, sensing even then that the kitchen was where all the action was. My mother was a good, plain cook; hospitable and always concerned that there might not be enough food to

feed her guests. Her hand written recipe book had two recipes for pikelets, but the one from her friend Shirley was always the one she made. I can remember still the thrill of making them 'all by myself' and the happiness I felt when my family ate them all up. That was the beginning of my cooking journey – cooking for the love of food and the people I love. My mother died last year and as I was going through her things I found that old recipe book. A flood of warm memories washed over me when I turned the faded pages; both of cooking these old fashioned recipes and of my gracious and lovely mother. Next time you are preparing afternoon tea, why not make these pikelets. They are best served warm with jam and a dollop of cream and a cup of tea (in a cup and saucer, not a mug!) And if you have a daughter or a son, get them to make them with you. Makes about 24 pikelets 2 eggs 1/4 cup sugar 1 1/2 cups self-raising flour 1 cup of milk jam and cream, to serve Put the eggs, sugar, flour and milk into a large bowl and whisk together until well combined and you have a fairly thick batter. Heat a flat frying pan on a medium heat (my mother always used her Sunbeam electric frying pan, and I do too). Put in a little butter and then drop tablespoonfuls of mixture into the pan. Hint: if you drop the mixture off the side of the spoon the pikelets will be oval shaped; off the tip of the spoon will give perfect circles. When bubbles appear on the surface, carefully flip them over and cook for a minute more before taking out of the pan. To keep the cooked pikelets warm, wrap in a tea towel while you cook the remainder of the batter. *For those outside of Australia and New Zealand pikelets are most likely unknown. They are actually similar to pancakes, although much smaller (about 3 inches or 7.5 cm across) In Scotland they are sometimes called drop scones. Not eaten at breakfast, only for morning or afternoon tea.

Tomato and bocconcini salad with beautiful basil dressing

Summer is the absolute best time to eat tomatoes and basil and I think I have a little bit of a food crush on them. This salad uses both; fresh tomatoes and a basil dressing which is both sweet and sharp. The addition of little soft and squishy bocconcini takes it to another level with the creamy chewiness of the cheese a perfect foil for the tomatoes and basil. On top of that, it takes all of five minutes to put together. Who wouldn't love it, love it, love it?!! Serves 4 – 6
400g mixed smallish tomatoes (try to get a variety of colours, there are heaps available in most supermarkets) 125g small bocconcini About 1 cup of lightly packed basil leaves (1 really good handful) 1/3 cup good quality extra virgin olive oil sea salt and black pepper 1 tablespoon white wine vinegar Slice the larger tomatoes in half, and leave little ones whole. Do the same with the

bocconcini; tear some carefully in half and leave others whole. Blend together the basil, olive oil and white wine vinegar until it is a quite smooth and bright green dressing. (I use a small blender) Season with the salt and black pepper to your taste. Put a good tablespoonful of the dressing on a serving platter and use the back of your spoon to spread it evenly. Place the tomatoes and bocconcini on the platter and then spoon over the dressing. Grind over a little more black pepper and serve to your soon-to-be-wildly-enthusiastic lunch or dinner guests.

Lemony baked chicken with thyme

I love the flavour of lemon because it gives the most amazing sharpness to both sweet and savoury foods, bringing out the best in the ingredients it is paired with. In this recipe a juicy lemon is sliced into wedges and then roasted with chicken, tomatoes, baby peppers and thyme until the chicken is tender and the lemon caramelised and bursting with tangy juices. Serves 6

750g skinless chicken thigh fillets olive oil, sea salt and black pepper 1 small bunch of thyme 1 punnet of cherry tomatoes 6 – 9 baby peppers in a mixture of colours, cored but left whole (or 1 red and 1 yellow capsicum cut into large chunks) 1 large lemon, cut lengthwise into 6 wedges

Season the chicken generously with salt and pepper. Place in a roasting pan with the tomatoes, lemon and peppers, Sprinkle over about a dozen sprigs of thyme and then drizzle with about 1 tablespoon of olive oil. Bake in a 180 C oven for around 30 minutes, or until chicken is tender and lemons have nicely caramelised on the outside. Place on a large platter and scatter over a few more sprigs of thyme. Serve with a green salad and cous cous with herbs and green chilli .

Brownies to die for

I won't say that these brownies are the best ever. I would never say that anyone's brownies are the best ever. I think that the world has room enough for a truckload of spectacular brownies, and I'm writing as one who has tried a comprehensive range; nutty, chewy, studded with white chocolate, or milk chocolate, or both; my love of brownies encompasses them all. I will say though, that these brownies meet all my criteria for what makes this chocolate dessert truly divine. Intense and dark, gooey and oozy in the middle, and with chunks of liquid chocolate as a surprise in almost every mouthful. They are best eaten when still warm, with a spoonful of thick cream and an espresso on the side. Do not let a single guilty thought enter your mind. Just enjoy the moment and hit the gym tomorrow. Makes 16 brownies 200g butter 160g brown

sugar 1 teaspoon vanilla extract pinch sea salt 3 eggs 300g best quality dark chocolate – 200g melted and 100g chopped into bite-sized pieces 150g self-raising flour 1 tablespoon cocoa Grease and line a 20cm square baking tin. Preheat the oven to 150 C. Cream the butter, brown sugar, vanilla and a pinch of sea salt, until light and fluffy. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well between each addition. Stir in the melted chocolate and then the flour and cocoa. Pour the mixture into the tin and then stud evenly with the pieces of chocolate, pushing them almost all the way into the mixture. Place in the oven and bake for around 25 minutes, when the brownies will be just cooked in the middle. Resist the temptation to leave them in the oven longer. They will set a little more as they cool and the best brownies are gooey brownies. Cool slightly in the tin before cutting into 16 slices.

Warm bean salad with proscuitto and herbs

The flavours in this warm salad – garlic, basil, onion, proscuitto and a kiss of chilli are absolute winners with the creamy cannellini beans. With some simply grilled meat, a fresh green salad and jacket potatoes, you have a complete meal that's delicious, healthy, and has a wonderful mix of contrasting textures and flavours. Serves 6 – 8 olive oil 2 cloves of garlic, chopped finely 1 red onion, finely diced 1 long red chilli, finely sliced (leave the seeds in if you like it a bit hotter) 4 slices of proscuitto, chopped A handful of basil and flat leaf parsley, finely chopped 2 400g tins of cannellini beans, drained and rinsed 1 tablespoon grated parmesan Sea salt and black pepper Heat about 2 tablespoons of olive oil in a frying pan over medium heat and cook the garlic, onion, chilli and proscuitto until the onion is transparent and the proscuitto is slightly crisp. Add the beans and herbs and toss until warmed through. Season well with salt and pepper. Place onto a serving platter and sprinkle with the parmesan. Drizzle over a little extra olive oil and serve.

Butter beans with pine nuts and lemon

I was inspired to create this recipe to bring out the gorgeous flavours of butter beans by the bumper crop from my vegetable patch this year. Butter beans are similar to green beans and not to be confused with the equally delicious but quite different broad beans. They have a slightly sweeter flavour and I think their colour is wonderful. Serve them with any grilled meat or fish. Serves 6 as a side dish 500g butter beans (yellow string beans) 60g butter 60g pine

nuts (about 1/3 cup) 1 lemon 1 tablespoon finely chopped chives Steam the beans in a steamer over boiling water until just tender. Meanwhile, put the butter into a small saucepan over low heat. Let the butter bubble until it is lightly golden, but not burning. Take off the heat and add the pine nuts, swirling them around until they are well coated. Put the beans onto a serving dish and pour over the butter and pine nuts. Use a microplane or fine grater to grate the zest of the lemon over the beans. Squeeze over the juice of 1/2 of the lemon, sprinkle with chives and serve. Serves 6 as a side.

Orange blossom cupcakes

When I was growing up cupcakes were called patty cakes and strictly for children's birthday parties. Now it seems as if the formerly humble patty cake is everywhere, and dressed up in all manner of adornments. No matter if they have a new name and fancy schmancy decoration, they are still a universal favourite. These are just a little more 'grown-up' in their flavour, with the addition of lots of orange zest and a touch of limoncello*. I like a not-too-sweet finish and also think less is more where icing is concerned, so the cream cheese based topping here fits the bill, for me at least. Makes 12 (but you can easily double the recipe) 140g soft butter 180g castor sugar zest of 1 large orange 1 teaspoon or vanilla extract 1 tablespoon limoncello 2 eggs 185 g self raising flour 125 ml milk 120g cream cheese about 1 teaspoon orange juice 200g icing sugar Beat the butter, orange zest and sugar together until creamy. Add the eggs one at a time, beating lightly after each egg is added. Gradually add the flour and milk and then stir in the limoncello. The batter should be pale and smooth and smell marvellous. Drop spoonfuls into a paper lined, 12 hole cake tin and then bake in the oven for around 20 – 25 minutes or until golden. The cakes should spring back when lightly pressed. The cakes need to be completely cooled before icing. To make the icing beat the cream cheese, orange juice and icing sugar together until smooth. You can let your imagination run wild with decorations or just serve them simply iced. I like lightly toasted coconut or tiny thyme flowers. * Limoncello is an lemon flavoured liqueur from southern Italy. Substitute orange juice or lemon juice if you can't find it.

Poached egg on toast

Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication – Leonardo da Vinci I doubt Leonardo da Vinci was referring to a poached egg on toast when he made that statement. However, a softly poached

egg – organic or from a generous friend's backyard chooks – with a chewy piece of toasted rye bread, topped with sea salt and fragrant black pepper speaks to me of both simplicity and sophistication. Sit in a sunny, warm place, eat your eggs and read something inspirational. Your day will be better for having eaten something so beautiful, yet so lacking in fuss and artifice. You can dress them up with smoked salmon, or ham-off-the-bone, or a sprinkling of dukkah for a special occasion, but they stand very well all on their own. There are many firmly held views about the best way to poach an egg so if you are committed to your way, go for it. Otherwise, here's how it's done at our place. Serves 1 Bring a medium sized saucepan half-filled with water to a gentle boil. Swirl the water around with a knife and then quickly break in the eggs. Turn the heat down a little and cook for four minutes. While the eggs are cooking, toast the bread and butter it generously. Using a slotted spoon, gently lift out the eggs and place onto the toast. Season with the sea salt and black pepper.

Spiced carrot dip

My father-in-law ate carrots under sufferance and to tease him I used to suggest all sorts of carrot based recipes for me to cook and him to eat. He never tried this spicy dip, but I like to think that if I hadn't told him that it was made with carrots, he would have loved it. Serve it with bread, lavash crackers or toasted pita bread. Makes about 1 cup 500g carrots 1 teaspoon butter 1 tablespoon olive oil a good pinch of dried chilli flakes, or more if you like things spicier 1 teaspoon ground cumin 1 teaspoon honey juice of 1/2 lemon sea salt Peel and chop the carrots into medium sized pieces. Cover with water and simmer over a gentle heat until the carrots are very soft. Add all the rest of the ingredients. Blend in a food processor for a smooth dip or mash with a fork for a more rustic result. Season to taste with salt. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Slow roasted tomatoes

These tomatoes are incredibly simple to make, taste fantastic and can be used in a multitude of ways. I like to have them as part of an antipasto platter, roughly chopped and stirred through pasta, layered in a vegetable lasagne, smashed onto toast with fresh ricotta and basil, or just by themselves. Hot, warm or cold they are fabulous. 1 kg roma tomatoes sea salt freshly ground black pepper about 2 tablespoons good quality olive oil Slice the tomatoes in half lengthwise.

Lay them in a single layer on a baking tray lined with silicone paper. Sprinkle with salt and pepper and drizzle the olive oil over the top. Place in an oven that has been preheated to 140 degrees celsius and roast for 45 minutes – 1 hour depending on how big the tomatoes are. They need to be very soft but still holding their shape and not over browned to ensure that all the sweet flavours of the tomatoes have had time to develop fully.

Dukkah

I love the nutty, spicy flavour and crunchy texture of dukkah, especially when I eat it with soft, warm turkish bread dipped in fruity, grass-green extra virgin olive oil. The word dukkah comes from the Arabic word meaning “to pound” since the spices and nuts are pounded together after being dry roasted. There are many different combinations of ingredients, but most of the recipes I’ve seen include sesame seeds, coriander, cumin, salt and pepper. This is my fairly traditional version, although I sometimes vary the combination of nuts by adding pistachios or pecan nuts. This recipe makes about 2 cups of dukkah. 100g sesame seeds 125 g hazelnuts 25g whole cumin seeds 25g whole coriander seeds 1 teaspoon sea salt flakes (I like Maldon Sea Salt) 2 teaspoons freshly ground black pepper Toast the sesame seeds in a small frying pan for 1 – 2 minutes until they are lightly golden and then put in a medium sized bowl. Toast the cumin and coriander in the same pan for 1 – 2 minutes, or until they release their aromas. Pound them up in a mortar and pestle or spice grinder until quite finely ground and then add to the sesame seeds. Roast the hazelnuts in a 180 C oven for 4 – 5 minutes and then tip into a tea towel, wrap them up and rub vigorously to remove most of the skin from the nuts. Coarsely grind the hazelnuts in the mortar and pestle or spice grinder and then add them to the bowl along with the salt and pepper. Stir everything together and when completely cold, store in a glass jar.

Pesto

My kids say that this pesto is the besto. From early October right through to the end of March where we live (in Queensland) my basil plants yield prolifically, so much so that I make pesto around once a week. Home made is so much better than even the best shop bought pesto and if you have a biggish pot and a warm sunny spot in your garden or patio you can grow your own basil and make pesto whenever the mood strikes. If you do grow your own basil, pick it in the morning before the leaves wilt with the heat and lose some of their plumpness and

sweetness. This recipe makes enough pesto for around 500g pasta but there are so many great ways to use this simple, classic sauce. It will keep in the fridge, tightly sealed and covered with a thin film of olive oil for three or four days, if it lasts that long! Serves 4

3 cups fresh basil leaves
2 / 3 cup pine nuts
1 cup extra virgin olive oil
2 / 3 cup finely grated parmesan cheese

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Put the pine nuts on a tray and roast in the oven until lightly golden. Once the pine nuts have cooled, place them and all the other ingredients in a food processor and pulse them until well combined but with a slightly chunky consistency.

Buttermilk panna cotta

This panna cotta was inspired by a Maggie Beer recipe to which I have added my own twist. It is creamy and smooth but not quite so decadently rich as a panna cotta made purely on cream and making it is simplicity itself. I like to serve it with fresh berries in spring or with mango and passionfruit in the summer. It also is fabulous as a do-ahead dessert for a party.

serves 6

3 leaves of gold strength gelatine
1 2/3 cups pure pouring cream
150 g raw castor sugar
1 1/4 cups buttermilk juice of 1 lemon
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract, or 1/2 vanilla bean, split

Soak the gelatine leaves in cold water to soften. Combine the cream, sugar and vanilla in a saucepan on medium heat and bring it almost to the boil. Take off the heat and add it to the buttermilk in a bowl. Stir through the lemon juice and let it cool a little. Squeeze the excess moisture out of the gelatine and whisk into the buttermilk and cream mixture. Pour into moulds and then set in the fridge for around 4 hours. Serve with seasonal fruit. (You can turn the panna cottas out onto a plate to serve, but I am always too cowardly and pressed for time so I set them in small glasses and serve.)

Cous cous with herbs and green chilli

I always say that cous cous is the working woman's friend. It is so quick and simple to prepare. But, it needs a little bit of love and attention by adding flavour and texture or else it is beyond boring. This is a version I have recently started making, mainly because I grow my own herbs, so there is always something in the garden that will add the necessary bazinga. Serves 4 as an accompaniment

1 cup cous cous
1 tablespoon good quality olive oil
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
About 1 cup of roughly chopped fresh herbs. Whatever you have around will most likely work. I always use flat leaf parsley and basil and then add chives and a little fresh thyme

too. 1 or 2 fresh green chillies, finely chopped, depending on how hot you like things. Leave out the seeds for less heat. Put the cous cous in the bowl you want to serve it in. Pour on 1 cup of boiling water and cover the bowl. Let it sit for 5 minutes. Use a fork to separate the grains and then add the herbs and chilli. Season well with salt and pepper and then drizzle over the olive oil and stir it through. That's it. Done. Yummy.

Lemon friands

Friands are buttery, almondy and rich. Traditionally baked in a special oval shape, they have a completely different texture to other more traditional small cakes or muffins and are just a little bit glamorous. I first started making friands when one of my children was diagnosed with coeliac disease because they can also be made very successfully with gluten free flour. I make all sorts of friands but these are my favourites. Blueberries or blackberries can be substituted for the raspberries. They are best eaten warm with coffee or tea and in the company of good friends. 190g unsalted butter 60g plain flour [or use gluten free flour] 1 1 / 3 cups (200g) icing sugar, plus extra to dust 120g almond meal 5 egg whites Grated zest of 1 lemon 100g of frozen raspberries Preheat oven to 180°C. Melt butter and use a little to grease a 12-hole friand pan or muffin pan. Dust with a little flour, shaking out excess. Sift the flour and sugar into a large bowl, then stir in the almond meal. Place egg whites in a small bowl and lightly froth with a fork. Add to dry ingredients with melted butter and zest, stirring until completely combined. Fill each friand hole one-third full. Put three or four raspberries in each hole, and then fill until the hole is two-thirds full with more mixture. Bake for 25-35 minutes until golden and a skewer inserted in the centre comes out clean. Remove from the oven, leave in the pan for 5 minutes, then turn out onto a wire rack to cool. Dust with icing sugar just before serving.

Poached rhubarb and raspberries

Rhubarb has a reputation for being sour or stringy or just plain yukky. But it is the most gorgeous thing and this way of preparing it, gently poached with vanilla and with the addition of bright, tangy raspberries, is one of the best ways to experience what rhubarb is all about. It is really important not to overcook it – when poached it should still hold its shape. I like to serve it with greek yoghurt and toasted brioche, but it is also fabulous on meusli for breakfast or used as a base for a truly outstanding crumble. Serves 4 1 bunch rhubarb 1 vanilla bean 100g caser

sugar 1 punnet fresh raspberries (or 300g frozen raspberries) 1 orange toasted brioche and thick greek yoghurt, to serve Wash the rhubarb and then cut into 5 cm lengths. Place in a medium saucepan. Split the vanilla bean in half and carefully scrape out the seeds. Put the bean and the seeds into the saucepan, along with the sugar, and the zest and juice of the orange. Cover the saucepan and simmer gently until the rhubarb is soft but still holding its shape. Take off the heat and add the raspberries. Stir very gently and then leave to cool. serve warm or at room temperature with thick greek yoghurt and toasted brioche.

Black forest mousse

I have to thank my fifteen year old son for this recipe which he adapted from a 1970s chocolate mousse recipe that was dog-eared and smeared with chocolate stains from overuse. He added the cherries and their tartness is a perfect foil for the rich chocolate and cream. If it is summertime and cherries are plentiful where you live, why not poach them yourself – but make sure you use sour morello cherries for the best flavour. The better the quality of the chocolate you use the better the final result – and, of course, there is no other chocolate but dark chocolate. serves 6 500g pitted morello cherries, drained, syrup reserved 300ml thickened cream 50g-piece dark chocolate, shaved 200 g dark chocolate 300 ml cream 4 large eggs 1 tablespoon castor sugar 1 teaspoon vanilla First make the mousse. Melt 200g chocolate in a bowl in the microwave. Use a medium low setting and stir after every minute as chocolate burns easily in the microwave. You could also melt the chocolate in a bowl placed over a pot of gently simmering water. Separate eggs. Mix egg yolks with sugar and vanilla and stir together. Mix with melted chocolate. Gently whip 300ml cream, add to chocolate mixture. Beat egg whites to stiff peaks. Put $\frac{1}{4}$ of the egg whites with chocolate mixture and combine, then add rest of egg white and fold through gently until completely mixed. Do not beat or over mix or the mousse will lose its airy texture. Chill for about 3 hours to let it set. In a separate bowl whip the remaining 300ml of cream to soft peaks. Layer the mousse, cream and cherries in individual glasses. Repeat so that there are two layers in each glass. Decorate with the 50g shaved chocolate on top, and a drizzle of cherry juice.

Rockmelon with prosciutto and thyme

Everyone from Jamie Oliver to Elizabeth Romer have rhapsodised about this simple Italian dish

and with good reason. It tastes stunning and looks wonderful. You must, must, must, though, use rock melon when it is at its seasonal best, heavy and dripping with sweet juices. Getting the prosciutto sliced paper thin is also important for the best result. It takes no time at all to prepare and every mouthful will be worth it. It works for breakfast, brunch or as a salad with a summer meal. Enjoy! Serves 4 1/2 rock melon, peeled and sliced into wedges, or scooped out into rough balls. 8-12 slices of paper thin prosciutto A few sprigs of fresh thyme with flowers, if they are in season Best quality olive oil Put the melon on a large serving platter and then carefully place the prosciutto around it, twisting and curling it around the pieces of melon. You could also wrap larger slices of melon with a slice of prosciutto, which I think is the more traditional method. Scatter over a few sprigs of thyme and thyme flowers and then very carefully drizzle a little olive oil over the top.

Pasta with roasted pumpkin and bacon

The sweetness of the roasted pumpkin contrasts beautifully with the salty crispness of the bacon and the nuttiness of the parmesan. Buy the best quality parmesan you can – it really makes a difference when you use good quality cheese. Serves 4 750g jap pumpkin, diced into 1 cm cubes 250g bacon, finely diced 2 cloves garlic, crushed 1 onion, diced 100g baby spinach 500g linguini 300ml cream 120g parmesan cheese, shaved Olive oil Salt and freshly ground black pepper Bake the pumpkin in the oven at 200C until lightly brown and soft, about 20 minutes. Meanwhile pan fry the onion and the bacon with a little oil until the onion is soft and bacon is becoming crispy. Add the garlic and cook for another minute. Put on a pot of water, salt lightly and bring to the boil. Cook the pasta until al dente. Just before the pasta is cooked, add the cream and the spinach to the bacon mixture and reduce slightly over medium heat. Drain the pasta and add it to the sauce with the roasted pumpkin. Top with the shaved parmesan and freshly ground black pepper and serve immediately.

Avocado with lime on sourdough toast

Avocado and lime are a winning combination and need nothing more than sea salt and lots of freshly ground black pepper to bring the flavours together. The avocado needs to be beautifully ripe and it is worth getting the avocado a couple of days before you need it to be sure of a softly yielding, creamy texture to contrast with the crisp toast and astringent lime.

Serves 2 1 perfectly ripe avocado 1 fresh lime extra virgin olive oil sea salt and freshly cracked black pepper 2 slices of sourdough bread, toasted Peel and halve the avocado. Slice thinly and place on the hot toast. Use a microplane or fine grater to zest the lime over the avocado. Season generously with sea salt and black pepper and drizzle with a little olive oil.