THE FLAVOUR GAME
exploring food through flavour
MILLIE MCLUSKIE
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Sometimes I get an itch. Thinking about food and what to cook - it’s akin to a phantom itch, you think you’ve got it, then it moves two inches to the left, then it’s gone again. Satisfaction is always just out of reach. For this reason, rarely do I cook exactly the same thing twice; there’s always something I could do differently. Every dinner gathering, I chastise myself for cooking something I’ve not done before - what if it goes wrong, what if I cook it for too long, what if the flavours are off, what if my friends don’t like it? So many ‘what ifs’ - but that’s what cooking is all about. Curiosity.

During my training at Le Cordon Bleu, I realised that while the chefs who taught us were indeed founts of knowledge, they were also fallible and full of contradictions. Cooking is a science so complex that few of us have all the answers for why something happens the way it does, and even fewer have the ability to control the kitchen environment to the point where every outcome can be precisely determined. Cooking requires a bit of know-how, a bit more guess work, and a lot of just giving it a go. It takes confidence - but how do you get that? It’s a keenness for exploration, an open mind, an acceptance of when things go wrong; the adage, ‘we learn from our mistakes’ was perhaps invented for the kitchen. But perhaps the most important ingredient for cooking (and you won’t get taught this at culinary school) is a sense of fun. The kitchen is my playground; it’s where I play the flavour game.

So, why ‘The Flavour Game’? Let’s look at the two components of this - ‘flavour’ and ‘game’. Perhaps most importantly is the ‘game’ bit - I want cooking to be playful! Food should be enjoyable and fun, not something to stress about - you don’t need to strive for perfection to achieve something delicious. For me, cooking is a means of relaxation and a canvas for creativity - you will not find any dogma in this book, except that which is (I hope) clearly meant in jest! Indulgence, deliciousness and fun are the only obligatories here. And flavour of course! By focusing on flavour over technique, good food is more accessible and achievable. It’s about what something tastes like, how flavours have been put together - not any convoluted processes it went through to get to your plate. Leave the 164-step method that requires 73 hours to prepare to the professionals (unless that’s your idea of a game). At home, food tastes better when it’s fun and enjoyable to make.

While all games must have some rules, the fun comes in the interpretation of these. Cooking isn’t an exact science as it often seems - sometimes you can follow a recipe to the dot and you end up with something inedible, other times you realise you’ve wholly misread the recipe and you end up with something fantastic (unless you’re Rachel in Friends and you’ve found yourself making a shepherd’s pie trifle for pudding, but even then at least Joey had some nice things to say about it). Experience teaches us that, while recipes are good for guidance, there are so many factors that can change the outcome of the cooking process. Ovens rarely emit the temperature they say they do, and each will have a hot spot or a cool spot in a different place - getting to know your oven is like trying to befriend a capricious cat, it’s not impossible but it’s not straightforward either. The size of your pan and the type of heat source will also alter how something cooks, and the ingredients themselves will vary - vegetables come in different shapes and sizes, and the freshness of pulses and spices will alter their flavour and how they cook. Instinct, intuition and experience trump recipe pedantry every time. As such, don’t be a slave to the cooking times and temperatures I’ve indicated in the following recipes - you’ll know your kitchen best, so if you think it’s done, it probably is! I’ve also tried to explain the reasoning behind the methods - this enables you to make a recipe your own, because once you understand why something is there you can decide whether or not you want to change it. Many of us read cookery books for inspiration rather than instruction, and I hope that is how the pages that follow will be used.

This cookery book was a product of the Covid-19 lockdown - a period of time that provided both opportunity and restriction (two key ingredients for creativity). The opportunity to devote my days to an indulgent project, a pipe dream never before afforded the time. And yet it faced restrictions too; trips to the supermarket were limited to once a week, some ingredients were scarce (plenty were not), testing a recipe more than once felt profligate, cooking anything not to be eaten was squandering. For props, I had only what was already at home (hence the ubiquitous Yuan china) and for the photography, it was me - an amateur, on an amateur DSLR; sans-studio or fancy lights, I plumped for a spot by a large window. And I was often chivvied on by a rumbling belly (or three). What resulted may not be perfect, but it’s the best of a bad situation. And if ever there was a time to find joy in food, and to play the flavour game, this was it.
literary larders: a musing

Flicking through The New Yorker archive, I fell into the delights of an article by Nora Ephron - My Cookbook Crushes. Ephron has a truly distinct style (Heartburn - the title of which neatly knits together the key components of her narrative: love aches injected with culinary morsels - had a recent resurgence and is well worth a perusal) and this piece, written in 2006, is an ode to recipes and relationships, or perhaps more aptly to relationships with recipes. Cookbooks carry with them backstories and associations, and should really stay with you in perpetuum - trends in food may come and go but, just like that pair of pale pink flared corduroys at the bottom of the chest of drawers, when the modernised version makes a comeback, it is the memories and authenticity of the old originals that we value most. Our days are punctuated by meals, and our lives punctuated by cookbooks - so much more than an instructive device, these collations of ingredients, methods and hopefully a generous serving of imagery, can provide the commas, ellipses and exclamation marks of our existence. As Ephron alludes, romantic relationships have strong parallels with cookbook crushes, and just as we never forget our first love, nor do we ever lose that capacity to find new love. I’m too young to write conclusively on such subject matter, but I can ruminate on beginnings.

There’s a reason concoction in the kitchen pairs so well with concoction on the page - as two of the most evocative art forms (except perhaps music, which can certainly take a seat at the table too) their synthesis makes for something really quite powerful and lovely. Some people quote Shakespeare and Homer, others Peep Show and Friends - but for some of us it’s Nigella and Jamie who’ve shaped our lexicon. And this doesn’t go undisclosed in the writings that feature most prominently on my (cook)book shelf.

Niki Segnit masterfully blends together cuisine and literature in her biblically proportioned Lateral Cooking, writing that ‘the legendary Marie-Antoine Carême once said that roux - the simply cooked mixture of flour and fat - was as indispensable to chefs as ink is to writers. These days, excepting a handful of romantic contrarians, chef-defenders of the roux are about as common as writers who choose the pen over the PowerBook’. Bearing in mind the weight of her treatise, we can safely assume that Segnit resides in the more liberated culinary camp (which encompasses most of us now) and which found its origins in the 1970s nouvelle cuisine, an antidote to the suffocatingly codified la grande cuisine of French masters, Escoffier and Carême.

Another proponent of a more liberated style of cooking, Sybil Kapoor identifies a congenial ethos whereby she edifies observation over pedagogy - “happily there is no such thing as right or wrong in cooking - only personal taste”. What a relief for someone who loathes instruction and acquiescence. Perhaps this explains my preference for exploring flavour over technique. It is possible to get a soufflé wrong, and an erroneous pastry case can crumble into a torrent of tears. Yet flavour is a more dependable companion; more readily available to play around with, and less likely to turn its back on you. A too-salty puttanesca can be remedied in ways that a scalded caramel cannot.

Segnit, writing again in the context of the roux, personifies her ingredients, metamorphosing them into Netflix-watching sofa-snugglers, as she laterally skips along “the roux continuum (towards) béchamel, the thick, flavoured white sauce under which ingredients unwind when they’re in the mood for a box set.” Apparently, not only are we having love affairs with culinary literature, but we develop relationships with our ingredients too. Few will be unfamiliar with the eroticised snippets of Jamie and Nigella, who ‘talk dirty’ about the succulence of breasts and the rough handling of balls. Add a degree of sophistication and food very much becomes a language of love. The penchant for good food lends to a much more reliable and steadfast relationship - bid adieu to unrequited crushes and temporary dalliances. As Ephron earnestly recalls, “If I was home alone at night, I cooked myself an entire meal from one of these cookbooks (Julia Child’s or Michael Field’s).” Then I sat down in front of the television set and ate it. I felt very brave and plucky as I ate my perfect dinner. O.K., I didn’t have a date, but at least I wasn’t one of those lonely women who sat at home with a pathetic container of yogurt. Eating a meal for four that I had cooked for myself was probably equally pathetic, but it never crossed my mind.” What better way to spend our evenings than conjuring up and subsequently devouring an amore (like a big pizza pie?) - how very Praying Mantis of us.

Coming full circle on this meandering, we arrive back at Niki Segnit and her decidedly lexical approach to food. The Flavour Thesaurus, which nominally yokes our two subject matters, is a most pertinent demonstration of this. In it she refers to her tidiness, an insistence to cling to instructions - but just as in matters of the heart, when it comes to the kitchen we can also prioritise intuition over rationality, feeling rather than thinking your way through. In this way, when working with flavour, you can sense your way to a harmonious palate just as well as, if not better than, if you journeyed there by logical means. But for those not quite brave enough to take that leap of faith, Segnit’s compendium provides something of a guidebook to flavour matchmaking, a halfway house between the pedagogy of a recipe and the free-for-all of raw experimentation. And so, these are my cookbook crushes. I’ve encountered only a soupçon of the dalliances that lie ahead of me, but I’ll always be fond of where it all started: this is just the beginning of a lifetime of loves.
For years I’ve been making soda bread with flour and oats, bicarbonate of soda and buttermilk; indeed, this is what chemically leavened bread whittles down to - flour, raising agent, and something to stimulate that raising agent. However, the mysterious disappearing act of buttermilk circa January 2020, and then of lemons only a few months later (at that inauspicious time…) saw me reaching for another alternative. And I think I prefer it to home-curdled ‘milk plus lemon’. The use of white wine vinegar can also negate the need for a dairy component altogether, with the volume of buttermilk being swapped for water and vinegar. However, the fat content of the milk not only adds flavour but gives structure to the rise of the loaf (by retaining the gasses released during baking) - so a water and vinegar version might only be truly appreciated by a lactose-intolerant recipient.

In exploring the relationship between soda bread and scones, the role of the egg came into question. Not a prerequisite to either, but often added to scones to lend extra buoyancy and ‘cakey-ness’. In a soda bread, this added bounce compensates for a tendency to experiment with flours, often heavier than the typical plain used, and overall contributes to both a superior crumb and delicious crust. The latter is thanks to the Maillard reaction - the interaction of sugars and proteins (more specifically in this case, but not exclusively, the extra amino acids from the egg and the lactose from the milk) in dry heat which results in browning - here, an attractive and tasty golden crust. (It’s worth bearing in mind that proteins and sugars are present in the flour alone, so this browning reaction occurs in all breads, but is exaggerated in bakes where there are additional sources of amino acids (protein) and sugar, in its various forms.) If this hasn’t persuaded you that adding an egg to your soda bread is a good idea, try this recipe and I challenge you to disagree!

**soda bread**

makes 1 small loaf

- 150g plain flour
- 150g self-raising wholemeal
- ¾ tsp bicarbonate of soda
- ½ tsp salt
- 50g jumbo oats
- 1 egg
- 175ml milk
- 2 tsp white wine vinegar

1. Preheat the oven to 200C/180C fan.
2. Sift together the flours, bicarbonate of soda and salt to ensure even distribution. Then stir through the oats.
3. Whisk the egg and add to the milk and vinegar, stirring to combine.
4. Make a well in the centre of your flour mix. Pour in the egg, milk and vinegar and stir to combine. It will be slightly too wet to handle - that’s ok. Scoop it onto a lightly floured baking sheet and shape it into a round (using either your hand or a butter knife to scoop any stragglers from around the edge up and over into the middle, rotating the baking sheet as you do).
5. Score a cross on the top - fabled to let the fairies out, so we must adhere to this. (Practically speaking, though, this should also aid even cooking by allowing the heat to easily reach the inside.)
6. Cook for 20 minutes, until golden brown and you can play knock-knock jokes on the bottom. If it needs a little more time, turn it upside down for a further 3-5 minutes.
7. Transfer the loaf to a wire rack and cover with a tea towel until ready to eat.

18 quick bites
the soda bread game

Soda bread is delicious in its rustic simplicity - but adding a few layers of flavour never goes amiss. Here I have included a few ways to play around with what is a very versatile bread.

Any (relatively flavourless) vinegar should be fine, white wine or apple cider for example. There’s nothing stopping you from swapping this for lemon juice either, it’s just a question of what you’ve got.

It doesn’t matter which flour is self-raising, or if neither are you could add ½ tsp baking powder or increase the bicarbonate of soda to 1 tsp or so. The moral of the story is despite precision being sacrosanct among bakers, there’s a lot more leeway than we are led to believe...

Play around with the flours - plain, wholemeal, rye, spelt, oat (whizzed up oats). Buckwheat flour is gluten-free so I’d avoid this in bread, scones etc - it is likely to result in something that needs several swills of tea and something of a jaw workout to get down. Start experimenting by exchanging no more than half of the total flour for your chosen alternative. This way the fifty percent plain flour acts as a safeguard against the possible one hundred percent disaster.

Seeds and nuts make a great addition, as do (small bits of) dried fruits. Try a fig and walnut loaf toasted, with piles of butter and a steaming hot coffee in the morning. Or take this into standalone-lunchtime-bread realms with grated beetroot, parsnip or carrot and a dispersion of cheese (again, anything goes - feta, goat, stilton, cheddar...) Spices and dried herbs are another low-maintenance way to get extra flavour into your loaf without needing to concern yourself with their effect on the final bake.

With regard to quantities, I’d recommend roughly equal weights of flour to grated vegetable - for example, 200g flour and 200g grated raw beetroot - and the cheese about half of that, at around 100g. For this, you will need to increase the raising agent; a combination of baking powder and bicarbonate of soda should do the trick - try 1-2 tsp baking powder and ½-1 tsp bicarbonate of soda. Remember that bicarbonate of soda needs something acidic in the mixture to activate it, whereas baking powder is activated simply when wet. When adding seeds or dried fruit, opt for roughly 75-150g overall of seeds and dried fruit per 300g flour.

These quantities are just an initial suggestion. Once you’ve made a soda bread a couple of times, you’ll know what texture to expect at the different stages of mixing and cooking - aim for something like this. If the mixture is too wet or difficult to handle, cook it in a greased and lined loaf tin. A wetter dough will take longer to cook - vegetable loaves may need up to 1hr20 or so, and they may need to be covered with foil for the second half of the bake. A skewer inserted will not come out completely clean but shouldn’t be too wet.
things on toast

An excellent opportunity to experiment with flavour matchmaking, without the commitment - kind of like a first date or the Topshop changing room. This doesn’t really need a page in a cookery book, but many a page has been printed celebrating crostini and bruschetta, which just goes to show that if you (loosely) translate ‘things on toast’ into Italian, anything goes...

There is also absolutely no time constraint on when you might eat your ‘things on toast’. I suppose that’s part of its allure - the whole notion of it condones snacking.

Here are just a few suggestions to get the flavour game started...

~ soft goats cheese, fresh figs, za’atar, thyme (pictured)
~ feta, roasted rhubarb, black beans, thyme
~ kimchi, feta, avocado
~ kimchi, blue cheese
~ fried leeks, gorgonzola // braised celery, stilton
~ tahini, quince compote
~ scrambled eggs, marmalade, poppy seed
~ gorgonzola, charred red cabbage
~ labneh, chorizo crumb, caraway
~ muddled roast squash, crumbled amaretti, parmesan
~ mashed sweet potato, pomegranate molasses, sumac, feta, mint
~ ricotta, marmalade, thyme
~ feta, summer berries, za’atar
~ pear, stilton, dark chocolate - definitely put this one under the grill for some ooze action
juniper and thyme taralli

A bite-size piece of southern Italy. These simple yet delicious crunchy morsels will elevate your snack game considerably, but they do necessitate a tipple so have a bottle of white ready in the fridge, or if you’re feeling fancy (and authentic), go down the Aperol/Prosecco route.

There isn’t an awful lot to say about taralli - and once you’ve started eating them no words will emanate but ‘mmmm’ - but the joy of writing about food is the slightly obscure places, in this case etymological, that exploratory meanderings can take you. I really wanted the word taralli itself to have some exciting esoteric meaning, but alas I’m yet to discover it. Nevertheless, I did chance upon the charmingly inelegant word, ‘toroidal’, denoting the shape of the taralli - a surface of revolution with a hole in the middle, or for the non-geometrists among us, a doughnut. Evidently the person who described taralli as such was also no geometrist, as a toroid must not have a point of intersection, whereas for taralli that is perfectly permissible. On a more idiomatic note, taralli not only taste damn good, but they keep the peace too. The Italian phrase ‘a tarallucci e vino’ (‘tarallucci’ being the affectionate diminutive of taralli) is often used to resolve a dispute, serious or otherwise, in a less than serious or principled way - i.e. encouraging the disputants to call it quits and have a glass of wine - something that will appease those with both a fear of confrontation and a penchant for drinks and nibbles.

This recipe makes one small bowl, enough to see about three people through one drink. If a second round is on the cards, or if your conviviality exceeds mine, double the recipe.

1. Combine the dry ingredients (flour, salt & any dry flavourings e.g. spices, seeds, etc).
2. Make a well in the middle and stir in the oil and white wine, bringing it together to form a dough.
3. Knead for 15-20 minutes, then leave to rest in the fridge for 30 minutes.
4. Preheat the oven to 200C/180C fan.
5. Once rested, pull off a walnut sized amount of dough. Roll it between both hands and the work surface, pulling gently to elongate, until it’s just under 1cm in diameter and about 8-10cm long. Loop it around and join the ends together. Repeat this process until all the dough is used.
6. Bring a large saucepan of water to a rolling boil. Drop the shaped taralli in and cook until they float. Remove with a slotted spoon and place on kitchen towel. You may need to do this in batches. Once they’re all cooked in this way, transfer them to a baking sheet and cook in the oven for 25-30 minutes, checking after 20 minutes, until golden brown and crispy.
7. Eat as soon as they won’t burn your mouth, and with a very large Aperol.

makes 1 small bowl

125g flour (see notes overleaf)
generous pinch of sea salt
5g juniper berries, ground
few sprigs of thyme, leaves only
37ml olive oil
50ml white wine (preferably dry)
the taralli game

A note on the flour - I tend to use 00 pasta flour, but plain and strong white bread flour works just as well. I am also keen to try with alternative grain flours too. I would be wary of anything with a low gluten content though - when shaping the taralli, the dough should have that frustrating elasticity.

A note on the oil - being an Italian food, olive oil is the go-to choice for taralli, and your choice of oil is really important here - no matter what flavours you throw at your taralli the flavour of the oil is undeniably so, make sure it’s one you’d happily dress a simple salad with or dip bread into. Put simply, your oil has got to taste banging. Rapeseed oil (and you can get some excellent extra virgin versions) is a keen contender - opt for this if your other flavour components wander astray from Italian finocchio (fennel seed), cracked black pepper, onion or the somewhat ubiquitous gusto pizza (tomato, oregano, paprika).

Making it sweet - add 25-50g caster sugar, depending on how sweet you want them. The sugared dough might be a little stickier to knead but it firms up nicely in the fridge before being rolled. I opt for a flavourless oil, such as sunflower, to avoid interference with the sweeter flavours. If using sultanas, or another dried fruit, chop these up fairly small as whole sultanas are just too chunky to roll. The same goes for nuts etc.

flavour combinations
~ fennel seed
~ black pepper & sea salt
~ onion
~ ‘pizza’ i.e. some combination of herb (oregano, basil), sundried tomato or pepper, and often onion
~ caraway & fennel
~ thyme & lemon zest
~ rosemary & parmesan
~ cumin, coriander, turmeric
~ curry leaves…(tempered and then ground to a powder)
~ sesame - seeds &/or oil
~ za’atar
~ urfa chilli flakes
~ paprika &/or cayenne
~ toasted hazelnut & chocolate (cocoa or nibs)
~ sultana, cinnamon, nutmeg (pictured)
eating with your senses: how we taste food

As children, if we didn’t like a certain food, we were told to hold our nose and think of strawberries while we swallowed - it made potato salad (a nemesis of mine) much more palatable. And this wasn’t just a silly trick to play on children; unlike the spoonful of yoghurt that emitted the ‘whhheeeee’ of a zooming airplane, the ‘hold your nose’ trick was more method than madness. Why? The answer to this lies in the distinction between taste and flavour - two words that despite being used interchangeably in fact signify two very different things. The English language doesn’t cater for the difference between the two, but delicious tasting (I’ve fallen into the semantic trap!) food definitely should. Learning to identify and utilise both tastes and flavours, as well as the number of other sensory aspects that feed into how we perceive food, will make for much more exciting and delicious menus, whether at fine dining establishments or in your own kitchen.

Taste is sensitivity to water-soluble compounds that are detected on taste buds on the tongue, palate and in the throat. As we chew food, these compounds dissolve and enter the taste buds, triggering nerve impulses that are transmitted to the brain. We have sensitivity to just five tastes: sweet, salty, sour, bitter and umami (savoury). One of any combination of these can be found in all foods. At a rudimentary level, examples of the tastes are as follows: sodium chloride is salty, glucose is sweet, citric acid is sour. Bitter and umami are slightly more rogue, but compounds that trigger these include pure caffeine for bitter, and monosodium glutamate (MSG) for umami. (MSG has been labelled as the evilest of additives, but at a molecular level it is deliciousness itself.) However, unless doing a controlled taste test, we rarely experience just one at a time and so it can be hard to differentiate clearly. Take a clementine - it’s definitely sweet, but also has a sourness to it. Or try a tomato - tomatoes are given as an example of umami flavour, but it also has a certain sweetness (if you’re lucky enough to get a big juicy Italian one) or a sourness (if you’re stuck with the under-sunned English kind).

Flavour, on the other hand, is the detection of airborne compounds in and around the back of the throat. It is perceived by the olfactory system - the sensory system used for olfaction, i.e. smelling. This requires air flow to carry the flavour compounds over the olfactory nerves (imagine a C-shape between your nose and mouth, and they’re somewhere in the middle of it). Think back to the last time your nose was blocked by a head cold, and food and drink didn’t taste as much as it usually does. Except it did have taste (that lemon and honey concoction was still sour and sweet), but the flavour of your food - anything fruity, or herbal, or nutty, etc. - was much harder to perceive. This is because there was no air flow to carry the flavour compounds over the flavour receptors (in the olfactory system). In contrast to the finiteness of the five tastes, the odorants and aromas that give us flavour are almost infinite. Well, maybe not quite infinite - 10,000 used to be the (somewhat arbitrary) number bandied about; now it’s more like a trillion or so. Once you’ve reached that sort of scale the precise number becomes slightly irrelevant - and try finding a trillion different ways to describe these! Flavour is the watercolour painting to taste’s pencil sketch.
If you start looking into this, you’ll find a lot of literature that makes claims such as ‘95% of what we taste is actually smell’. Charles Spence, writing in the journal *Flavour*, emphasises that, as it stands at the moment, discrimination between taste and flavour is a more qualitative than quantitative practice. Claims that 75-95% of taste is smell - or any percentage for that matter - are something of a ‘medical myth’ as there is little scientific evidence to support precise percentages, whereas words like ‘dominant’ and ‘majority’ hit the qualitative spot. What is more, it would be misleading to claim that any amount of flavour is smell, because olfaction is broken down into two distinct processes. We have orthonasal olfaction, this is smell and occurs at the nose-end of the olfactory system, and retronasal olfaction, this is what we perceive as flavour and happens at the mouth/throat end of the olfactory system. While both of these influence the way that we perceive what we eat, it is only the retronasal part that actually constitutes our perception of flavour. The orthonasal part (or smell) is what is described as modulatory - it has an effect on our perception of flavour but isn’t smell itself. Take a Sauvignon Blanc - on first sniff you may notice a strong floral aroma, but on sipping the wine the citrus notes come through as flavour. An aroma on the nose isn’t the same as an aroma in the mouth.

This leads us on to another aspect that makes the definition of flavour a tricky business; how can we discriminate between sensory inputs that modulate our perception of flavour and those that are constitutive of it. Our perception of food is multidimensional and multisensory; the way something smells, looks, sounds or feels can affect the way we taste our food - but that does not mean these are actually what make up the flavour and the process of perceiving it. The International Standards Organisation defines flavour as a complex combination of the olfactory (smell/flavour), gustatory (taste) and trigeminal (keep reading!) sensations perceived during taste; flavour may be influenced by tactile, thermal, painful and/or kinaesthetic effects. By way of a jargon buster, the ‘trigeminal nerve’ is the largest of the cranial nerves and transmits sensory information to the face; ‘kinaesthetic’ is relating to a person’s awareness of the position and movement of their body parts by means of sensory organs. ‘Complex combination’ is just about the gist of it.

One thing that is clear, however, is that what we refer to as ‘taste’ isn’t just one thing. It can be helpful to see it as built upon three main pillars: aroma, taste and chemical irritation (here, ‘aroma’ is standing in for what we’ve already described as ‘flavour’, while we use the word ‘flavour’ to signify the overall perception - you can see why some additional vocabulary would be helpful here…). We can categorise the first two, so let’s look at the third element. Chemical irritation takes into consideration the effect of, for example, spicy food on the palate - chillies offer something over and above taste and aroma, and it’s undeniable that heat plays a huge part in a lot of cuisines. This is referred to as trigeminal chemical irritation and can also be called ‘chemesthesis’. It includes flavour experiences such as the fizzy tingle from CO2 in sparkling water, the burn from black pepper, hot chillies, ginger and so forth, the nasal pungency of mustard and horseradish, and the lachrymatory (tear-inducing) effect of raw onions. In this way, our sensitivity to the chemical components in what we consume plays a significant role in our experience of food in general. However, it is complicated by the fact that the trigeminal nerves that pass on this information also mediate tactile, thermal and pain sensations; therefore, the distinction between chemical sense and tactile sense are easily blurred.

Take tannins, for example; tannins are chemical stimuli (a food molecule that evokes a sensory response) and are thus constitutive of flavour as a chemical irritation. However, the astrigent sensations they provoke are also tactile, and thus modulatory. In the case of tannins, their astrigency makes the mouth feel dry and cause puckering of cheeks (think over-stewed tea or a heavy Bordeaux). To further complicate matters, while scientists describe this astrigency as chemical irritation, wine tasters would account for this as a component of ‘flavour’, and thus we can see that even when we define flavour perception by its constituent parts - aroma, taste and chemical irritation - and demarcate the modulatory from the constitutive, experts from different fields send our neat taxonomy into disarray.

It isn’t only the experts and their different ways of defining things that cause the confusion though - the olfactory (aroma) and gustatory (taste) stimuli are at a degree themselves interconnected. This can confuse the distinction between taste and flavour but can also be exploited to enhance the perception of food. In this way, aromas can enhance or suppress certain tastes; for example, caramel aromas simultaneously augment the perception of sweetness and diminish that of sourness. This is in part also a learned response and the extent to which sweet and sour are altered will depend on how often a tartant (taste-provoking chemical) and aroma have been experienced together. It is even the case that certain aromas such as vanilla, caramel or strawberry give rise to the perception of sweetness in an otherwise tasteless solution. Of course, we perceive the flavour and taste of our food in a myriad of permutations, and each of these will appear to be slightly unique for each person. Much of what we perceive as flavour is learned, culturally defined, and redolent of much more than food.

This leads to the suggestion that the way we perceive food is idiosyncratic and culturally learned. It’s not just a question of what’s going on in our mouths, but what’s going on in our minds too. Our likes and dislikes are subjective, though there may be patterns and similarities with other people’s - close family, cultural groups, strangers from the other side of the world - but ultimately it comes down to the precise nexus of food experiences that form our individual preferences. There is some science behind this too - proximity within the brain means that flavour reception triggers memories and emotions. Food is highly evocative; Brakes herbed potato wedges send me plummeting back to the horrors of school dinners, and crystallised ginger is reminiscent (ironically) of nauseating car journeys. We can train ourselves to like and dislike things through habit and mental persuasion - however much I say that I like celery (and do I?) would I seek it out if it was 500 calories a stick? And would chocolate brownies be as delicious if, instead of being an indulgence, they suddenly became virtuous?

A person’s mindset and preconceived ideas weigh heavily in their perceptions of what they eat. Why else would supermarketers do blind taste tests of own-brand crumpets versus Warburtons? Because tasting is fundamentally a cerebral activity. A favourite example of mine is a two-Michelin-starred restaurant in Switzerland where comical plastic cows are placed on each table and which, once picked up, emit a languid ‘moo’. This bizarre occurrence, most unexpected of a fancy restaurant, immediately makes the ambience more playful and relaxed. The diners are now better placed to enjoy, and to really taste, their food. In a similar vein, when I experiment with a new recipe (and do I?) do I not always seek to find if it was 500 calories a stick? And would chocolate brownies be as delicious if, instead of being an indulgence, they suddenly became virtuous?

Finally, the modulatory aspects of taste and flavour perception are key to the overall dining experience; what we feel, see and hear also impacts our perception of food. Take a starchy tablecloth and linen napkin compared to an uncovered plastic table-top and paper napkin - these are likely indicators of the expense and quality of the food, if not your likely enjoyment of it. For me, there is something about a cheap gingham table-cloth and scratched, unmatched cutlery which spells delicious rustic and grandmother’s secrets; but give me crisp white linen and gleaming silverware and I’ll be preoccupied more by potential slip-ups of decorum than by gustatory delight. This process is referred to as ‘sensation transference’ whereby our perception of, say, the tableware influences our perception of the food. While there are supposed ‘rules’ that restaurateurs
may want to follow, for example a weightier menu, heavy silver cutlery and attentive staff are all said to indicate better quality food; these signals may not evoke the same response in everyone. Having a stranger tuck me and my chair into the table doesn’t really put me in a relaxed state to enjoy the subsequent meal. And what is it with the small plates trend? They’re simply never big enough to share, so evolutionary instincts set in and conversation halts while you fight your way to the last morsel of ‘tempura caraway carlin pea’. Did you actually taste anything?! So do away with the restaurant environment altogether and plonk me, please, at a large table of friends and family tucking into an abundance of home-cooked goodness, amidst vociferous ‘yums’ and the clink of wine glasses - the food may not be of the same quality, but there’s one thing I do know, conviviality tastes better than pomposity.

The touch, texture, or mouth feel of the food itself is also highly significant and it is common for this to be a reason for disliking food; compare the stringiness of grated carrot to the succulent crunch of cucumber, or the importance placed upon the texture of meat as a sign of its quality and cooking. Shellfish commonly provokes exclamations of ‘oh but the texture is yucky’ - and indeed there’s something about the squidgy and slimy that is commonly, if not universally, off-putting. Another abhorrence - tongue; it’s suggestive of a bit more intimacy than I’d like with what’s on my plate. In contrast, chocolate’s renowned appeal is in part attributed to it being almost unique in the way it melts at mouth temperature. Noise too is a factor; around a quarter of drinks orders on planes are for tomato juice, a drink far more popular in the stratosphere than anywhere else. The booming of the engines interferes with our ability to perceive sweetness and enhances our savoury taste, hence the hankering for a slurp of that umami tomato.

All of this is more than just a search for semantic precision - if we ask each other, ‘what can you taste?’, and we understand each other when the reply is something like ‘it’s nutty’ or even ‘it tastes like a summer holiday in Provence’ - both evidently not one of the five tastes - then why does it matter whether we call taste flavour or flavour taste? It doesn’t really. But - and there is a ‘but’ - once we learn about the difference between taste and flavour (and chemical irritation) - what gives rise to each, how one affects the other, not to mention the plethora of other factors that influence the way we perceive food - how something feels, visual cues, the sound our food makes, as well as the memories it can evoke - this can have a very practical impact on our cooking. We can add interest to a simple rice dish by adding salty capers and sweet sultanas, while layering it with the herbal aromas of mint and the earthy flavour of walnuts. Add to this the crunch of the nuts and the succulence of the berries, a beautifully and plentifully arranged plate, the company of friends and roars of laughter, and you’ve got yourself something truly delicious.

You may well have put that altogether without any inkling of what the scientists call ‘gastrophysics’ - but now that you do have an inkling, you can drop in some fun gastro facts when the conversation lulls…
Rhubarb is, perhaps unexpectedly, a leafy member of the buckwheat family with thick petioles (a fancy word for ‘stem’) that’s tart and succulent and boasts a green-pink ombré (very Microsoft WordArt circa 2001).

The word ‘rhubarb’ also refers to the nonsensical indistinct mutterings of a group of actors giving the impression of background noise. Don’t be fooled, the addition of rhubarb in this recipe is anything but indistinct background noise - it’s quite the opposite; the characterful sharpness of the rhubarb elevates this otherwise beige concoction into something a little bit different. It’s a riff on cauliflower cheese, but with two ingredients (rhubarb and tahini) that you tend to find cosying up in a galette at pudding time.

Cauliflower leaves often get side-lined, tossed aside and relegated to the compost; but they’re delicious roasted in a little oil and black pepper for about 10 minutes (at the same temperature you roast the florets). These are lovely served as a garnish atop this cauliflower bake.

1. Preheat the oven to 220C/200C fan.
2. Toss the cauliflower florets in rapeseed oil and 1½ tbsp of the sumac, season with salt and pepper and transfer to a roasting tray lined with baking parchment (this prevents the flavoursome bits sticking). Roast in the oven for 20-25 minutes, until soft and starting to brown.
3. Meanwhile, make the tahini béchamel. In a medium-sized saucepan over a medium heat, melt the butter and stir in both flours to form a roux. Continue stirring this for 3-4 minutes to cook it out. Then, slowly pour in the milk and stir until you get a smooth sauce (you may want to use a whisk for this). Cook for 5 or so minutes, stirring continuously, until the sauce has thickened. In a separate bowl, whisk together the tahini and water until smooth and an off-white colour, then add this to the béchamel along with salt and pepper to taste, and stir to combine. It should be fairly thick but pourable - you may need to let it down with a touch more milk. Remove from the heat until needed.
4. When the cauliflower is almost cooked, toss the 1-inch chunks of rhubarb in a drizzle of rapeseed oil and seasoning. Add to the tray with the cauliflower and roast for a further 5 minutes, until the rhubarb is just starting to soften but retaining its shape.
5. Transfer the roasted cauliflower and rhubarb to an ovenproof dish, pour over the tahini béchamel, then sprinkle on top the finely sliced rhubarb, parmesan, lemon zest and pine nuts, if using. Give it a good grinding of black pepper and place under the grill for 3-5 minutes, keeping an eye on it. You want the rhubarb on top to soften slightly but avoid burning the cheese.
6. Serve immediately with green vegetables - the cauliflower leaves are a lovely accompaniment.

**Rhubarb, cauliflower and tahini bake**

serves 4

1 large cauliflower, chopped into florets
rapeseed oil

1½ tbsp sumac & 1 tsp extra
50g unsalted butter
25g spelt flour
25g plain flour
500ml milk (any kind of milk works)
4 tbsp tahini (mixed with 8 tbsp of water)

300g rhubarb; 250g chopped into 1-inch chunks, 50g finely sliced
35g parmesan, grated
½ lemon, zested
2 tbsp pine nuts (optional; flaked almonds also work well)
fig and feta tagliatelle

This little figgy stayed at home. Think Sicilian caponata flavours but swap the raisins for figs and add a crumbling of feta; we’ve sailed south to the Ionian now too - a thoroughly Mediterranean meal. Indeed, caponata is itself a celebration of the various cuisines that converge on the island of Sicily - European (most obviously but not exclusively Italian), North African and Middle Eastern. The harmonising of sweet and sour is a frequent feature of Arab cuisine, think barberry-studded Persian stews and apricot-flecked Moroccan tagines. In a caponata sauce, the sourness is likely to come from a generous dose of red wine vinegar, while the sweetness is derived from the raisins. Olives and capers provide some tongue-tingling saltiness. The pasta sauce here goes easy on the vinegar and skips out the sofrito and tomato foundation of a caponata altogether, but the characteristic marriage of sweet, salty and sour is what should pervade. The fresh figs were added in a moment of desperation - a September glut from a nearby fruit and veg shop with a minimum spend had me purchasing a whole tray of them... This plate of pasta dissipated that despair of what to do with them.

The general rule of thumb here is sweet + salty + sour, hence this recipe can be taken in lots of different directions. The sweet can come from any fruit - dried or fresh - and one that also boasts sourness (take the barberry, for example) would be an excellent inclusion. For salty, capers and olives are the obvious choice; and anchovies take a step or two towards the puttanesca. The sour component may be vinegar or citrus - think juice, zest and preserved for the latter. Feta is the cheese representative here, but mozzarella (or stracciatella di bufala...) would be a lovely stringy addition, or let some gorgonzola steal the show. Likewise, swap the pine nuts for hazelnuts for a hint of sweetness, or walnuts for some bitterness, or lean to the east with pistachios. The mint is deliciously light and fragrant, but parsley, basil and thyme wouldn’t need to assume the role of black sheep to be accepted at the table here.

1. Bring a large saucepan of salted water to the boil and cook the tagliatelle for 8-10 minutes or until al dente.
2. Meanwhile, heat the olive oil in a large frying pan and gently fry the red onion for 3-4 minutes. Next, add the garlic, capers, figs and cook for a few more minutes, then deglaze with a few spoonfuls of the pasta water and the red wine vinegar.
3. When cooked, drain the tagliatelle and add it to the frying pan. Crumble in most of the feta and toss through roughly half of the mint, reserving the rest of each for serving. Season to taste.
4. When the tagliatelle and the sauce have come together, plate up and top with the remaining feta, mint and the toasted pine nuts.
Riffing on the Levantine salad, tabbouleh, this version swaps the traditional core ingredients - bulgur wheat, parsley and tomato - for quinoa, swiss chard and rhubarb. Parsley and mint also get a good look-in on the herb action. The rhubarb component can be swapped for any seasonal fruit - peach, apricot, cherry, or even apple or pear in the winter. Play around with the cheese and nuts to go with the fruit - cheddar or blue cheese is always a winner with apple and pear, while hazelnuts or almonds might suit the summer soft fruits better. Similarly, the greenery here is just a suggestion - any finely chopped herb or green leaf will work nicely, but make sure you’ve got roughly an equal ratio of quinoa to herbs/leaves - sometimes recipes shy away from the quantity of herbs in a tabbouleh but it should be more of a herb salad with grain, than a grain salad with herbs (not that I can talk about what a tabbouleh should be, having just denuded mine of all convention and re-clothed it in something caustically inauthentic…)

1. Bring a pan of salted water to the boil and cook the quinoa for 15 minutes, or so that it keeps a bit of bite. Drain, and set aside in a sieve to cool. Meanwhile, prepare the rest of the ingredients.
2. Once the quinoa is cooled but not cold, tumble this together with the rhubarb, swiss chard, parsley, mint, lime juice, capers, pomegranate seeds, sumac, red wine vinegar and olive oil. Season to taste.
3. Serve on a large plate with the crumbled cheese, toasted nuts and extra pomegranate seeds scattered on top.
4. Lovely served by itself, or with roasted cauliflower. I like to decorate this tabbouleh with dandelion flowers, or another edible flower such as primrose.

**rhubarb, chard and quinoa tabbouleh**

serves 4

- 150g quinoa (I use a mix of red, white and black)
- 5 sticks rhubarb, finely sliced
- 50g swiss chard, stems and leaves, finely chopped
- 50g parsley, finely chopped
- 50g mint, finely chopped
- 1 lime, juiced
- 2 tbsp capers
- 3 tbsp pomegranate seeds & 1 tbsp extra for serving
- 2 tbsp sumac
- 1 tbsp red wine vinegar
- 3 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 50g feta, crumbled
- 50g hazelnuts, toasted and roughly chopped
Popular in northern parts of Italy, blueberries and mushrooms pair surprisingly well together. The contrast of the sweet fruitiness of the berry and the earthy meatiness of the mushroom enhances both flavours very nicely indeed, without the sense of imposture you sometimes get when putting fruit in a savoury dish. If blackberries are in season these go well too. Walnuts are a safe choice of nut, satisfying the classic walnut-mushroom flavour combination, but hazelnuts and pine nuts would be interesting variations to try out too. The herbs included here could be optional - but they do add a certain freshness. Parsley should be the dominant flavour, but a hint of mint adds a light sweetness that brightens the otherwise woody flavours.

1. Combine the mushrooms and Marsala in a small saucepan and bring to the boil, then transfer to a bowl to soak for anywhere from 1-24 hours.

2. Melt the butter and heat the oil in a large frying pan over a low-medium heat and add the shallots. Cook gently until caramelized and very soft, about 8-10 minutes, stirring to ensure they don’t catch. Meanwhile, in a separate frying pan, toast the walnuts until they start to go golden brown and release their nutty aroma, remove from the heat and set aside.

3. Bring a pan of well-salted water to the boil and add the orecchiette. Cook as per packet instructions, or until al dente.

4. Remove the mushrooms from their soaking liquid and finely chop them until you have achieved an almost mince-like consistency, allowing for smaller and larger bits to add a bit of texture. Add the chopped mushrooms along with any remaining soaking liquid to the caramelised shallots. Then stir in the garlic.

5. In a separate small pan over a medium heat, add the blueberries and blackberries, with a small splash of water. These want to sizzle and darken in colour, without losing too much of their structure. A minute or two should do the trick. (Or if you’re short of hob space these can go into a hot oven on a roasting tray for a few minutes.) Remove from the heat and set aside.

6. Add a few spoonfuls of pasta water to the mushroom sauce, along with a handful of the walnuts and a handful of the herbs. Stir together. Season the sauce and add more Marsala, to taste.

7. When the pasta is cooked, drain the water off and tip the pasta into the frying pan with the sauce and stir it through, adding the rest of the herbs and walnuts right at the end so they retain their freshness and bite – keep just a bit of each back for a garnish on top when serving. Plate up, and top with a garnish of herb and walnut, and a spoonful of the berries on top too.

8. Serve with plenty of parmesan and black pepper, and a final spritz of balsamic vinegar if you wish. Roasted purple sprouting broccoli works very well on the side.

serves 4

30g dried porcini mushrooms
200ml Marsala & extra few glugs, to taste
4 banana shallots, finely sliced
2 tbsp rapeseed oil
25g unsalted butter
100g walnuts, chopped
2 cloves garlic, grated
400g orecchiette (dried)
½ - 1 small bunch parsley
3 sprigs of mint
120g blueberries & blackberries
parmesan & balsamic vinegar, to serve
holy mole corn cobbler

Outside of Mexico, 'mole' tends to refer to the harmonising of chocolate and chilli in a savoury sauce. The concept is referred to more specifically within Mexico as 'mole poblano', for the word 'mole' alone is indicative merely of a marinade or sauce. Take guacamole for example - a (sort of) sauce of avocado that bears no relation to its somewhat hedonistic cacao cousin. For the sake of the following recipe, 'mole' is the rich and spicy sauce that showcases cacao's versatility in savoury dishes. Indeed, chocolate itself is not sweet in its natural form, we have just become accustomed to eating the ubiquitously sweetened version. Cacao itself tastes bitter and boasts a panoply of subtle flavours, ranging from caramel and fruit to grass and spice, depending on the variety and origin. It adds depth and complexity to savoury dishes in ways that make you wonder why it's not more universally utilised in these savoury ways.

A truly authentic version of the mole sauce exists far beyond my reach - shrouded in familial secrecy and encoded in ways that defy imitation (an endless catalogue of ingredients that resides in minds only; intangible, never penned). It has however been explored and simplified on numerous occasions, and the following impersonation is a result of having to adapt and reorient at a time when cupboard raids were all the rage. Many recipes will call for chipotle paste and ancho chillies, however been exported and simplified on numerous occasions, and the following impersonation is a result of having to adapt and reorient at a time when cupboard raids were all the rage. Many recipes will call for chipotle paste and ancho chillies, thus fiery and smoky; it makes sense really, there's no smoke without fire - except there can be! To imitate this, cayenne, paprika, urfa chilli flakes and lapsang souchong conspire together to cultivate something sweet and spicy and smoky. Consequently, this supposedly Mexican dish becomes something of a globetrotter, with pit stops in Japan (for the lapsang) and Turkey (for the urfa), before ending up here.

Sauce method (start a day ahead)

1. In a large saucepan, sweat the onions on a low-medium heat, stirring occasionally to ensure they don’t stick, until soft and turning translucent.
2. Meanwhile, in a small frying pan, toast the coriander and cumin seeds (add the cumin in after a few minutes as these will toast quicker than the coriander.) Once toasted, transfer these and the lapsang souchong to a spice grinder (or pestle and mortar) and grind to a powder. Add this, along with the cinnamon, paprika, cayenne and urfa to the onions and stir to coat.
3. Cook out the spices for 2-3 minutes.
4. Next, add the garlic, coriander stalks, chopped tomatoes, tomato puree, vinegar and prunes, and cook for a further 5 minutes. Add the puy lentils, stirring to combine all the ingredients, and then pour over the stock and water. Leave this to simmer for around 40 minutes, until the lentils are soft. Keep checking and add more water if needed.
5. Once the lentils are more or less cooked, add the peanut butter, chocolate and molasses and stir until melted - a few minutes. Remove the saucepan from the heat and allow to come to room temperature before moving to the fridge, for 12-24 hours.

Meat method (start a day ahead)

5. Preheat the oven to 110C/90C fan.
6. Add all the ingredients to an ovenproof dish with a lid, large enough to fit the cut of meat, and cover with water (about 2.5 litres, but this will depend on the size and shape of your dish - ensure the meat is fully submerged).
7. On a high heat, bring to the boil. Once it reaches a rolling boil, cook like this for 2 minutes, then transfer the lidded dish to the oven for 12-15 hours (overnight).
8. Once it's cooked, wearing marigolds as it will be hot, remove the neck and tear off the meat from the bone. Keep this aside in a bowl ready to add to the mole sauce. Discard the bones and spinal cord, keeping the liquid (and veg) as stock if you want.

Cobbler method (on the day)

9. When it's nearly time to eat, preheat the oven to 220C/200C fan. Mix the torn meat and mole sauce together, transfer into an ovenproof dish (about 23cm) and place this in the oven as it's heating up.
10. In a food processor, pulse the sweetcorn until roughly chopped but not smooth. Add the flour, polenta, bicarbonate of soda, salt and butter, and pulse until the butter is well distributed and the mixture resembles breadcrumbs.
11. Transfer to a large mixing bowl and stir through the cheddar and coriander. In a separate small bowl, combine the beaten egg, milk and vinegar. Add this to the flour mixture and stir with a spoon until well combined.
12. Take the dish out of the oven and quickly spoon over the cobbler topping, starting from the outside (you will get about 8 spoonfuls around the edge, leaving the middle open - this will help it heat through). You can sprinkle on 1 tsp of paprika and some finely sliced red chilli if you would like. Return to the oven and cook for 20-25 minutes or until golden brown on top and the meat underneath is piping hot. Check halfway through and turn around if cooking unevenly - you may want to cover with foil for the last 5-10 minutes to avoid burning the top.
13. Serve with green vegetables and a guacamole, spiked with lots of lime and fresh coriander, in keeping with the Mexican inspiration.
the cobbler game

This recipe uses neck of venison, however any meat (or no meat at all, just up the lentils) will work here; typically, mole poblano accompanies turkey or chicken. The cooking method will need to be adjusted, however, to accommodate for different meats. Alternatively, swap the torn meat for mince added straight to the sauce, and do away with the lengthy meat cooking process altogether.

The method above was developed with a tough cut in mind, and hence I recommend poaching it overnight, with onion, celery, carrot, salt and vinegar, to produce very tender and tear-able meat. This also creates a stock which you can freeze and use at a later date. I then combine the cooked meat with the sauce just before reheating, and subsequently assembling as a cobbler. Cooking the venison and sauce separately ensures that the meat is cooked carefully, whilst avoiding overwhelming the sauce with its strong gamey flavour.

I also recommend making the sauce at least a day before - this enhances the flavours in a way that cannot be achieved in haste. It also means that on the day of serving all you need to do is tear up some meat and whip up a cobbler, which is pleasingly simple.

The premise of the cobbler - a stew topped with scones - can be taken in many directions. I have suggested a way of framing your cobbler permutations on the following page using the magic rule of three...

permutations for playing the cobbler game

~ the focal point - this doesn’t have to be meat; you could go for wintery root vegetables or summery greens. Add in some pulses for a bit of protein.

~ the flavour theme - pick a cuisine and run with it, or freestyle... Go Mediterranean with tomatoes, aubergine, basil and borlotti beans; or tear some chicken into fennel, spinach, feta and oregano for a hint of Greece. Anything from the slow-cooked game (p58) will work here too.

~ the cobbler topping - weave the flavours into what’s going on in the rest of the dish; do you want to lift it with some lemon zest, or mellow it out with some cumin and paprika? Make them cheesy with cheddar, parmesan, or feta; or swap some of the flour for something nuttier (spelt, rye, oats or even ground almonds).
Sometimes, we want to rustle up a meal in a flash - tiredness and tetchiness has us scrambling eggs and dolloping them on buttered toast for instant (or 3 minute) gratification; or a hot summer’s evening has us throwing together some crisp and crunchy veg while a chilled glass of rosé sits impatiently in the last of the day’s sun. But there are other times - and I do feel they tend to be seasonal, say on a lazy and rainy Sunday when we need five cable knit jumpers just to still feel our fingers - when it is the time-greedy cooking processes that provide us with comfort and reward; something like cheap therapy. This is one of those meals. It’s the sort of food that, while not a looker, feels like having a hug from the inside. Mushrooms and ale provide intense levels of umami, while the muntjac (or indeed any gamey number) gives a most pleasing rich and rustic overtone. The only thing that is left to call out for is the parmesan-laden polenta reminiscent of mountain-side feasts. The secret, according to a favourite padrone di casa of the Italian alps, is adding béchamel to the polenta - and when you taste this, you’ll see why.

The 15-hour cooking time isn’t essential, and if you’re not lucky enough to have an AGA and don’t want to have your oven on for that length of time, 5 hours or so at a slightly higher temperature should have a similar affect. Instead of cooking overnight, I would suggest making it the day before to allow plenty of time for the flavours to get to know each other, before reheating to serve. This also means you’re not in a rush to serve if you find it needs more time in the oven.

1. Preheat the oven to 110C/90C fan (or higher, see step 4).
2. Add the rapeseed oil, smoked pancetta, leek, celery and carrot to a large casserole dish on a low-medium heat (make sure you pick a dish big enough to fit 1.5L of liquid plus the meat and all the veg). Stir occasionally until starting to soften, about 5-10 minutes.
3. Next, add the tomato, shallots, onions, garlic, bay and rosemary and stir again. Then lay the neck of muntjac on top, shimmying it down so it doesn’t stand proud of the rim of the dish. Add in the shitake and porcini mushrooms, the juniper berries, squeezing them between your finger and thumb as you do, a good grating of nutmeg, and finally pour over the amber ale and about 1 litre of water, so that most if not all of the neck is covered. (If some of it remains uncovered that’s fine - it will cook in the steam and you can turn it over part way through the cooking time.)
4. Bring the liquid to the boil, simmer for 2-3 minutes, then with a lid fitted securely transfer to the oven and leave for anywhere from 5-15 hours - the longer the better, and overnight is ideal. (If opting for a shorter cooking time, crank the oven up to about 180C/160C fan for the first hour or so.)
5. After the desired cooking time, remove the casserole dish from the oven. With a pair of marigolds on, separate the meat from the bone (it should...
be tender and fall off) and set aside into a large bowl. Next, scrunch the vegetables in your hands and add these to the bowl, removing any onion skins, tough rosemary stalks, bay leaves and juniper berries as you go.

6. When you are left with just the liquid in the casserole dish, transfer it to the hob and bring to a rolling boil until reduced by about half. Return the meat and veg to the casserole dish, give it a good stir and check the seasoning - add more salt and pepper if required. Bring the ragù to the boil for a minute and then transfer to the oven (110°C/90°C fan) to keep warm until ready to serve. (Or if making the day before, cool the sauce and transfer it to the fridge overnight at this stage. The following day, remove it from the fridge about 1 hour before you want to re-heat it, then bring it to a boil for 2-3 minutes before leaving it to simmer until heated through.)

7. For the béchamel polenta, begin by making a roux. In a small saucepan over a medium heat, melt the butter and then stir in the flour. Continue stirring this for 3-4 minutes to cook it out. Then, slowly pour in the milk and whisk to combine until you have a smooth sauce. Cook for 5 or so minutes, stirring continuously, until the sauce has thickened. Next, stir through the parmesan, season with salt, pepper and some more of the grated nutmeg, and set aside.

8. To cook the polenta, bring 1 litre of salted water to the boil and add the polenta. Cook over a low-medium heat, stirring continuously. Add more water if needed. Once cooked (about 8-10 minutes) add the béchamel and stir through. Add more seasoning to taste, and an extra knob of butter if you think it needs it.

9. Serve immediately, spooning the ragù over portions of polenta, with lots of greens and extra parmesan on top.

goat and porcini ragù

This ragù is proof that good things happen when you marry up the five tastes. Porcini mushrooms, marmite and sundried tomato give this ragù a real umami kick, tempered by the sweet acidity of balsamic vinegar and Marsala wine - which though dry, nevertheless brings the sweetness of something fortified. Meanwhile, the soy sauce and pancetta hit the salty spot. Finish this off with lashings of salty-umami parmesan and you’ll notice your taste buds calling out for a salad of bitter leaves - chicory, radicchio, rocket.

Goat meat is woefully underused, wrongly typecast as a tough, overly pungent poor-man’s meat. But give this meat a chance and you’ll realise it is truly quite delicious - it bears no resemblance to goat’s cheese which I believe deters quite a few, though the hormones released by ram goats (the men) do really stink, and in France they let the dairy goats roam around the fields rubbing up against their menfolk so as to enhance the goat-y flavour of their milk and thus cheese. But this aside, the meat is another story, and a rather charming, bucolic one at that: fragrantly flavourful, more so than beef, and without the cloying fattiness of lamb. Goat is in fact lean and rich in iron, making this sumptuous hug-in-a-bowl rather nourishing too.

1. In a small saucepan, combine the dried porcini mushrooms in 100ml of Marsala (or just enough to cover - you can top this up with water) and bring to the boil. Remove from the heat and transfer into a small bowl. Cover and leave to soak for anything from 1 to 24 hours.

2. To make the ragù, preheat the oven to 120°C/100°C fan (or higher, see step 6).

3. On a low-medium heat, add 3-4 tbsp rapeseed oil to a large casserole dish, along with the chopped onion, celery, carrots, leek, and pancetta. Cook until softened, stirring to ensure it doesn’t stick, for about 10 minutes or so.

4. Next, add the garlic and herbs, and cook for a further 2 minutes. Meanwhile, remove the porcini from the soaking liquid (reserving this) and chop very finely. Add this and the mince to the casserole dish, and stir, breaking up the mince as you do, until lightly browned. Then add the liquid from the porcini and allow to bubble.

5. Stir through the tinned tomatoes (plus a little water used to rinse out the tins), tomato puree, sundried tomato paste, 1tbsp Marsala, marmite, soy sauce, balsamic vinegar and a good grating of nutmeg. Season well with salt and pepper. Give the sauce a taste and adjust any of the flavours as you see fit.

6. Increase the heat and bring the ragù to the boil for a minute or so, then cover with a lid and transfer to the oven, for 2-3 hours. Check it occasionally and add a little water if needed. (Alternatively, it could go into the oven at 200°C/180°C fan for 1 hour if you have less time.)

7. Serve with fresh tagliatelle, lashings of parmesan, and a bitter leaf salad.
Goat meat is having something of a renaissance - and a long overdue one it is. A delicious meat, it is not dissimilar to lamb, yet boasts a much more aromatic depth of flavour and shuns lamb's sometimes musty fattiness in favour of something a little leaner. This beautiful meat doesn’t want to be overpowered and it is lovely with this honey and coriander seed glaze. The Wiltshire honey used here offers a certain fruitiness which draws out the citrus notes in the coriander, highlighting this against the mellow earthiness of both the coriander and the rapeseed oil. Nothing beats the yellow brilliance of rapeseed, both in the fields and in the kitchen. Here, the coriander seed, honey and rapeseed oil are a perfect trinity of ochre hues. The inclusion of blackcurrants is a riff on the redcurrant jelly we eat with roast lamb - but if they’re hard to come by, blackberries will work too with a little added lemon juice - the acidity is important here.

In terms of cooking the meat, kid legs are as tender as lamb. Start in a hot oven to help brown the surface, adding crucial flavour, then lower the temperature to reduce some moisture loss, and apply the glaze towards the end of the cooking time to avoid burning the sugars in the honey. Resting time is essential for the tenderness of the meat - don’t worry about it getting cold as the ‘afterheat’ will see that the inside continues to cook. Once the temperature subsequently does fall, the meat structure becomes firmer and thus increases its water-holding capacity, meaning fewer juices are lost during carving. Similarly, carving the meat across the grain, rather than with the grain, is important to retain moisture. If your joint is larger, add about 5 minutes cooking time (at 170C/150C fan - step 6) for each 150-200g extra.

serves 3-4

2 red onions, quartered
1 carrot, quartered
7 tbsp rapeseed oil
4 small-medium sweet potatoes
8 cloves garlic, unpeeled and left whole
half leg of kid, with bone (about 600g)
200g purple sprouting broccoli

for the glaze
3 tbsp coriander seeds
2 tbsp runny honey
2 tbsp rapeseed oil

for the salsa
150 g blackcurrants (or blackberries), roughly chopped
15g flat leaf parsley, finely chopped
15g mint, finely chopped
1 clove garlic, finely sliced
3 tbsp white wine & 100ml for deglazing
3 tbsp rapeseed oil
(if using blackberries instead, include juice of half a lemon)

1. Take the joint out of the fridge about an hour before cooking to bring it to room temperature (this helps the meat to cook evenly).
2. Heat the oven to 200C/180C fan.
3. Toss the onion and carrot in 2 tbsp of the rapeseed oil, season and place in a roasting tray in the oven while it is heating up.
4. Cut the sweet potato into wedges and toss in 3 tbsp of the rapeseed oil, sea salt and black pepper. Transfer to a large shallow ovenproof dish, along with the whole garlic cloves and 100ml water. Place this in the bottom of the oven (this will cook at the same time and temperature as the meat).
5. Rub the kid all over with 2 tbsp rapeseed oil, sea salt and black pepper. Remove the roasting tray (with the onion and carrot) from the oven and place the joint on a roasting rack on top of the onion and carrot. Add 100ml water to the roasting tray and return to the oven and cook for 15-20 minutes, for the meat to brown.
6. After this time, reduce the heat to 170C/150C fan. Turn the joint over and recipe continues overleaf
baste with juices from the roasting tray. Place a lid on the sweet potatoes (or cover with foil) so they don’t dry out. Continue cooking both the meat and potatoes for a further 30 minutes (or add another 10 minutes or so if you prefer your meat well-done).

7. Meanwhile, make the salsa and glaze. For the glaze, toast the coriander seeds on a high heat for 1-2 minutes, until fragrant. Remove from the heat and roughly grind in a pestle and mortar. Reserve about 1/3 of these for sprinkling at the end. In a small bowl, combine the rest of the coriander seed with the honey and rapeseed oil, and season with salt and pepper.

8. For the salsa, combine the blackcurrants, chopped herbs, garlic, white wine and rapeseed oil (plus lemon juice, if using blackberries) in a small bowl. Season with sea salt and black pepper and stir well, crushing some of the currants slightly as you do to release some of their juices. Set this aside for the herbs to soften a little.

9. When the 30 minutes is up, remove the joint from the oven and quickly smooth over the honey and coriander glaze, returning to the oven for a final 5-10 minutes.

10. Once the meat is cooked to your liking (for medium, the juices should run a little pink and a meat thermometer will read about 60C, for well-done the juices will be clearer and a thermometer will read about 70C), remove it from the oven and leave the joint to rest on a warm plate for at least 30 minutes, covered with foil (this is vital - don’t skimp on the resting time!). Check the sweet potatoes - they should be very soft and caramelised around the edges.

11. When it’s 15 minutes before you want to serve, add the purple sprouting to the dish with the vegetables and turn up the oven to 220C/200C fan. Cook like this for 15 minutes, until the purple sprouting is slightly browned but retains some bite.

12. Next, deglaze the roasting tin that had the goat in it with about 100ml water, over a high heat. Scrape any sticky bits off the bottom, stirring as you do, and add 100ml white wine. Simmer for a couple of minutes and transfer this gravy to a warm jug for serving.

13. Carve the joint and serve atop the sweet potatoes, onion, carrot and purple sprouting, drizzled with the blackcurrant salsa, gravy and the reserved toasted and ground coriander seeds.
slow-braised goat, fig and walnut, with orzo and brown rice

serves 3-4

10 cardamom pods, seeds removed from husk
2 tsp cumin seeds
2 tsp coriander seeds
2 tsp paprika
1 tsp turmeric
1 tsp cinnamon
1 tsp allspice
6 tbsp rapeseed oil
half goat leg, with bone (about 675g)
1 onion, finely sliced
1 large thumb-sized piece of ginger, peeled and grated
2 garlic cloves, peeled and grated
2 vine tomatoes, grated (and skins finely chopped)
1 tbsp honey
2 tbsp red wine vinegar
1 tbsp pomegranate molasses
200g dried figs, stalks removed and cut in half
100g walnut halves
½ small bunch of thyme, tied together with cooking string

for the orzo brown rice

120g wholegrain brown rice
25g unsalted butter
95g orzo
300ml vegetable stock
few sprigs of parsley and mint, roughly chopped (plus extra for garnish)
3-4 tbsp pomegranate seeds (plus extra for garnish)
natural yoghurt & sumac, to serve

Return the meat to the casserole dish and let it rest in a warm oven (about 70°C/50°C fan) while you cook the orzo and rice.

8. Rinse the rice. Bring a pan of water to the boil and par-boil the rice for 10 minutes. In a separate saucepan, melt the butter. Add the orzo and cook for 2-3 minutes, coating the orzo in the butter and stirring frequently to avoid burning. You want it to go a golden-brown colour. Then drain the par-boiled rice and add this to the orzo, stirring to coat it all in the butter. Add the stock and bring to a gentle boil. Lower the heat and cover the saucepan with a lid, cooking gently for 15 minutes (don’t be tempted to remove the lid as it needs the steam to cook properly!) After this time, remove from the heat, stirring through the chopped herbs and pomegranate seeds, and transfer to a warm serving dish.

9. Bring the goat dish and the orzo and rice to the table and serve with seasonal green vegetables, natural yoghurt topped with sumac, and any spare herbs and pomegranate seeds to garnish with.

Ambrosial like a tagine that marries the rich sweetness of cooked fruit with the spiced savouriness of a meat stew, this dish comes to the table with all guns blazing. The long and slow cooking process lends some serious depth and intensity to the characterful flavours - cardamom and allspice, coriander and cumin, paprika and cinnamon, all melded together. The sweet fruitiness of the figs, plumped up during cooking, is balanced by the slightly bitter earthiness of the walnuts, also rendered pleasingly soft by a long, warm and nicely spiced soak. If pomegranate molasses is hard to find, a little extra honey will do the trick. This dish is intensely rich and comforting, and the slow-braising method renders the goat meat supple and succulent. Don’t worry too much about the cooking time - slow cooking removes the need for too much accuracy as there is a reassuringly spacious gap between under- and over-cooked. If you are short of time, change the temperature in step 6 to 150°C/130°C fan and cook for 2½-3 hours instead. This will produce a nicely cooked leg, though it will need resting and carving as the meat won’t quite fall away from the bone (as in step 7).

1. Heat the oven to 220°C/200°C fan.
2. Place the coriander seeds in a small frying pan over a medium heat. Toast for 1-2 minutes, then add the cardamom and cumin seeds, and toast for a further 1-2 minutes until fragrant. Transfer to a pestle and mortar and grind almost to a powder.
3. In a small bowl, combine the ground spices with the paprika, turmeric, cinnamon and allspice along with 3 tbsp of the rapeseed oil, salt and pepper, then rub this onto the goat leg. Place the leg onto a rack in a roasting tin and cook in the hot oven for 15-20 minutes, until browned.
4. Meanwhile, heat the remaining 3 tbsp of rapeseed oil in a casserole dish (about 20cm, to fit the goat leg and other ingredients snuggly, with a tightly fitting lid). Add the sliced onion and sweat these for 8-10 minutes. Add the ginger and cook for a further 2 minutes, before adding the garlic. Next, add the grated tomato, honey, vinegar, dried figs, walnuts, pomegranate molasses and thyme. Season with salt and top up the casserole dish with 250ml water. Bring to a simmer.
5. When the goat leg is browned, remove it from the oven and transfer it into the casserole dish. Reduce the oven temperature to 180°C/160°C fan. Spoon some of the liquid over the joint and bring it all to a simmer for 2-3 minutes on the hob. Place the lid on and put the dish in the oven for 30 minutes.
6. Then reduce the oven temperature again to 120°C/100°C fan and cook gently for a further for 4-6 hours. Check it occasionally to ensure it isn’t drying out, if so top it up with a little more water.
7. After this time, remove the joint from the dish and on a board pull the meat off the bone using a fork, and carving the larger chunks of meat as desired.
the slow-braised game

the focal point
~ instead of goat, try any other joint of meat - slow-braising is great for tougher cuts as the 'low and slow' cooking tenderises the meat
~ or put vegetables and pulses at the centre - celeriac, butternut squash, plantain, puy lentils, butter beans... although you won’t need to cook these for nearly as long

the flavour bit
~ a fruit - fresh or dried
~ a nut - the long cooking time softens these and allows their nuttiness to permeate the stew
~ some spice - Indian, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, or fuse these together
~ make sure there’s something punchy - vinegar, lemon, wine; and counter with some sweetness - a honey or molasses to complement the fruit
~ do you want something light and zesty? Think thyme, lemon, juniper, pistachio
~ or hearty and warming? Think nutmeg, allspice, prunes, walnuts, cocoa
~ try fresh apricots, mint and pistachio with pork; or blackberries and rosemary with lamb

the bit on the side
~ rice might be the go-to, but make it interesting: mix it up with something wild and colourful, add in some pine nuts or almonds, capers or olives, pomegranate seeds, chopped herbs
~ new potatoes tossed in butter, or sweet potato wedges roasted in paprika
~ maybe it’s calling out for tagliatelle
less waste more taste
A Sustainable Kitchen

It would be imprudent to avoid the subject of sustainability in a book about food, and yet equally unwise for me to claim particular expertise on the matter. It is difficult to know how to interpret the plethora of information thrust upon us, navigating our way through the lies and the truths, but interpretation is the only tool we have - nothing is as simple as it seems, and everything needs some degree of scrutiny.

Food sustainability is a hot topic - the research is constantly developing, new technologies are in the making, and opinions sway one way and then the other. The next few pages are therefore by no means meant as a diatribe, but simply an effort to make you stop and think, and hopefully something of a plaudit for the people and ideas that are doing great things, making the way we eat more sustainable.

Public enemy no. 1 - red meat. But is this fair?

Yes and no - nothing is as simple as it seems. What's important here is that not all red meat is made equal. For example, was the animal corn-fed or grass-fed? While the latter produces more methane (thanks to flatulence), the former emits greater quantities of carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide (a result of cultivating the feed). And without getting too technical, carbon dioxide and methane have different life cycles in the atmosphere and thus different effects on the environment. Let's compare cows and cars. Burning fossil fuels releases carbon dioxide, and this lasts in the atmosphere for hundreds of years. Ok, so let's plant more trees! Lovely idea. And maybe in a couple of generations' time those trees will have absorbed all the CO2 that we burned in our cars, not to mention our central heating systems, our speedy flights to far-flung corners of the world. On the other hand, ruminant animals (those that have four compartments to their stomach rather than just the one that we humans have - that's cows, sheep, goats, deer, and so on) produce methane and nitrous oxide. However, this methane does not add to the net atmospheric stock of methane, as the fossil fuels' carbon dioxide emissions do to their own atmospheric stock, because methane only lasts in the atmosphere for ten years. It is then converted back into carbon dioxide which is used in the photosynthesis of the grass that feeds the livestock. A cycle like this one is easily sustained, with the inflow equaling the outflow, as it were. Ruminant animals eating grass is the natural way of things (hence the four stomach thing) and while this may produce more methane than feeding them corn, our ecosystem can compensate for this in ways it can't for the level of carbon dioxide emissions.

About ten years ago, 1/3 of global cereal production was fed to animals, making a strong case for the vegetarian diet being a more efficient use of food resources. Corn-fed chicken is seemingly also in vogue; somewhere along the line yellow-tinged meat can make you stop and think, and hopefully something of a plaudit for the people and ideas that are doing great things, making the way we eat more sustainable.

Other advances in fishing practices include developments in beam trawling technology which include replacing chains with electrodes that stimulate fish into the net, thus reducing the damage done to the seabed, as well as special sections of the net that allow bycatch to escape. Nevertheless, this would need to be universal practice, and we are not there yet. Consumer choice is often a powerful means of driving sustainable practices, but if the selectivity of fishing methods is dubious then protecting the oceans from exploitation may require more than reducing demand for just cod, say, but reducing demand for all fish. If we are to see fish stocks even start to recover, we may need to accept that eating fish will be the reserve of the seaside holiday, limited to occasions when we can trace our fish back to small fleet fishing boats (or a line off the back of your own boat) - and in doing so not only supporting the seas but supporting local fishing communities too.

Of course, this begs the question do fish farms not solve most if not all of these problems? And ostensibly, yes: aquaculture enables a degree of control that protects coastlines and seabeds, avoids depletion of wild fish stocks whilst also providing an environment for developing scientific knowledge and technical advances. But for every silver lining, there is unfortunately an ominously dark cloud. Fish farms release faeces, uneaten food, chemical treatments and medicines, as well as increase the likelihood of outbreaks of sea lice, which endanger not only the farmed but also wild species. There are also examples of breakages in enclosures unleashing farmed fish into the wild, which result in the degeneration of wild species as they breed with genetically inferior farmed fish. This has been identified in the case of salmon, a wild population now in a state where it is no longer the wild fish that is at risk but the farmed one. The salmon's intelligence defies hatchery and farming practices. It is routine for salmon to recall the river in which they were spawned despite years lived at sea. This memory is so innate that the salmon reproduced for Scottish salmon hatcheries, using roe imported from Scandinavia, are able (on their escape) to return to the very river in which they were spawned as roe, on the other side of the North Sea. Sadly, aquaculture hasn't provided the solutions to our sea problems it was thought it might, but instead has introduced a host of serious complications to an already troublesome predicament.
Mud, mud, glorious mud

Back on land, and we have a similar sort of problem; soil. The relationship between the soil and the plants that grow within it is one of symbiosis: the healthier the soil, the more plant growth it will promote and, in turn, the healthier the soil. Soil is made up of minerals (from rocks), water and organic matter (from the plants that grow and then go on to decompose in it). It’s easy to take soil for granted - it’s everywhere, isn’t it? - but actually 1/3 of the earth’s soil is degraded, through the physical processes of farming, the application of chemicals that damage its biological function, and through the extractive nature of repeated harvests from the soil before they can return organic matter and nutrients. 98% of all calories consumed come from land-grown crops - so the health of our soil is really important. Water is another material we most likely take for granted - after all, it makes up 65% of the earth’s surface. However, only 3% of that is fresh water, and only 1% is available for human consumption. And while for many of us access to clean running water is not an issue, there is 1.1 billion people lacking it. This is significant as food production accounts for 70% of global water usage, and this is compounded by a shift away from starch-based diets towards more water-intensive foodstuffs, such as meat, dairy and nuts. Here is an example to illustrate this: it requires 210 litres of water to produce a 60g portion of rice, and 140 litres to produce 1 cup of coffee, while it takes 900 litres for a 60g portion of beef. And so fresh water and fertile soil are two materials we probably take for granted as components of the earth - it rains, and then we’re washing mud off our shoes - but in reality, these valuable resources aren’t as guaranteed as they seem.

Staying with the land and arable farming, we come onto the matter of pollinators. In total, around ¾ of global food production, from 87 crop species, depends on pollinators. It must be said that key dietary staples - wheat, corn and rice - do not need insects, but rely on wind for pollination instead. Nevertheless, fruit and vegetables (in other words, where all the vitamins come from) as well as foods such as coffee, chocolate and nuts, do rely on insects, mainly bees, but also butterflies, moths and flies. Did you know that chocolate is pollinated by midges? The production of insect pollinated crops has increased by 300% over the last fifty years and it is this expansion of intensively managed agriculture which threatens the very pollinators these crops rely on. Where there might be a dearth of native pollinators, some farms introduce colonies of bees into fields and inside polytunnels to boost pollination, but this can bring its own dangers - for example the new bees may introduce novel diseases into the resident population of pollinators. Bees are particularly good at pollinating plants because they exhibit what is referred to as ‘flower constancy’ - in other words, they focus on visiting a particular species of plant during a particular foraging trip, thus increasing the likelihood of successful pollination. Interestingly, they are also susceptible to the caffeine present in the nectar from the coffee flower. This increases their memory function, meaning they return to those plants more, in turn increasing pollination success.

The butterfly effect and the bigger picture

Intensive agriculture, in trying to achieve high crop yields, often damages the very ecosystem on which it relies. Short term gains are acquired at the cost of big long-term losses. To understand why this happens and to appreciate why farmers who are often most in tune with the land are induced to carry out pernicious practices, we need to look at sustainability as a more holistic concept. Sustainability isn’t just about living within the limits of our biophysical environment and using natural resources at a steady rate so that future generations can continue to do so; it is a much broader and more complex matter. We can begin to see this by considering the three pillars of sustainability: Economic, Social and Environmental. To achieve sustainability, these pillars need to intersect (imagine a Venn diagram). Economic and environmental factors must work together to be viable; environmental and social factors will work together to be acceptable, and social and economic factors together must be equitable. Only when these three pillars - economic, social and environmental – are joined together by actions that are viable, acceptable and equitable can we have sustainable development. And in reality, even this explanation is too simplistic.

It is worth asking ourselves, what drives intensive food practices? The answer to this is, more often than not, commodification - in other words, the economic value that food commands on a global scale. Unfortunately, one result of this commodification is the widening of the gap between the food secure and the food insecure. An example of this is that people who have a £100 a week to spend on food to buy for their family, will not be able to fill the gap, finding an alternative fruit snack, loaf cake flavour or pancake topper. But, outside of the economically developed nations, it is the £2 billion people who rely on bananas for ¾ of their daily calorie intake who would not be able to fill the gap.

The ultimate role of the consumer - crucial yet indirect - is evident when we consider the supply chain; and there are many stops along the way from field to plate. Retailers typically use a ‘push system’ supply chain, whereby a product is continually pushed through the system on the assumption that consumers will continue to buy said product. This tends to produce high profits, but also high wastage. It contrasts to a ‘pull system’ supply chain, which uses more granular data to forecast consumer demand and is thus more sensitive to the actual choices we make in the shops. Mismangement of the food chain can instigate unsustainable demand, and this is exemplified by the collapse of Atlantic cod stocks. There is an expectation that supermarkets should stock all foods all year round, regardless of real-life stocks and seasonality, and this is something that certainly needs redressing; whatever happened to ‘good things come to those who wait’? The notion of food equity brings together the pillars of sustainability; ensuring environmentally responsible food is affordable and accessible at the consumer end of the chain is vital, as is making sure the growers and producers at the opposing end are paid fairly. Eating locally is an oft praised means of consuming more responsibly; it assumes a shorter supply chain which affords greater transparency and accountability, as well as reducing the carbon footprint of freight transport. However, global trade is necessary to balance supply and demand across different regions, compensating for when growth of population and growth of production get out of sync, and the insuring against regional shocks such as drought and conflict. While food waste may be a sign of abundance in some regions, food shortages are cause for major concern elsewhere. Food sustainability isn’t just about what ends up on your plate, but about ensuring food ends up on people’s plates across the globe.

Similarly, whether a food process is sustainable depends on more than just its environmental impacts. When much needed moratoriums on Atlantic cod fishing were introduced in the 1990s, the Canadian economy (in particular around Newfoundland) suffered hugely; 30,000 fishermen lost their jobs, plus another 15,000 workers in ship building and fish processing. It is estimated that in the early 1990s the cost of this unemployment was around $1 billion. That’s not to say that cod fishing should have continued - it really couldn’t be sustained - but every action, even a ‘good’ action, has its ramifications. Another way to illustrate the complexities faced by our world is the paradox of palm oil. Palm oil is a dirty word. It is a symbol of land exploitation, deforestation and irresponsible agriculture, and has been the subject of mainstream consumer and retail boycotts. Nevertheless, it is present in 60-80% of products in the supermarket, from peanut butter to face cream. The initial attraction of palm oil was its highly efficient yield - per hectare of land it produces five times more oil than rival plant oils, olive, rapeseed and sunflower. Subsequently, it requires the cultivation of significantly less land mass to produce the same amount of oil as other oil-producing crops. Here’s the ‘Catch 22’ - the expansion of palm oil crops comes at the cost of plant, animal and human life and may require even more land usage. There are ways to improve the sustainability of this product: the plantations themselves can be adapted, for example maintaining biodiversity within the cultivated area, a practice known as ‘land sharing’, and avoiding
Coffee is another ubiquitous foodstuff - the second most exported crop in the world, after palm oil - which illustrates the long and convoluted nature of supply chains. There can be anything between 10 and 32 stages of the process between growing the coffee plant and the liquid that ends up in your coffee cup. Sadly, coffee production demonstrates all too well the elusiveness of profits through a supply chain. In the 1970s, coffee small-holders and growers received 20% of the profits, yet now this is just 1-2%. This is in part because regulations imposed by the International Coffee Organization guaranteed a minimum price for the growers, but when these were lifted by the USA in 1989 the market value of coffee fell dramatically and growers were even put into a deficit, with the cost of production greater than the price they received for their produce. Equitable treatment and remuneration of growers, as well as market value and price guarantees of food products, are just as much part of food sustainability as the biophysical environment in which it grows. Shopping responsibly and endeavouring to support businesses and products that see the fair treatment of those along its supply chain, while avoiding those that don’t, is the responsibility of us, the consumer. Every pound you spend is a vote for the sort of food you want to eat, the type of world you want to live in.

What next?
Alarmed, baffled, overwhelmed - just some of the things we probably feel in response to reading and learning about the sustainability, or otherwise, of food production. The topic manages to be both immediately concerning and yet someone else’s problem. Unfortunately, it is our problem - both here and now. But there are positives. There are rays of sunlight pushing through that dark and foreboding cloud, and there are people and businesses out there doing really good things. The bigger picture can be difficult to grapple with (if it wasn’t, solutions would be much easier to come by) but to avoid being completely overwhelmed, it’s a good start to remember that each positive action we take is one more than if we hadn’t. While there’s no merit in hypocrisy - for example, only eating organic but ignoring fair trade - if there’s one thing that this reading has highlighted it is that calculating the butterfly effect of every one of our actions would be stultifying. The best course of action is to build up and develop on sustainable practices; make a small step today, another one tomorrow, and a bigger step the next day. Small actions may seem like just that - small - but each and every one of them adds up to something greater.

Here are some ideas for what you can do - today, tomorrow and the next day - as well as some wonderful people and businesses doing great things. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it’s a good place to start.

Businesses & people doing great things
~ Rubies in the Bubble - they take delicious ingredients that would otherwise have gone to waste and turn them into tasty sauces. “Some say it’s a load of rubbish, we take that as a condiment.”
~ nibs, etc - their mission is to make delicious and nourishing snacks using ingredients that would normally be thrown away - it’s about redefining the concept of ‘waste’ in a tasty way.
~ Oddbox - purveyors of ugly veg. This is the box that helps save the planet by rescuing odd and surplus fruit and veg directly from farms. Supermarkets also have ‘ugly’ ranges.
~ Ollie Hunt - author of 30 Easy Ways to Join the Food Revolution & head chef at The Wheatsheaf, Chilton Foliate. His food is delicious.
~ Tom Hunt - a champion of climate friendly cuisine. He writes the ‘Waste not’ column in Guardian Fear and has a phenomenal tapas restaurant, Poco, in Bristol.
~ The Chef’s Manifesto - an advocacy hub seeking to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2: To end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture by 2030.
~ The Gourmet Goat Farmer - a responsible and free-range goat herd reared in Wiltshire.

Tips & tricks for your own kitchen
~ Cut your food waste - if it looks and smells ok, it probably is! Wash your vegetables instead of peeling. If you must peel, keep the scrag ends aside and blitz them up into a pesto (roasting and blitzing with oil, cheese, nuts and seeds covers a multitude of sins). Make soup, or ratatouille.
~ Eat local - it’s nice to know where your food comes from, and it is more difficult to cover up bad practices in a short supply chain. Air freight is a big no-no, but sometimes food shipped from not too far (Europe) actually has a lower carbon footprint than something grown in polytunnels in the UK - so really this should be ‘eat responsibly’, and local where that is the case.
~ Support small local businesses.
~ Grow your own - if this is possible.
~ Cook from scratch - know what goes into your food.
~ More biodegradable packaging - avoid the plastic. Or opt for no packaging at all.
~ Beeswax wrap (or the vegan alternative) instead of clingfilm - or just cover bowls of leftovers with plates instead.

expansion onto primary rainforest, planting instead on already degraded agricultural lands. Consumer action, such as boycotting palm oil products, would also impact the supply chain, forcing manufacturers to look for alternative materials. If demand is reduced, supply will be too.

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~ More biodegradable packaging - avoid the plastic. Or opt for no packaging at all.
~ Beeswax wrap (or the vegan alternative) instead of clingfilm - or just cover bowls of leftovers with plates instead.

expansion onto primary rainforest, planting instead on already degraded agricultural lands. Consumer action, such as boycotting palm oil products, would also impact the supply chain, forcing manufacturers to look for alternative materials. If demand is reduced, supply will be too.

Here are some ideas for what you can do - today, tomorrow and the next day - as well as some wonderful people and businesses doing great things. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it’s a good place to start.

Businesses & people doing great things
~ Rubies in the Bubble - they take delicious ingredients that would otherwise have gone to waste and turn them into tasty sauces. “Some say it’s a load of rubbish, we take that as a condiment.”
~ nibs, etc - their mission is to make delicious and nourishing snacks using ingredients that would normally be thrown away - it’s about redefining the concept of ‘waste’ in a tasty way.
~ Oddbox - purveyors of ugly veg. This is the box that helps save the planet by rescuing odd and surplus fruit and veg directly from farms. Supermarkets also have ‘ugly’ ranges.
~ Ollie Hunt - author of 30 Easy Ways to Join the Food Revolution & head chef at The Wheatsheaf, Chilton Foliate. His food is delicious.
~ Tom Hunt - a champion of climate friendly cuisine. He writes the ‘Waste not’ column in Guardian Fear and has a phenomenal tapas restaurant, Poco, in Bristol.
~ The Chef’s Manifesto - an advocacy hub seeking to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2: To end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture by 2030.
~ The Gourmet Goat Farmer - a responsible and free-range goat herd reared in Wiltshire.

Tips & tricks for your own kitchen
~ Cut your food waste - if it looks and smells ok, it probably is! Wash your vegetables instead of peeling. If you must peel, keep the scrag ends aside and blitz them up into a pesto (roasting and blitzing with oil, cheese, nuts and seeds covers a multitude of sins). Make soup, or ratatouille.
~ Eat local - it’s nice to know where your food comes from, and it is more difficult to cover up bad practices in a short supply chain. Air freight is a big no-no, but sometimes food shipped from not too far (Europe) actually has a lower carbon footprint than something grown in polytunnels in the UK - so really this should be ‘eat responsibly’, and local where that is the case.
~ Support small local businesses.
~ Grow your own - if this is possible.
~ Cook from scratch - know what goes into your food.
~ More biodegradable packaging - avoid the plastic. Or opt for no packaging at all.
~ Beeswax wrap (or the vegan alternative) instead of clingfilm - or just cover bowls of leftovers with plates instead.
leek top pesto

Pesto is a quick and easy way to reduce food waste, simply by blitzing up leftover vegetables and wilting herbs that were otherwise destined for the bin. It is also always more delicious than the shop bought stuff.

While not strictly a pesto, because this recipe does not include pine nuts or equivalent, it nevertheless serves a similar purpose. And there is certainly scope to add nuts or seeds to this recipe - walnuts or pumpkin seeds would work well - however, this was originally concocted in slightly frugal times. Leek tops are often over-looked and you may find they have been removed from their more popular pale lower half - what a waste! However, if you can get your hands on them, don’t cast them aside - they’re an absolutely delicious and versatile bit of veg.

1. Preheat the oven to 220C/200C fan.
2. Toss the chopped leek tops in a generous drizzle of rapeseed oil, salt and pepper, and a squeeze of lemon juice. Transfer to a roasting tray and cook in the oven for 5-10 minutes until softened. If they start to brown slightly that’s fine as this adds a bit of extra flavour.
3. Once cooked, transfer to a food processor along with 60ml rapeseed oil, the lemon zest, preserved lemon, capers and pecorino.
4. Pulse until combined but not completely smooth. Season with salt and pepper to taste, adding a little more lemon juice if required.
5. Serve stirred through pasta, ideally fusilli, but spaghetti also works.

serves 3 (with pasta)

5 leeks (tops only, i.e. the dark green leaves), roughly chopped into 1-inch pieces
60ml rapeseed oil & extra for cooking
1 lemon, juice & zest
1 preserved lemon, finely chopped
1 tbsp capers
65g pecorino, coarsely grated

other uses for pesto

~ on toast with scrambled eggs
~ as a crust for salmon, rack of lamb or goat, chicken
~ added to salads for additional flavour
~ on top of hummus or yoghurt as a dip

the pesto game

~ cavolo nero & cashew (with garlic, parmesan, lemon & olive oil)
~ sage & hazelnut
~ broccoli & almond
~ borage, almond & sherry vinegar
~ any herb or leafy veg that is almost past its best, along with any nut or seed (best toasted first), oil to bring it together, cheese optional, and some acid e.g. lemon
leek top, pecorino and walnut babka

Babka, endearingly named after the Polish ‘grandmother’, and also referred to as Krantz cake, is usually a sweet braided loaf filled with chocolate and nuts, or cinnamon and sugar. I have also made a delicious Christmas loaf with marzipan, candied peel and cranberries. It really can be a vehicle for anything. The dough for the sweet loaf is likely to be enriched with more sugar and soaked in syrup after cooking. This version is a savoury lunchtime take on it. I have already extolled the virtues of leek tops, and here is another use for them. Pecorino and walnuts harmonise perfectly with the slight bitterness of the leek, offering a perfect flavour trio. The leek greens can be replaced by any green leaf, spinach would work well, or chard, or cavolo nero… And any cheese would work deliciously - cheddar or ricotta salata, goat or gorgonzola - and the walnuts stand in for any nut or seed.

This is a truly tasty way of using up the less-than-lively looking leftovers in your fridge. Scrag-ends of cheese, past-their-best herbs, overripe fruit… Think ‘less waste - more taste’.

1. Start the day before by making the dough. Combine the flour, sugar and yeast in a large mixing bowl and stir well to distribute the sugar and yeast. Make a well in the centre and add the beaten eggs and milk. Stir together with a spoon to combine. Next, sprinkle over the salt and add the cubes of softened butter, a few at a time, kneading them in with your hand. Once the dough has more or less come together, transfer it to the work surface and continue to incorporate the rest of the butter. Knead the dough for about 20 minutes until the dough is completely smooth, elastic and shiny.

2. Shape the dough into a ball and place in a large, greased bowl. Cover with clingfilm or a damp tea towel and leave in the tin until just warm. Remove and slice thickly, using both hands roll up the rectangle like a roulade, starting with the long side nearest you. Press to seal at the wet edge, lay the roll onto its seam and then rotate it 90 degrees so it is lying lengthways, as if from 12 o’clock to 6 o’clock (it was 9 o’clock to 3 o’clock before). With a serrated knife, trim the edges (now the top and bottom) and then cut the roll lengthways down the middle, revealing the inner layers of dough and filling. Rotate each half outwards so that the layers and filling are facing upwards. Squeeze together the top ends of each half and very carefully lift the left half over the right (an extra pair of hands might come in handy at this stage!). Repeat this process, creating a simple, two-pronged plait until you reach the end. Squeeze together the bottom ends so you have the two halves, intertwined, with the filling showing on top.

3. The next morning, start by making the filling. Wash and roughly chop the green ends from the leeks. Heat up the rapeseed oil in a large frying pan and add the leek greens, sautéing until softened and starting to brown a little, about 8-10 minutes. Transfer to a food processor and blitz with the lemon zest and juice. The greens are fairly fibrous so it won’t be smooth, but almost paste-like - some bits are nice. Transfer this to a plate to cool.

4. Grease and line a loaf tin (22cm x 11cm x 6cm). Remove the risen dough from the bowl and roll out on a lightly floured surface into a rectangle, about 2cm x 27cm. Turn it so that the long side is next to you, parallel with the edge of the work surface. Spread the leek greens over the rectangle, leaving a 2cm border all around. Sprinkle over the grated pecorino and chopped walnuts.

5. Brush a little bit of water around the 2cm border (or use a wet finger) and carefully transfer it into the loaf tin. Cover with a damp tea towel and leave to rise in a warm place for 1½ hours - it will rise by about 10-20 per cent in this time.

6. Carefully transfer it into the loaf tin. Cover with a damp tea towel and leave to rise in a warm place for 1½ hours - it will rise by about 10-20 per cent in this time.

7. Preheat the oven to 190C/170C fan (to coincide with the end of the rising time). Transfer the loaf tin to the middle of the oven and bake for 25-30 minutes, or until a skewer comes out clean (of dough, the cheese and leek will be wet).

8. While the loaf is in the oven, warm up the rapeseed oil and infuse with the sliced preserved lemon. Once the loaf comes out of the oven, drizzle with the lemony oil and leave in the tin until just warm. Remove and slice thickly, serving with a green leaf salad.

9. The loaf will keep for a few days, wrapped in foil, and is delicious re-heated under the grill.

Tip - the dough can be left for its first rise for anywhere between 6 and 12 hours. Overnight is best, but this will depend on the temperature. Having done this in my kitchen (rather than a proving drawer with temperature control) I discovered that in the winter I needed to leave it overnight to rise sufficiently, but in the summer I could start the rolling and shaping about 6 hours after making the dough. For example, making the dough at about 10pm and leaving to rise until about 9am is perfect timing for a lunchtime loaf. Alternatively, start making the dough at 7am and then roll and shape at about 2.30pm for a teatime loaf. The shorter method will need a warmer environment to rise in. If you opt for the overnight rise and find that in the morning it is overproofed (the dough has formed a skin and pressing a finger into the surface leaves a permanent dent) de-gas the dough by pressing down firmly on it, then give it a quick knead and reshape the dough, leaving for a further few hours to rise. Choose a temperature and timescale that works for you.
the babka game

The concept of a filled loaf like this one is just calling out for the flavour game to be played.

first things first - sweet or savoury? Let’s start traditional with sweet...

~ classic is chocolate, and you can’t go wrong here
~ or think fruit, nuts, spices...
~ marzipan, cherry
~ cinnamon, banana
~ raspberry, almond, rose (pictured)
~ nectarine, mint

go savoury, and all you need is a picnic rug...

~ ploughman’s - cheddar, grated apple, a touch of chutney
~ italian tricolore - tomato, mozzarella, basil
~ italian tricolore on holiday - pistachio, feta, sundried tomato
~ tahini, parmesan, za’atar, lemon zest
~ sumac, walnuts, coriander
~ chorizo, manchego, parsley
~ spinach, cheddar, pumpkin seed
~ basil, ricotta, sundried tomato, almond

The same dough works well for both savoury and sweet babka.

In terms of quantities for the filling, enough to roughly cover the rolled out dough (as pictured, top left) will be sufficient.

For a sweet babka, swap the oil drizzle (infused in the previous recipe with preserved lemon - step 8) for a simple sugar syrup. Add two-parts sugar to one-part water (about 50g and 25ml respectively) in a small saucepan over a low heat. Allow the sugar to dissolve into the water but do not stir. Remove from the heat and drizzle over the babka while the cake is still warm.

Tip: if the dough is too soft and sticky to knead (step 1) place the dough in a bowl in the fridge or freezer until it firms up slightly. I find I often need to do this if the butter was too soft when incorporated.
sourdough crackers

I have a sourdough starter - her pet name is Sally. I’m rather fond of her and often take her with me when I go away for the weekend - not that she doesn’t cope very well on her own in the fridge, Sally is made of sturdy stuff, but I just like making and eating things with her. I have never, and may never, master the art of sourdough - I could blame Sally, but a bad workman blames his tools, so I’ll bear that burden myself. I do however like to pretend I’m a fermenting fiend and put ‘sourdough’ in front of all sorts of baked goods. The thing to remember is that whether your starter is bubbling and burping or just lazing about watching the kitchen equivalent of a boxset - i.e. regardless of the activity of its yeasts - it is in essence about a 1:1 ratio of flour and water. As such it can be added to almost anything which uses these ingredients. In the case of a flatbread or cracker, no raising agent is required (to compensate for the starter’s lethargy), but in say a soda bread or a scone (or a puffy pancake), chemical raising agents will do the job they’ve already there for. The starter is just along for the ride. So called ‘good practice’ in the world of sourdough starters requires discarding half of the flour and water mixture each time it is fed, which results in a lot of flour going in the bin. Recipes that use this discard don’t need an active starter - they are simply a way of avoiding perfectly decent ingredients ending up in the rubbish (whilst utilising the starter’s signature sour, fermented flavour). If you don’t have a sourdough starter, just replace the allotted starter in the recipe for half and half flour and water.

These crackers are a great starting point for playing with flavour combinations. Mix up the flour - wholemeal, plain, or rye is nice. The ground flaxseed adds much of the flavour here, but feel free to play around with this too - try oat bran and chia seeds. Gram flour would make a nice addition, but I’d opt for using this in place of some of the ground seed rather than the flour as it doesn’t contain gluten. Of course, the poppy and nigella seeds have a purely gustatory role, so these can be swapped for anything - herbs, spices, nuts. These crackers are dangerously moreish nibbled at on their own - but do keep some for a smelly cheese!

makes about 18 rectangular crackers or 36 squares

25g spelt flour
70g ground flaxseed
generous pinch of sea salt flakes
1 tbsp poppy seeds
1 tbsp nigella seeds
20g rapeseed oil
60g sourdough starter

1. Preheat the oven to 180C/160C fan, and line a baking sheet with baking parchment.
2. Stir together all the dry ingredients in a bowl, then add the liquid (oil and starter) and bring together with your hand to form a cohesive dough.
3. Roll out between two pieces of clingfilm until about 1-2mm thick. Transfer to the lined baking sheet and gently score with a sharp knife into squares. Cook for 20 minutes, or until browned and starting to crisp up, checking after 10 minutes to turn if needed.
4. Once cooked, cool on a wire rack for 10-15 minutes to firm up, before gently breaking along the score marks.
sourdough starter pancakes

Sometimes what you really need is a big stack of pancakes. These bad boys can be eaten around the clock, sweetened up or savoury-ed down, with maple syrup and streaky bacon (cremated and crispy) for a beefy breakfast; or, like here, with cheese and chutney (if it works on bread, it works with pancakes too). Remember that starter is essentially equal parts flour and water, so if you don’t have a ‘Sally’ just make up the sourdough starter quantity with 1:1 plain flour and water. Have a play with the flour here too - rye and Guinness flavours pair brilliantly, while the quinoa gives a slightly lighter nuttiness. Spelt, plain, wholemeal or chickpea flour would work just as well, and the Guinness could be swapped for fizzy water or milk too. Once you’re familiar with the consistency of the batter you need to achieve, have a play around with how you get there.

1. Combine the quinoa flour, bicarbonate of soda and salt in a bowl and stir thoroughly to distribute the bicarb. In a separate bowl, mix together the sourdough starter, Guinness, beaten egg and rapeseed oil. Fold the dry ingredients into the wet and let it sit for 10-15 minutes.

2. Heat a well-greased frying pan over a medium heat. Add a few spoonfuls at a time (you can make smaller pancakes with 1 tbsp each, or larger individual pancakes to fill a plate). When the batter is bubbly and the bottom slides when shaken, flip it over and cook for a further 1-2 minutes. Keep warm while you cook the rest of the batter.

3. Serve in a stack, layered with generous gratings of parmesan between each pancake and topped with a generous dollop of chutney.

nettle sourdough starter fried flatbreads

These fried flatbreads are simpler than simple - they barely need a recipe penning at all. And they’re the perfect way to quickly and easily make use of sourdough starter discard - the part of the starter that you’re supposed to chuck. Please don’t! Instead - take your sourdough starter in whatever state it is. Roughly speaking, the quantities of the starter are likely to be 1:1 flour to water, but it’ll want to be fairly loose so add some water if needed, you’re looking for a consistency similar to a drop scone batter.

These really are a blank canvas for flavour - here I added blanched and chopped nettles from the garden and served them sliced up with smoked rapeseed oil and sherry vinegar. They also work well with spring onions, fried in toasted sesame oil, but really can take any flavour - sweet or savoury. Orange zest added to the starter batter is also delicious and makes a great, quick breakfast.

1. In a small bowl, combine the sourdough starter, salt and the prepared nettles.

2. Heat the rapeseed oil in a large frying pan over a medium-high heat. Spoon the starter mixture into the pan a tablespoonful at a time. Once it starts to produce bubbles and turn slightly opaque, flip and cook for a further few minutes until firm and golden brown on both sides.

3. Remove from the frying pan and slice up for dippers or leave whole.
oat and rye loaf

Using vital wheat gluten (essentially, pure gluten) is a nifty way of making bread with alternative flours, or in this case blitzed oats, as it enables you to get the structure and chew that is essential for bread without the need for strong bread flour. Roughly speaking, the gluten content of flour is more or less equivalent to the protein content (which you can find easily in the nutritional information on any bag of flour) - in strong bread flours this is between 12-15% (or grams per 100 grams). Therefore, for every 100g of gluten-free flour used, add between 12-15g of vital wheat gluten.

I love the flexibility of this loaf - using the rule of thumb of 500g flour to 350-400ml liquid, you can play around with this loaf, using different flours and swapping water for milk. Some flours will need more liquid, for example rougher, wholemeal flours have a high absorption, hence the recommended liquid quantity is flexible. This recipe is in the zero-waste chapter because it utilises sourdough starter discard, but as with the previous recipes it can easily be replaced by equal parts flour and water. The oats, rye and wholemeal flours included in this loaf make it both tastier and more nutritious than a simple white loaf. This bread will have you reaching for the butter; it also makes the perfect accompaniment for poached eggs on a Saturday morning.

1. Start by blitzing the oats in a food processor until fine and flour-like. Transfer to a large mixing bowl and add the vital wheat gluten, flours, yeast and sugar. Stir well to combine. Then add in the starter (or flour and water) and milk and roughly combine with a fork or your fingers to make a shaggy mess. Leave this to sit for 30 minutes (this activates the gluten and the yeast - salt hinders the activity of the yeast, so I add this later to give the yeast a head start).

2. Next, sprinkle over the salt and fold it in. Knead the dough on an oiled surface for 10-15 minutes. Typically, you would be working towards a smooth and elastic dough, but the various flours in this mean it won’t quite get smooth, but it will be a cohesive and not sticky dough. Shape the dough into a ball and place in a lightly oiled bowl covered with a damp tea towel. Leave to rise until doubled in size, about 1½ hours - the dough should bounce back when gently prodded. Meanwhile, line a 1kg loaf tin.

3. When the dough is risen, tip it onto a lightly floured surface and knock it back to remove larger air bubbles. Fold the dough in on itself several times, then fold the top and the bottom into the middle to form a rough rectangle. Roll up into a sausage the length of the tin, and then place seam side down into the tin. Cover again with the damp towel and leave in a warm place to prove again until risen above the rim of the tin, for 1-2 hours depending on how warm it is. Meanwhile, heat the oven to 220C/200C fan.

4. When well-risen, bake the dough for 35-45 minutes, until golden brown and the loaf sounds hollow when tapped on the bottom. Tip the loaf out of the tin and leave to cool completely on a wire rack.

makes 1 loaf

135g oats
20g vital wheat gluten
150g rye flour
110g strong wholemeal flour
10g yeast
1 tsp sugar
200g sourdough starter (or 100g plain flour & 100ml water)
200–250ml milk
10g salt
oil, for kneading
lunchtime lemon tart

I initially made this savoury lemon tart using a typical quiche recipe: single cream whisked together with eggs. Spiked with a crumbing of feta, some preserved lemons and lemon zest it made for a fresh and zingy alternative to a traditional quiche. In a bid to increase the sharpness I looked to swap out some of the cream for yoghurt (a substitution I’d read about that nudged the custard tart towards its cousin, the cheesecake). A quick fridge raid later and I was finishing off scraps of feta, ricotta, crème fraîche and natural yoghurt. Any soured dairy would work well here - cheese, yoghurt etc - and preferably full fat; just use what you have and make it up to about 330g with single cream or milk. The result was less puffy than a traditional quiche but it offered a much bolder flavour. Not to mention it was an excellent ‘using-up’ job, and that’s how the recipe ended up here in the zero-waste chapter. If you find yourself with a glut of lemons and choose to preserve your own, that really would earn you a gold (green?) star.

1. Begin by making the pastry. Stir the za’atar through the flour, then rub the butter between your fingers, picking up the flour as you go, until you have the consistency of breadcrumbs. Next, mix in the egg yolk. (Alternatively, pulse the flour and butter, and then the yolk, together in a food processor until just coming together.) Then use your hands to bring it together into a dough. Wrap in clingfilm and leave to rest in the fridge for 30 minutes.

2. Preheat the oven to 180C/160C fan.

3. Once rested, roll the pastry out to 3mm thick (on a lightly floured surface, or between two sheets of clingfilm or greaseproof paper). Lay this into a 24cm loose bottomed tart tin, pressing the pastry into the corners and the fluting. Prick the pastry with a fork, then line with baking parchment and fill with baking beans, before blind baking for 20-25 minutes, removing the beans and returning to the oven for the last few minutes to crisp up. It is cooked when the pastry is just turning opaque and has taken on a bit of colour. While it’s still hot, trim the pastry around the top of the tin and leave to cool for 5 minutes. Then seal the pastry with an egg wash (using the white left over from the yolk that goes into the filling).

4. While the pastry case is cooling, make the filling. Using an electric whisk, beat together the feta, ricotta, crème fraîche, yoghurt and single cream. Then add the eggs and yolks and whisk to combine. Finally, add the chopped preserved lemon and zest of one lemon, along with the leaves from a few sprigs of thyme. Season well with salt and pepper and whisk to combine. Pour into the pastry case and place this on a baking sheet. Transfer to the oven (still 180C/160C fan) and cook for about 30 minutes, or until puffed up and golden brown on top.

5. Meanwhile, slice the remaining lemon into cross sections as thinly as possible. After 15-20 minutes (once the quiche has firmed up enough to take some weight) lay the lemon slices on its surface and return the tart to the oven for the remaining cooking time.

6. To make the tahini sauce, use a fork to stir the tahini, adding cold water very slowly, until the tahini goes an almost-white colour and is at a consistency you like (thinner or thicker is fine, you’re looking for the colour to change to know you’ve got it right.) Then add in the lemon juice and stir this through. Season with salt and pepper.

7. Once the tart is cooked, leave to cool for 10 minutes or so before popping out of the tin.

8. Serve at room temperature with a herby salad and tahini sauce.
stressed herbs: "taste better"
5 o’clock teatime
blush orange and fennel upside-down cake

The blush orange - as if rosy cheeked, yet some show their embarrassment at fruit bowl flirtation more than others. More often called blood oranges, but you'll struggle to buy them as such, for though a more valiant term it apparently offends our sensitivity. But whichever rouge this fruit wears it offers a more complex and sweeter flavour than its plainer sibling, though the latter is a useful substitution when blush oranges fade from the shelves with their seasonal shyness. And on the theme of culinary coyness, fennel - though the most beautiful flavour - is, too, sometimes a little shy (unless you’re a fennel hater in which case you’ll sniff it out a mile off). It is toasted and ground here to release the wonderful sweet aniseed aromas, but even then, it’s not super punchy. Rosemary would take a bolder stance as a flavour here, as would cardamom. This cake can see you through from teatime to pudding time in a terribly sophisticated manner. Spoon over a nice dollop of crème fraîche or Greek yoghurt - the sourness works perfectly with the sweet-sour-bitter that comes from the whole oranges used in this dense, moist sponge.

serves 8-10

for the cake
3 blush oranges
5 eggs
160g polenta
160g ground almonds
35g caster sugar
100g soft light brown sugar
1½ tsp baking powder
1-2 tbsp fennel seeds, toasted and ground
1 tbsp olive oil

for the bottom that becomes the top
2 blush oranges, whole
juice from ½ blush orange (25ml)
50g castor sugar

1. Place the oranges for the cake in a saucepan and cover with water. Bring to the boil and then reduce to a simmer for 2 hours. After this time, remove the oranges from the water and allow to cool. You can do this the day before and keep them in the fridge.

2. Grease a 23cm spring form cake tin, and line the bottom with baking parchment. This will help with inverting the cake.

3. Slice the remaining two blush oranges into rounds as thinly as you can - flesh, zest and all (but removing any pips). Arrange these cross-sections on the baking parchment in the bottom of the tin, making sure they’re overlapping so the batter won’t seep through.

4. In a small saucepan, gently heat the 50g of caster sugar and the juice of half a blush orange, along with 10ml of water. Swill the liquid around to start with but then resist the temptation to stir it. Let it gently come to the boil then, once melted, pour this over the blush orange slices laid out in the cake tin. Set aside to cool and firm up.

5. Preheat the oven to 170C/150C fan.

6. Roughly chop the boiled oranges and remove any pips, then blitz in a food processor, peel and all, until smooth. Add the eggs, pulse to combine, and then incorporate the rest of the cake ingredients. Blend until well mixed. Pour the cake mixture into the tin over the orange slices and cooled syrup.

7. Bake for 1 hour, checking after 45 minutes, until a skewer inserted comes out clean. Remove from the oven and leave to cool in the tin for about 30 minutes. Then turn out onto a plate. Prettify with edible flowers if you want and serve warm or at room temperature.
banana and apple tea loaf

I originally made this loaf cake without the muscovado sugar and it was delicious. There is of course sweetness from the apples and bananas - but if you like your teatime treats a little sweeter, you might want to include the sugar. In baking, sugar serves the purpose of tenderising the gluten proteins, thus differentiating a sponge from a bread, whilst adding moistness to the crumb. It also acts as a leavener when creamed with butter, as this traps air pockets which then expand when baked. Nevertheless, leaving out the sugar here works very well - it just goes to show that despite baking generally being considered a painfully precise art, if you’re open-minded about the results it’s always worth bending the rules and seeing what happens... The main flavours here - cardamom, tahini and Earl Grey - are delicious but subtle. If you prefer your flavours to pack a punch, swap the Earl Grey for Lapsang Souchong, or the tahini for peanut butter, or the cardamom for cinnamon.

Without the sugar - and even with, as it amounts to about 5g per slice - this cake is pretty darn healthy and you’d be excused for eating it at breakfast (you’d also be excused for eating any cake for breakfast if that was what you wanted to do).

1. Preheat the oven to 180C/160C fan. Grease and line a 1kg loaf tin (23x13cm).
2. Start by stewing the cooking apples. Add the chopped apple to a medium saucepan over a medium heat, with the caster sugar (if using), squeeze of lemon juice and about 1 tbsp water. Stir regularly until cooked through - it doesn’t matter if there is the odd lump. Set aside to cool (you can speed this up by placing the saucepan in a bowl of cold water).
3. In a food processor, combine the bananas, eggs, yoghurt, rapeseed oil, tahini, muscovado sugar and cooled stewed apple. Blitz until smooth and transfer to a large mixing bowl.
4. Sift together the flours, bicarbonate of soda, salt, 2½ tsp of the ground cardamom and contents from 2½ of the Earl Grey tea bags. Fold this into the wet ingredients, along with 50g of the chopped walnuts.
5. In a small bowl, toss together the remaining 50g of chopped walnuts, ½ tsp ground cardamom, contents of the remaining ½ Earl Grey tea bag, and the soft light brown sugar. Spoon the cake mix into the lined loaf tin, smooth over the top with a knife and sprinkle over the walnut topping.
6. Bake for 55-60 minutes, or until a skewer inserted into the centre comes out clean. Turn the grill on and place the cake under the grill for 2-5 minutes to caramelise the sugar.
7. Leave to cool in the tin on a wire rack and remove when completely cool.
8. Serve with lashings of salted butter.

serves 10-12

2 small-medium cooking apples, skin on, cored and chopped (260g prepared raw or 245g cooked)  
squeeze of lemon juice  
1 tbsp caster sugar (optional)  
3 overripe bananas  
100g full-fat natural yoghurt  
85g rapeseed oil  
85g tahini  
50g dark muscovado sugar (optional)  
150g self-raising wholemeal flour  
100g rye flour  
½ tsp bicarbonate of soda  
½ tsp salt  
3 tsp ground cardamom  
3 Earl Grey tea bags  
100g walnuts, chopped  
1½ tsp soft light brown sugar
simple scones

Scones - here in the ‘5 o’clock’ chapter, but certainly can be eaten anytime from breakfast onwards.

They say three is a magic number, and indeed it’s something of a trump card in the flavour game. As well as a ‘base’ recipe below, from which to start your scone permutations, I have included a couple of culinary triumvirates that produce good gustatory balance. It’s worth remembering though that we all perceive flavour slightly differently - and here lies the problem of trying to please a crowd - with some being more sensitive or blind to particular flavours than others. So practice the chef’s prerogative - it tastes the way you want it to!

1. Preheat the oven to 220C/200C fan.
2. Sift together the flour, bicarbonate of soda and salt into a large mixing bowl. Rub in the butter using your fingers until it has seemingly disappeared, then stir in the sugar.
3. Combine the milk, vinegar and beaten egg in a separate bowl or jug. Make a well in the centre of the dry ingredients and add the liquid, stirring with a knife or spoon until almost combined, then bring together with your hands and transfer to a well-floured surface.
4. Using a well-floured rolling pin, roll the dough to roughly 1-inch thick. Cut into triangles (to avoid any scraps) or use a biscuit cutter (about 6cm diameter) for traditional rounds. Place on a baking sheet and cook in the oven for 7-10 minutes, or until golden on top.
5. Serve warm with clotted cream and jam, or simply lots of butter.

makes 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>flour</th>
<th>250g plain flour</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bicarbonate of soda</td>
<td>1 tsp</td>
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<tr>
<td>salt</td>
<td>½ tsp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unsalted butter</td>
<td>50g cold cubed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sugar</td>
<td>1 tbsp caster (omit if making savoury scones)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>milk</td>
<td>50ml</td>
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<tr>
<td>white wine vinegar</td>
<td>2 tsp</td>
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<tr>
<td>egg</td>
<td>1 large beaten</td>
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For the lightest and fluffiest scones, follow the base recipe. If adding anything heavy or wet it will affect the lightness of the scone, as will alternative/wholemeal flours. Here are some suggestions and recommendations for playing the scone game.

the scone game

For the lightest and fluffiest scones, follow the base recipe. If adding anything heavy or wet it will affect the lightness of the scone, as will alternative/wholemeal flours. Here are some suggestions and recommendations for playing the scone game.

to compensate for alterations

~ reduce the liquid in the base recipe proportionally to any added liquid or puréed flavours
~ increase the raising agent in the base recipe if adding any heavier “bit” in, or if you have a wetter dough. An extra ¼ - ½ tsp of bicarbonate of soda should be enough
~ if you find the dough is too wet to roll, add more flour a teaspoon at a time until the dough is more workable
~ adjust cooking time according to the texture of the mixture, for example raspberries make it wetter so cook for 10 minutes instead of 7-8 minutes
~ for the following flavour combinations, use the quantities of the flavour components in the recipes on p96-99 as guidance, but have the confidence to follow your intuition. For example, if using a vegetable like sweet potato, refer to the method and quantity for the beetroot on p99. For nuts and dried fruits use about 50g, for cheese use about 50-75g, for fresh fruit use roughly 75g. If trying alternative flours, start by swapping this for half the total quantity of flour. See p45 for the polenta, cheddar and coriander alternative in practice

think in threes

~ something chunky, with bite, pieces of something – e.g. a nut, chocolate chunks, dried fruit
~ aromatics - a herb or spice, this can take the limelight or play more of a supporting role
~ a fruit or vegetable - puréed, grated, chopped

some star combos

~ carrot, thyme, feta
~ za’atar, blackberry, rye
~ apple, parmesan, barberry
~ sweet potato, cinnamon, ginger
~ pistachio, orange zest, dried apricot
~ polenta, cheddar, coriander
beetroot, chocolate and coriander scones - vibrant before cooking...

raspberry, walnut and rosemary scones
raspberry, walnut and rosemary scones

I will very often opt for a savoury, or at least semi-savoury, element to my sweet flavour combinations. The slightly bitter earthiness of the walnuts along with the robustness of the rosemary, often more reminiscent of Sunday roasts than teatime treats, offset the sweetness of the raspberries rather well.

makes 8

125g plain flour
125g rye flour
1 1/2 tsp bicarbonate of soda
1/2 tsp salt
50g cold unsalted butter, cubed
1 tbsp caster sugar
50g walnuts, roughly chopped
1 sprig of rosemary, leaves removed and finely chopped
50ml milk
2 tsp white wine vinegar
1 large egg, beaten
80g raspberries (frozen or fresh)

1. Preheat the oven to 220°C/200°C fan.
2. Sift together the flours, bicarbonate of soda and salt into a large mixing bowl. Rub in the butter using your fingers until it has seemingly disappeared, then stir in the sugar, nuts and rosemary.
3. Combine the milk, vinegar and beaten egg in a separate bowl or jug. Make a well in the centre of the flours and add the liquid, stirring with a knife or spoon until almost combined.
4. Scatter over the raspberries and gently fold in.
5. Then bring together with your hands and transfer to a well-floured surface. Using a well-floured rolling pin, roll the dough to roughly 1-inch thick. Cut into triangles (to avoid any scraps) or use a biscuit cutter (about 6cm diameter) for traditional rounds. Place on a baking sheet and cook in the oven for 7-10 minutes, or until golden on top.
6. Serve with sumptuous amounts of clotted cream and a jam of your choice. Raspberry would be the obvious choice here, but if you can’t abide the seeds anything fruitily sacchariferous will do. Nectarine jam satisfies this scone’s flavour trinity perfectly.
beetroot, chocolate and coriander scones

A mellow trio with a bold colour that belies the subtlety of its flavours. However, the vibrant pink dies a death in the baking so the addition of cocoa powder wouldn’t be too aesthetically remiss, and might take this scone into more indulgent territory. Coriander is surprisingly versatile - I first experienced its sweet side in a honey and coriander seed cake. Draw out its citrus notes and you’ll see it really does bat for both sides.

The amount of beetroot puree called for here will probably require 1 small-medium beetroot, but I like to do a few at a time and use the puree for other things. One such example is a tasty dip - mix the beetroot puree with Greek or natural yoghurt, juice of a lime and some freshly chopped mint leaves. Fresh and delicious. Or try finely chopped preserved lemon, feta and toasted cumin seeds.

1. Start by preparing the beetroot. Wash them well, cut into cubes and place in a saucepan - don’t peel the skins, but do remove any green leaves and keep these aside for a salad! Cover with water and bring to the boil, then reduce to a simmer for 20-25 minutes. A knife should be inserted easily into the flesh. Puree with a stick blender or food processor and leave to cool.
2. Preheat the oven to 220C/200C fan.
3. Sift together the flours, bicarbonate of soda and salt into a large mixing bowl. Rub in the butter using your fingers until it has seemingly disappeared, then stir in the sugar, coriander and chocolate chunks.
4. Combine the milk, lemon juice, beaten egg, honey and beetroot in a separate bowl or jug. Make a well in the centre of the flours and add the liquid, then reduce to a simmer for 20-25 minutes. A knife should be inserted easily into the flesh. Puree with a stick blender or food processor and leave to cool.
5. Then bring together with your hands and transfer to a well-floured surface. Using a rolling pin, roll the dough to roughly 1-inch thick. Cut into triangles (to avoid any scraps) and place on a baking sheet and cook in the oven for 7-10 minutes, or until a skewer inserted comes out clean (check this on 3 or 4 scones around the baking sheet).
6. With a fork, mix together the ingredients for the chocolate butter, adding more maple syrup and cocoa to taste.
7. Serve the scones warm with a thick spreading of chocolate butter.

makes 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ingredient</th>
<th>quantity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>85g plain flour</td>
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<tr>
<td>85g rye flour</td>
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<td>85g spelt flour</td>
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<td>2 tsp bicarbonate of soda</td>
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<td>½ tsp salt</td>
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<td>60g cold unsalted butter, cubed</td>
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<td>2 tbsp caster sugar</td>
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<tr>
<td>75g dark chocolate, roughly chopped</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 ½ tbsp coriander seeds, toasted and ground</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 tbsp honey</td>
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<td>120g puréed beetroot</td>
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<td>1 tbsp milk</td>
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<td>3 tsp lemon juice</td>
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<td>1 large egg, beaten</td>
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for the chocolate butter

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25g unsalted butter, softened</td>
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<td>1 ½ tbsp cocoa powder</td>
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<tr>
<td>drizzle of maple syrup</td>
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<td>generous pinch of sea salt</td>
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boozy smokey fig loaf

This little figgy went to the pub and knocked back a P.X. sherry and puffed on some... tea. Soaking the dried figs in lapsang souchong adds a real smokiness to this cake (as does over-toasting the walnuts if you’re feeling reckless). The rye flour, mixed spice and allspice have an important role playing support act to the star flavours here - fig, molasses, something smokey. The P.X. sherry (Pedro Ximenez is the intensely sweet dessert wine made with the grape variety of the same name) adds sweetness to the cake, but it’s the drizzle on top where it really sings (i.e. where the alcohol hasn’t been cooked off!). Pinprick the cake while still hot before pouring the icing over to have yourself a ‘sherry drizzle’ situation. This cake is certainly sweet, but in a black treacle ‘it’s getting dark and the sky looks sticky’ way - rather than a pink and fluffy ‘Queens of Candyfornia’ way.

1. Combine the dried figs, lapsang souchong leaves and boiling water in a small bowl and leave to soak for at least 30 minutes. Heat the oven to 180C/160C fan.

2. Toast the walnuts in the oven for 5-8 minutes until they start to brown and release their nutty oils and aromas. Transfer to the bowl of a food processor and leave to cool for 10 minutes. Meanwhile grease and line a 1kg loaf tin (23x13cm).

3. Blitz the cooled walnuts until roughly ground. Add the figs and soaking tea liquid (including the leaves) and blitz again to a paste. In a large mixing bowl, cream the butter and dark muscovado sugar with an electric whisk. Then whisk in the eggs, molasses, sherry and yoghurt, and then the blitzed fig and walnut mixture. Sift together the flours, baking powder, salt and spices, and then using a metal spoon fold this into the wet ingredients in three batches.

4. Transfer the mixture to the loaf tin and bake for 45-55 minutes (you may want to cover it with foil for the last 5-10 minutes), or until a skewer inserted into the middle comes out clean.

5. Meanwhile, sift the icing sugar and pour the sherry into a small bowl, then whisk until smooth. When the cake is out of the oven, prick it all over with a skewer and then pour over the drizzle. Top with the toasted and chopped walnuts.

6. Leave the cake in the tin to cool completely before lifting it out and slicing up.

serves 10-12

9 dried figs, stalks discarded
1 tsp lapsang souchong leaves, mixed with 75ml boiling water
80g walnuts
200g unsalted butter, softened
150g dark muscovado sugar
4 large eggs
1½ tbsp molasses
1 tbsp P.X. sherry
50g full-fat natural yogurt
100g plain flour
100g rye flour
2½ tsp baking powder
½ tsp salt
½ tsp mixed spice
¼ tsp allspice

for the sherry drizzle
2 tbsp icing sugar
2 tbsp P.X. sherry
25g walnuts, toasted and roughly chopped
room for pudding?
oozy gooseberry and almond surprise pudding

If surprise pudding conjures up memories of school dinners, then this pudding may just make for a rather pleasant surprise - it's better than you remember. Also referred to as self-saucing, these puddings masquerade as a simple sponge but reveal gooey, curdy custardiness underneath - the surprise. What’s even better is, if it lasts for a second day, the aforementioned goozy, curdy custardiness sets into something akin to a set crème pat. This is certainly something I would like to see cooking on a time lapse through the cross section; I imagine the whipped egg whites inflating, pulling the sponge upwards with them, while the yolks draw down the gooseberries and sugars with them on their delicious descent. Scrunch the gooseberries in your hands as they get added to the bowl to release their juices, but keeping some whole lends to even more and even better surprises. Ease off the almond essence if you’re not a fan, though then you’ve only really got an oozy gooseberry surprise pudding - which might be just what you want!

1. Heat the oven to 180C/160C fan; butter a 1.5 litre ovenproof dish. You’ll also need a larger roasting tray (this will be half filled with hot water for the ovenproof dish to sit in).

2. Cream the butter and sugar until well combined (it won’t be pale and creamy but should be well incorporated), then beat in the egg yolks, milk and almond extract. Add the gooseberries, scrunching them with your hands to burst the skins of some of them, and stir. In a separate bowl, sift together the flours and combine with the ground almonds.

3. In another bowl, whisk the egg whites until firm but not stiff. Fold the dry mixture into the wet mixture, and then fold the egg whites into this, taking care not to knock the air out.

4. Pour the mixture into the buttered ovenproof dish and place this in the larger roasting tray. Pour boiling water into the baking tray so it reaches half-way up the height of the ovenproof dish. Bake for 45-50 minutes, until the top is golden brown and set but there is still a bit of a wobble - this means there’ll be gooseberry ooziness below.

5. Meanwhile, toast the flaked almonds. When the pudding is cooked, serve hot with flaked almonds and icing sugar sprinkled on top, and cream if you like.

serves 4-6

50g unsalted butter, softened
150g caster sugar
3 eggs, separated
250ml milk
1 tsp almond extract
270g gooseberries
50g plain flour
50g self-raising flour
50g ground almonds
25g flaked almonds, to serve
icing sugar, for dusting
Gajar ka halwa - literally ‘carrot pudding’ - don’t knock it till you’ve tried it. Traditionally, it is stirred over the heat for hours on end, a sort of aroma-filled therapy, but this is a quicker version for those who don’t have the patience for delayed gratification. It is very versatile; make a big batch and eat it by itself or stirred through porridge - I guarantee it won’t last long. This version differs from the more traditional recipes which go heavy on the cream and ghee - I swap these for cashew milk and coconut oil, and I go easy on the sugar, but you can increase this if you prefer things sweeter. Here, the cooked carrot is layered between well-buttered slices of brioche and soaked in cardamom-infused custard. Cardamom should be the abiding flavour here (and if you can get ground cardamom this is more pungent than from the pods), but if you’re not a fan let the cinnamon and ginger steal the show.

1. Start by making the gajar ka halwa. Melt the coconut oil in a large frying pan over a medium heat and add the grated carrot. Give it a good stir and cook for 2-3 minutes. Pour over the milk, sugar, spices and sultanas and stir to combine. Leave this simmering for 15-20 minutes, or until the liquid has been absorbed and the carrot is soft, stirring occasionally to ensure it doesn’t stick. Transfer to a plate and allow to cool to room temperature.

2. Next, start the custard. In a saucepan, warm the cashew milk and double cream with the cardamom (bashed slightly to open the pods) to infuse it. Just before the milk bubbles, remove it from the heat and allow it to cool down.

3. Butter the brioche slices, and layer these into a 1.5 litre ovenproof dish, alternating brioche with the cooled gajar ka halwa.

4. In a bowl, beat the eggs, egg yolk and sugar together, then when the milk mixture is just above room temperature (no hotter), remove the cardamom pods and pour the milk into the bowl, stirring constantly. Then pour the custard into the dish with the bread and carrot mix and leave to sit for at least 30 minutes - the longer the better.

5. Preheat the oven to 200C/180C fan.

6. Scatter the chopped pistachios over the pudding, and then put the dish into a deep roasting tray and pour about 2cm of boiling water into the tray. Transfer to the oven and bake for 40-45 minutes, until crisp and browned on top and the custard is just firm. It may need some foil over the top to stop it burning for the last 10 minutes or so.

7. Allow it to cool down slightly before serving.

serves 6

for the gajar ka halwa
1 tbsp coconut oil
250g carrot, grated (approx. 1 carrot)
300 ml cashew milk
15 cardamom pods, seeds removed & ground
¼ tsp ground cinnamon
1 tsp ground ginger
2-3 tbsp soft brown sugar
90g sultanas

for the bread and butter
300ml cashew milk
150ml double cream
5 cardamom pods
200g brioche / 6 slices, cut in half on the diagonal
35g unsalted butter, softened until easily spreadable
2 large eggs & 1 yolk
100g soft brown sugar
30g pistachios, roughly chopped
the bread and butter pudding game

Bread and butter pudding - a sweet dish that consists of a sliced carb, layered, and drenched in custard; with the added option of gooey deliciousness in between said layers of sliced carb.

You can intensify a particular flavour by spiking your custard with an aromatic infusion of the milk - cardamom, pine (yes, from a Christmas tree), thyme, star anise, orange peel, and so on and so forth...

Here are some tips and tricks on how to play the bread and butter pudding game.

the sliced carb

~ croissant (and not necessarily plain!)
~ hot cross buns
~ brioché
~ fruit loaf
~ rye bread
~ panettone
~ banana bread
~ crumpets
~ teacake

the gooey deliciousness

~ marmalade
~ jam - apricot, damson, fig, etc...
~ grated apple, sultanas, cinnamon
~ stewed pear, cranberry, marzipan
~ summer berries, goats cheese, thyme
~ sliced nectarine, slivered almonds
~ peanut butter, banana, honey
~ grated beetroot, dark chocolate
~ lemon curd, mint
~ grapefruit curd, pink peppercorn
rhubarb and raspberry thyme cobbler

One of the joys of coming home to my parents’ house is the chest freezer in the garage that is packed full of summer berries from the previous year’s (and previous, previous, previous years’) garden harvest; raspberries, gooseberries, red currants, blackberries - and mountains of them. At this time of year, springtime, there is also an abundance of rhubarb - the permutations of fruit puddings are endless. Here, we pair together rhubarb and raspberries for unbeatable fruity pinkness and crown these flavours with rustic thyme scones to make a cobbler. It isn’t unfitting that the word ‘cobbler’ also denotes (archaically) a clumsy workman, and it is quite likely that the name for this dish came from it being ‘cobbled together’ - supposedly it originated in the British American colonies when English settlers couldn’t get their hands on the means to make a traditional suet pudding, so the stewed filling was covered with dumplings (or scones) instead. This isn’t a pudding if you’re looking for refined sophistication - it is instead wholesome, hearty and comforting - everything a pudding should be.

1. Preheat the oven to 190C/170C fan.
2. Put the rhubarb and raspberries in a mixing bowl with the cornflour and sugar and toss together well. Transfer this to a 1-litre ovenproof dish.
3. Sift together both flours, the bicarbonate of soda and salt and stir to evenly distribute.
4. Rub in the butter using your fingers, stir through the sugar and thyme leaves, and then make a well in the centre. Whisk the egg, milk and white wine vinegar together, then pour this into the well in the flour. Stir to combine so no flour is visible.
5. Place this mixture on top of the fruit, a spoonful at a time, and transfer to the oven to cook for 30-35 minutes. About halfway through, sprinkle the pine nuts on top. It is cooked when the cobbler topping is golden brown, a skewer inserted comes out clean, and the fruit underneath is jammy and starting to soften.
6. Serve warm with crème fraîche or, if you’re feeling indulgent, clotted cream - it is after all not a far cry from scones, jam and cream.

serves 4

for the stewed fruit
550g rhubarb, cut into 1-inch chunks
450g raspberries
2 tsp cornflour
4 tbsp light soft brown sugar

for the cobbler
125g plain flour
125g wholemeal flour
1 tsp bicarbonate of soda
½ tsp salt
35g cold unsalted butter, cubed
1 tbsp caster sugar
½ small bunch of thyme, leaves only
150ml milk
2 tsp white wine vinegar
1 egg
handful of pine nuts
the cobbler and crumble game

A note on flours for a cobbler - mix and match as you like, I have used ½ plain flour and ½ wholemeal flour, but any combination of plain, wholemeal, rye, spelt etc would work. I would advise against gluten-free flours making up more than half of the quantity of flour, though the inclusion of oats or oat flour adds a nice depth of flavour. If adding oats on top of the flour content, as in a soda bread, increase the milk and vinegar quantities slightly to compensate for this. Self-raising flour can also be used - in this case reduce the bicarbonate of soda slightly; roughly speaking for 150g of self-raising flour, reduce the bicarbonate of soda by about ½ tsp, but don’t completely do away with it.

A note on crumble toppings - never a fan of the powdery flour crumble toppings that disintegrate in your bowl, my go-to crumble topping is heavy on the oats and nuts. Butter and sugar bring these together into something crunchy and flapjacky; or use lightly whisked egg whites to bind together your topping for a healthier option.

A note on the fruit - I like my fruit to have some bite to it, but if you prefer it very soft I would recommend giving the fruit mixture a little head start in the oven, or cutting it very small. Hard fruits like apple and pear will want pre-cooking, but soft stone fruit and berries shouldn’t need this.

“What’s the difference between a pie and a tart? Tarts don’t wear tops.”

cobbler and crumble - the top half

~ walnut, rosemary
~ cardamom, orange zest
~ pistachio, rose water, lime zest
~ barberry, pine nut
~ cocoa nib, pecan
~ cinnamon, pumpkin seed
~ crumbled amaretti biscuit
~ hazelnut
~ almond, marzipan
~ nutmeg, ground almond

fruitiness - the bottom half

~ apple, whisky-soaked raisins
~ peach, raspberry
~ apricot, greengage
~ plum, fig
~ apple, raspberry
~ apple, pear
~ apricot, amaretto
~ rhubarb, ginger
~ pear, gooseberry, elderflower
~ plum, greengage
gorgonzola, fennel and chocolate cheesecake tart

The realms of culinary science and literature illustrate that there is so much more to food than what we put on a plate. A favourite nugget of mine is the little-known alliance of blue cheese and chocolate; not as opposed as you might think, they have sixty aroma molecules in common. The two bring out the best in each other. The bitterness of the chocolate balances the sourness of the cheese, and the potential for the roasted, nutty, spicy or floral notes in the chocolate to harmonise with the rich, buttery piquancy of a gorgonzola is endless. If I was putting this recipe on a menu I would have difficulty categorising it - though envisaged as a pudding, its savouriness surprises and could steer this plate into the starters, yet it's everything you want to round off a meal - a hybrid of pudding and cheese course. Add more maple syrup if you want something identifiably sweet, otherwise relish in its salty savoury deliciousness and just enjoy it without any burdensome thoughts of 'but what is it?'. And to drink - a rich and peppery red is obligatory. Walnuts go best in terms of flavour but any nut butter will work here, and four egg yolks might seem excessive but you really do need these to bind the pastry. Use the leftover egg whites to make financiers or coconut macaroons.

1. Preheat the oven to 200C/180C fan, and line a baking sheet with baking parchment.
2. De-stone the fruit and cut into halves or quarters depending on the size of the fruit. Add this to a small saucepan with a splash of water, and gently simmer until the fruit softens but retains some of its shape. Set aside to cool.
3. Toast the walnuts in the oven for 3-5 minutes or until slightly browned and aromatic. Meanwhile, measure out the flour and flaxseed into a medium sized mixing bowl. When the walnuts are done, remove from the oven and blitz to a paste in a spice grinder or mini food processor. Add this to the bowl with the flour and flax.
4. In a small frying pan, toast the fennel seeds and star anise until fragrant. Blitz these in the spice grinder and then add to the bowl along with the walnuts, flour and flax. Finally, mix in the egg yolks and work together using a fork and then your hand until combined.
5. Divide the mixture into four onto the lined baking sheet. Taking each portion in turn, press it flat into a biscuit cutter (about 8cm) using the back of a spoon, until you have four pastry rounds on the baking sheet. Transfer to the oven and cook for 10-12 minutes, until golden brown and almost firm to touch. The oils from the nuts may leach out and look as though the pastry isn’t cooking, but once out of the oven the oil will reabsorb. Transfer to a wire rack to cool.
6. While the pastry is cooling, whip together the ricotta, gorgonzola and maple syrup with a fork. Then add in the chopped chocolate and stir through.
7. Once the pastry base is cooled, spoon over the cheese mixture, taking it to the edge of the base and smoothing over with a butter knife. Serve topped with the fruit compote, cacao nibs and extra toasted walnuts.

makes 4 individual tarts

for the pastry base
45g walnuts (plus extra for decorating)  
65g wholemeal spelt flour  
2 tsp flaxseeds  
2 tsp fennel seeds  
2 tsp star anise, petals broken  
4 egg yolks

for the cheese filling
200g small stone fruit (such as plums, damsons, cherries or apricots)  
100g ricotta  
60g gorgonzola  
20g maple syrup  
40g good quality chocolate, 85% cocoa, roughly but finely chopped  
cacao nibs or more dark chocolate, for serving

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pistachio roulade with rose and cardamom cream

This is a hybrid of a pistachio swiss roll and my matrilineal chocolate roulade. Ditching away with the flour included in a swiss roll makes this roulade much lighter and less chewy than a sponge, while the substitution of pistachio paste for melted chocolate makes for something a little fudgier than a roulade. You can find pistachio paste online, otherwise toast and blitz some whole pistachios in a food processor until paste-like. Make the coffee stronger if you like a more intense flavour, but here just a hint of it adds depth while letting the pistachio flavour take centre stage. Take care with the rosewater as it can go from exotically aromatic to bath soap in just a couple of drops.

1. Preheat the oven to 180C/160C fan. Grease a 30x35cm shallow baking tray and line with baking parchment.

2. Beat the egg yolks and caster sugar for 3-4 minutes until well-combined and lemon coloured. Then beat in the pistachio paste and espresso (warm, but not hot). It may feel like it’s seizing but the espresso should ease this.

3. Wash the beaters of your electric whisk really well. In a separate bowl, whip the egg whites to soft peaks, then fold these into the pistachio mix using a large metal spoon or spatula; imagine the bowl as a clockface and drag the spoon from 12 o’clock down to 6 o’clock, whilst rotating the bowl anti-clockwise so that the spoon ends up at what was originally 9 o’clock (but is now 6 o’clock).

4. Once combined, pour this into the lined baking tray, smooth over with the back of the spoon or spatula so it is even, and bake for 10-15 minutes until firm but springs back when lightly touched. Meanwhile, dampen a tea towel; when the roulade sponge is slightly cooled gently cover it with the towel. Leave in a cool place to come to room temperature.

5. When the roulade sponge is nearly cooled, make the filling. With clean beaters, whip the egg whites to form stiff peaks. In a separate bowl, whip the double cream to stiff peaks; then spoon in the Greek yoghurt and beat again to combine, adding the icing sugar, ground cardamom seeds, rosewater and red food colouring to combine. Then add the egg whites and beat again until just combined (try not to over-whip at this stage).

6. By now the roulade sponge should be completely cool. Lay a piece of baking parchment larger than the sponge onto a work surface; dust lightly with the extra 1 tbsp icing sugar and then flip the roulade sponge onto the parchment. Remove the tin and then carefully peel away the parchment. With the short end of the sponge nearest to you, spoon on the cream filling and smooth over evenly with the back of the spoon, leaving 1 inch free along the top short edge. Place the raspberries evenly over the cream; then, holding onto the baking parchment underneath, roll up the cake - confidence and a firm touch will help here! Transfer onto a long platter.

7. Sprinkle over coffee beans, rose petals and chopped pistachios to serve.
sot-l’y-laisse: don’t be the idiot that forgets... the French name for the chicken oyster - the juiciest, most prized part of the bird; it doubles up as a French expression, ‘the idiot that forgets’, for only a fool would forget the best part of the chicken.

supper club (noun)

a hybrid of restaurant and dinner party; akin to a pop-up, or more titillatingly described as ‘underground dining’
A recipe for this feels slightly surplus to requirements - it’s more of an assembly job.

Labneh is easy to make at home - simply strain full fat Greek yoghurt in a cheesecloth over a bowl (to catch the whey) for anywhere between 6 and 24 hours, depending on the thickness you start with and the thickness you want to achieve. You can add a little salt and lemon juice but it’s not necessary. However, even easy things aren’t always convenient! You can buy labneh online - or check out your local middle eastern supermarket (if you have one).

You’ll want to make the pickle about 1 month in advance - there are lots of recipes for ‘quick pickles’ flying about but if you want the flavours of the aromatics to develop and find their way into the beetroot you’ll want to leave this to do its thing for at least a few weeks. Play around with the spices - mustard, coriander and cumin seeds chime of India and so is lovely with the curry leaf tadka, but there’s nothing to stop you venturing off in another direction.

Tadka, also known as ‘tempering’, is the Indian culinary trick of briefly frying herbs and spices in oil or ghee. It helps to release their essential oils, and thus their flavour, and is delightful sprinkled on top of, well, anything. Coconut oil is used here to add a nutty sweetness, but any oil will work.

Make the pickle a month in advance

1. Bring a pan of salted water to the boil and add the diced beetroot. Boil it for 15 minutes or until a sharp knife is easily inserted. Drain and set aside to cool.
2. Add the sugar, vinegar, 150ml cold water, the spices and bay leaves to a saucepan and bring to a boil. Reduce to a simmer for about 2-3 minutes and allow the sugar to dissolve.
3. Transfer the cooled beetroot to a sterilised Kilner jar, and then pour over the pickling liquid, including the spices and bay leaves, tucking these down the sides of the jar. Leave it to cool with the lid ajar, then close to seal and place in the fridge - don’t open it till you’re ready to eat it!

Assembly time

4. Evenly spread the labneh over a plate so it’s about 1cm thick, then scatter the pickled beetroot on top. At the very last minute, make the tadka.
5. Heat the coconut oil in a frying pan over a medium heat. Add the curry leaves and let them sizzle away for 3-4 minutes, or until crisp and turning slightly brown at the edges. It will smell heavenly. Remove these from the heat and sprinkle over the pickle. Serve immediately.

serves 6-8

for the labneh
250g tub of labneh, or strained greek yoghurt

for the pickle
900g golden beetroot, peeled and diced
50g castor sugar (add more if you prefer your pickles less acidic)
250ml white wine vinegar
1 tbsp mustard seed
1 tbsp coriander seed
1 tbsp cumin seed
4 bay leaves

for the tadka
1 tbsp coconut oil
handful of curry leaves (fresh are best but dried will do fine)
lapsang souchong poached quince with black beans, kale, chestnuts, sage and feta

Quince works well in savoury dishes as it isn’t overtly sweet and it offers a pleasantly soft texture (rather like cooked apple or pear), adding a slightly unusual textural element to the plate. Lapsang souchong acquires its distinctive flavour from the process of smoke-drying the leaves over pinewood fires and it’s this delicious smokiness that proffers a certain grandeur. Here, it beefs up the gentle quince like a cigar and brandy does a meagre man.

To make it more substantial, add some cooked grains - barley, farro or spelt work well.

1. Bring a medium saucepan of water to the boil, with the lapsang souchong leaves and cinnamon stick. Add the quince slices, return to the boil, then reduce to a low simmer and poach for 10-20 minutes until a knife is easily inserted, but the fruit retains some bite. The cooking time will depend on the ripeness of the fruit, so best to check it regularly.

2. In a medium sized frying pan over a medium-high heat, melt a large knob of butter and add some salt and pepper. When it’s hot, toss in the chestnuts and move around the pan continuously until starting to char. Set the chestnuts aside and return the pan to the heat with another knob of butter and more salt and pepper. When hot, add the sage leaves and fry until fragrant and starting to crisp. Set these aside.

3. Place the greens into a nest steamer, with about 1cm of water in the saucepan and a tight-fitting lid on. Cook on a high heat for 2-3 minutes until just starting to wilt.

4. To assemble, lay the steamed greens onto a large serving plate. Next, remove the quince segments from their poaching liquid and place them on top of the greens, then scatter over the black beans, crumbled feta, fried chestnuts and sage leaves.

serves 4

1 quince, cored and sliced into 16 segments
2 tsp lapsang souchong leaves
½ cinnamon stick
4 large handfuls of kale, roughly chopped (cavolo nero also works well, or if you can get your hands on it, baby kale salad leaves are lovely and don't need any cooking)
1 x 400g tin black beans, drained
120g feta, crumbled
75g cooked chestnuts, roughly chopped to about 1cm
½ small bunch sage, leaves removed
knob of butter

hodmedod red fox carlin pea hummus

Hodmedod’s is an online purveyor of British pulses and grains. One of my favourite things about them is the fancy names of their produce - Red Fox, Black Badger, Flamingo Peas - more fun than the Plain Jane Chickpea we import from abroad. A little investigation reveals that the word ‘hodmedod’ is an East Anglian dialect word typically used to refer to a snail in Suffolk, and hedgehog in Norfolk. It can also refer to the curls in a girl’s hair! It’s a joy to have such interesting produce grown in the UK and these guys should be top of your shopping list.

This Hodmedod hummus was made with their Red Fox Carlin pea - it has a distinctive nutty flavour and makes for a top-notch riff on hummus - but any of their dried peas would work a treat. I prefer to use already roasted garlic cloves as this mellows their astringency, but you can use grated raw garlic if you prefer (or try popping the peeled cloves into the boiling peas for the last 10 minutes or so). Don’t introduce salt to the peas until they’re cooked as salt prevents them from going really tender - the bicarbonate of soda, on the other hand, does a great job of tenderising the peas, but take care not to add too much or you’ll end up with an eggy sulphuric aftertaste!

1. Soak the dried peas as per the instructions on the packet - you’ll need to do this the day before to get a really softly cooked pea.

2. The next day, drain the peas and place them in a medium saucepan over a high heat, along with the bicarbonate of soda. Cook for about 3 minutes, stirring vigorously. Then add 1.5 litres of water and bring to the boil. Cook until tender enough to break easily between your thumb and finger - about 20-40 minutes, depending on the freshness of the peas.

3. Drain the peas and place in the bowl of a food processor. Blitz to a stiff paste, then with the machine running pour in the tahini, lemon juice, then add the garlic and salt. Finally, slowly drizzle in the cold water until you have a smooth paste, thicker or looser depending on your preference.

4. Transfer the hummus to a bowl and leave covered in the fridge, removing and allowing it to come to room temperature for 30 minutes, before serving with a drizzle of your favourite oil.

serves 6

250g dried red fox carlin peas
½ tsp bicarbonate of soda
150g tahini
4 tbsp lemon juice
4 cloves garlic, grated or already roasted
100ml cold water
sea salt, to taste
roasted butternut squash with amaretti, parmesan and sumac

This simple yet tasty dish calls for the crunchy dark amaretti biscuits (usually made with apricot kernels) as opposed to the soft and pale version. You can certainly make your own, though the expense of the apricot kernels makes the bought ones a much more appealing option. Pick your parmesan wisely here, with so few ingredients you can’t really mask a dodgy one. It’s well worth a trip to an Italian deli for this - you want a well-aged Parmesan with lots of cheese crystals. The crystals are essentially pure umami, which in turn is essentially what MSG is - though I wouldn’t advise masking a cheap cheese with shop-bought MSG! The sumac isn’t essential, but the acidity adds a nice freshness to the palate.

1. Preheat the oven to 200C/180C fan.
2. On a roasting tray, drizzle the squash slices with rapeseed oil, season with salt and pepper, and transfer to the oven for 40-45 minutes, or until tender and golden-brown in places.
3. Meanwhile, crush the amaretti biscuits into roughly ½ cm chunks, and roughly slither or crumble the parmesan.
4. When the squash is cooked, transfer to a serving plate and sprinkle on top the amaretti, parmesan and sumac. Serve warm so the parmesan has a chance to soften slightly in the heat of the squash.

serves 8, as a side

1 large butternut squash, cut lengthways into 8, deseeded
3 tbsp rapeseed oil
8-10 amaretti biscuits
40g good parmesan
1 tbsp sumac

lemony dal with shawarma-spiced wiltshire goat

This dal may have its roots in India, but it certainly picked up some tricks on its travels westwards. Shawarma spices on a bed of strong citrus flavours - you can’t go wrong. Amchur, or dried green mango powder, is commonly found in North Indian cooking. It adds sourness to a dish, along with a certain fruitiness. If it’s tricky to find, some additional lemon juice will do a similar job. I have included a spoonful of the liquid from the preserved lemon jar here - whether or not to include this is completely up to you and somewhat dependent on the brand of preserved lemons you buy (or if you’ve gone to the effort of making them yourself). The one I tend to buy is sweet, sour and syrupy, but other brands can taste more like brine - not pleasant. So please, taste the liquid in your jar before adding!

1. In a large saucepan, melt the coconut oil on a low heat. Add the onions and sweat until softened for 8-10 minutes, stirring regularly to ensure they do not catch or brown at all.
2. Meanwhile, toast the cumin and coriander seeds. For best results do these separately as their different shape and size means they won’t toast evenly. Heat up the cumin seeds in a dry frying pan until they just start to smoke and are very fragrant. Transfer to a pestle and mortar and grind as finely as you can (or use a spice grinder if you have one). Repeat this process with the coriander seeds.
3. When the onions are soft and translucent, add in the spices, tamarind and preserved lemon, and stir through.
4. Add the red lentils to the pan and toast for a couple of minutes before adding the stock, along with the bundle of thyme and the barberries. Cook at a gentle simmer for 25-30 minutes, until the lentils are completely soft, adding more water along the way if necessary. (The dal can be made up to this stage a few hours in advance.)
5. Meanwhile, to cook the rack (or racks) of goat, preheat the oven to 220C/200C fan.
6. Combine the rapeseed oil and shawarma spice mix in a small bowl, then rub onto the top side (fat side) of the rack. Transfer to the oven and cook for 10-12 minutes, then reduce the temperature to 180C/160 fan and cook for a further 10-15 minutes. Leave the meat to rest at about 40-50C, for at least 10 minutes, before carving. Keep any juices to spoon over once served.
7. When the dal is cooked, remove the bundle of thyme and stir through the lemon juice and zest, then check the seasoning and adjust accordingly.
8. To serve, plate up the dal and lay the carved goat rack on top. Spoon any leftover juices over the meat, and sprinkle with chopped pistachios. This is really nice served with natural yoghurt on the side.

serves 4

for the dal
1 onion, finely diced
1 tbsp coconut oil
2 tsp cumin seeds
3 tsp coriander seeds
1 tsp ground cumin
1 tsp ground coriander
1 tsp turmeric
1 tsp amchur (mango) powder
2 tsp tamarind paste
2 preserved lemons, finely chopped & 1 tbsp preserving liquid (if using)
½ small bunch thyme, stems tied together with kitchen string
3 tbsp barberries
300g red lentils
750ml veg stock & 250ml water
1 lemon, zest & juice

for the goat
1-2 racks of goat
2-3 tbsp rapeseed oil
3-4 tbsp shawarma spice mix
handful of pistachios, roughly chopped, to serve
caraway roasted red cabbage
with black, red & wild rice,
and parsley & cashew pesto

Cabbage has a bad rep, but well-roasted wedges of red cabbage showcase a range of textures from succulent to crispy and are extremely moreish. The addition of caraway seeds lends a liquorice sweetness that pairs perfectly with the earthier sweetness of the cabbage. Rice is an ubiquitous grain (and plain white rice can be offensively dull) but its many varieties add a bit of interest - opt for something with a little colour and suddenly your palate is exposed to earthy, nutty, even tea-like, flavours. Add some salty capers and sweet sultanas into the mix and you’re hitting every spot. Here, the pesto acts as a bed, a foundation, rather than an adornment on top. For this reason, you want it to be a fairly thick consistency.

1. Preheat the oven to 220C/200C fan.
2. Drizzle the cabbage wedges with the rapeseed oil and season with salt, pepper and caraway seeds. Place in the oven for 40-45 minutes, or until a knife is easily inserted and the outer leaves are just starting to brown.
3. Bring a large pan of salted water to the boil and add the rice. Cook per pack instructions (the different variations may require more or less time, so factor this in). Once cooked, drain well and leave to cool to room temperature.
4. Meanwhile, toast the cashews in the oven for 5-8 minutes, until golden brown, checking to ensure they don’t burn. Then transfer to a blender and add enough boiling water to just cover them. Blitz these until smooth and then add the chopped parsley, lemon juice, olive oil, tamari and garlic. Blitz again until almost smooth - it wants to be a fairly thick, spreadable consistency. Then check the seasoning, adding salt, pepper and more lemon or tamari as desired.
5. When the cabbage is cooked, turn down the oven to 110C/90C fan to keep it warm while you assemble the rest of the dish.
6. Toss the sultanas, capers and toasted pumpkin seeds through the cooled rice.
7. To serve, smooth the pesto onto a large serving plate. Top with spoonfuls of the rice mixture, and then the cabbage wedges, making sure to scrape off any lost caraway seeds from the tray. Finish off with lots of black pepper, maybe another drizzle of oil, and some fresh parsley leaves if you have them spare.

serves 4

for the cabbage
½ large red cabbage, cut into wedges
2 tbsp rapeseed oil
2 tbsp caraway seeds

for the rice
225g rice - mix of black, red & wild
3 tbsp sultanas
3 tbsp capers
3 tbsp pumpkin seeds, toasted

for the pesto
50g cashew nuts
50g flat-leaf parsley, roughly chopped
1 lemon, juiced
1-2 cloves roasted garlic
2 tbsp olive oil
1 tsp tamari

cavolo nero with hazelnuts,
maple and tamari

No meal is complete without a serving of freshly cooked greens on the side. Cavolo nero is an Italian kale used especially in Tuscan cuisine. It is quite possibly my favourite of the greens, with its succulent thick leaves and earthy flavour which hints at both bitterness and sweetness. When cooking to impress a crowd, simply steamed vegetables isn’t really going to cut the mustard; add moreish hazelnuts and umami tamari, along with the sweet and sour of the maple and vinegar, and you have a fulfilled taste palate.

1. Preheat the oven to 180C/160C fan. Toast the hazelnuts for a few minutes until golden brown and releasing their nutty aromas. Remove from the oven and roughly chop the toasted nuts; then set aside while you make the dressing.
2. In a small bowl, whisk together 1 tbsp of each the maple syrup, tamari and red wine vinegar, then add more of each ingredient to taste. The nuts and dressing can be prepared up to a day in advance.
3. Just before serving, pour 1 inch of water into a large pan and bring this to the boil. Place a nest steamer into the pan, add the cavolo nero and place a tight-fitting lid on top. Steam for 3-4 minutes until tender but not too floppy. (If you do not have a nest steamer, use a metal colander that fits into the pan, or just place the greens into the pan with the water and drain once cooked). Remove the cavolo nero from the pan (drain if required) and transfer to a large serving bowl or platter. Pour over the dressing and most of the chopped nuts, tossing thoroughly. Then sprinkle the remaining nuts on top.

serves 4-6, as a side
300-350g cavolo nero, cut into 1cm thick strips
50g hazelnuts
1-2 tbsp maple syrup
1-2 tbsp tamari
1-2 tbsp red wine vinegar
millionaire’s plate with roasted rhubarb and persille de chèvre

Shortbread is easy to remember; I was taught the mnemonic ‘short bread formula’ for sugar, butter, flour - of which the ratio is 1:2:3. Plus an egg yolk, but that doesn’t play nice with the mnemonic so you just have to remember that one. Besan, aka gram flour, aka chickpea flour, makes a brilliant substitution for the flour in this recipe. I stumbled upon this variation in Niki Segnit’s Lateral Cooking and haven’t looked back. I was looking for a coeliac-friendly shortbread at the time and unlike the heaps of biscuit dust I had hitherto made, this shortbread could have been full of gluten for all its delicious crunch. The besan flour has its own unique flavour, but works well here with ground lapsang souchong leaves for an added earthy smokiness.

This pudding plate was contrived out of a fear of cutting millionaire’s shortbread - was it ever possible to cut through brittle chocolate and biscuit, separated by mere squishiness, without fracturing and splurging? The solution was this deconstructed version. The date caramel also runs away from a fear of hot sugar!

Lateral Cooking and haven’t looked back. I was looking for a coeliac-friendly shortbread at the time and unlike the heaps of biscuit dust I had hitherto made, this shortbread could have been full of gluten for all its delicious crunch. The besan flour has its own unique flavour, but works well here with ground lapsang souchong leaves for an added earthy smokiness.

For the shortbread
1. Preheat the oven to 180C/160C fan.
2. Cream the butter and sugar until just combined (don’t take it to light and fluffy as you would a cake, and start with the butter softened, but not melted, as this will affect the texture of the finished biscuit).
3. Add the besan flour, salt and ground lapsang souchong and stir together with your hand, bring the mixture together to form a dough.
4. Roll out the dough to a thickness of 4-5mm and cut into 12 equal lengths on a greased and lined baking sheet and chill for 30 minutes, or until the dough is firm to touch.
5. Bake in the oven for 25-35 minutes, turning them halfway. They are ready when they are just starting to take on a brown colour at the edges. They’ll firm and crisp up as they cool.
6. These shortbread keep well in an airtight container for about 1 week.

For the date caramel
7. In a bain-marie over a very gentle heat, melt the chocolate and coconut oil together. Be patient, and don’t stir too much.
8. Transfer to the fridge to cool down until it’s rigid and snappable (at least 2 hours, preferably longer).

For the rhubarb
10. The night before, combine the cherries and cassis in a small bowl and leave to soak. You will drain the cassis off when ready to use.
11. Preheat the oven to 180C/160C fan, and line a baking sheet with baking parchment.
12. In a bain-marie over a very gentle heat, melt the chocolate and coconut oil together. Be patient, and don’t stir too much.
13. Meanwhile, roast the nuts in the oven for 5-10 minutes until starting to brown slightly. Then roughly chop.
14. Toast the sesame seeds lightly in a dry frying pan, and roughly bash the pink peppercorns in a pestle and mortar.
15. When the chocolate is melted, stir through the sour cherries, pistachios and seeds, adding a squeeze of orange juice for a bit of acidity. Add more milk if needed to loosen, but you want it fairly stiff.
16. Transfer to the fridge to cool down until it’s rigid and snappable (at least 2 hours, preferably longer).

Assembly
There are no hard and fast rules as to the assembly of this, but work with where it all started - biscuit, then caramel, then chocolate. Keep any juices from the rhubarb away from the biscuit to keep it crisp. And don’t forget the cheese. Any extra pistachios or pink peppercorns also make for a colourful scatter on the plate.
sot-l’y-laisse
February Feast
supper club
27.02.20
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thank you

Usually, this part of a cookery book would be devoted to reams of names of helpers - stylists, testers, photographers, publishers, suppliers, editors; the list goes on. Indeed, I did have a crucial few extra pairs of eyes to proofread and be my artistic sounding board - you know who you are, and I am so so grateful for your fresh eyes and feedback. Given the circumstances, and aside from these all-important aides, my acknowledgements and gratitude go largely to my parents - for their boundless encouragement, love and support; I can't thank them enough. For their patience, for putting up with my experimenting; to my mother for letting me invade her kitchen and raid her larder, for providing a third and fourth hand when two would not suffice. For instilling in me a devotion to home cooked food, and for making the kitchen the beating heart of our home.
"Perhaps the most important ingredient for cooking is a sense of fun. The kitchen is a playground; it's where we play the flavour game."