

two in a glass of hot water, actually a little Moroccan tumbler, its snowy etching and gold rim almost worn off with age.

In our house, a lemon will find itself accompanying a grilled pork chop or even a steak, or sometimes I'll toss one in with a roasting chicken or a pan of sliced potatoes as they crisp in the oven. Lemons are squeezed into a rasping green-oil mayonnaise, instantly lightening its colour and flavour, and even find their way into the velvety gloop of a risotto. I have only recently started to use lemons with pasta (even though lime is a given with Asian noodles). Squeezed or grated into a cream sauce and matched to fat, peppery basil leaves, they introduce a vitality all too often missing in Italian pasta 'comfort' suppers.

Today I don't bother with the cream. This 'sauce' is all about the sharpness of the lemon tempered by the Parmesan, and the warmth of the pasta gently bringing out the fragrance of the basil. I'm not sure if it's about chemistry or art. All I know is that it is sumptuous and incredibly simple.

Grating 75g of Parmesan takes longer than you might think, but no longer than it takes the pasta to cook. This turns out to be another ten-minute supper.

linguine – 200g
the juice of a large lemon
olive oil – 75ml
grated Parmesan – 75g
basil leaves – a large handful

Put a huge pan of water on to boil. When it is bubbling furiously, salt it generously, then add the linguine. Let it cook at an excited boil for about eight minutes.

Put the lemon juice, olive oil and grated Parmesan in a warm bowl (warmed under a running tap, then dried) and beat briefly with a small whisk till thick and grainy. Tear up the basil and stir in with a grinding of black pepper.

Drain the pasta and quickly toss in the lemon and Parmesan 'sauce'.
Enough for 2

There is the constant patter of rain on the kitchen roof and the gentle rattle and putter of a pan of simmering chickpeas. I don't always cook these hazelnut-sized pulses from scratch, and often as not open a tin instead. I guess I just wanted to smell them cooking today – a mealy, nutty smell that must have filled Middle Eastern kitchens since time immemorial. That said, they do survive the canning process more successfully than any other ingredient.

The chickpea thing has been set in motion by my finding a jar of organic harissa in the healthfood shop. I usually buy this brick-red

**May 4
Chickpeas
with harissa,
basil and
ham**

spice paste in beautiful little tins with yellow and blue writing and scenes of Fez. I use a tablespoon or two to add depth to a stew or bite to a baked aubergine, then leave the opened tin in the fridge. I find it a few weeks later when I am having a clear out, sporting a layer of blue fur. I must have thrown away scores of them over the years. Harissa in a screw-top jar could change my life.

There always seems to be an aubergine and a few tomatoes around. They come, with a slight monotony, in the weekly organic sack. If they are still there by Wednesday, I roast them with olive oil and maybe oregano, cumin or garlic, then eat them as a warm salad with sesame bread and fresh basil leaves. To add substance, I may stir in some cooked haricot beans or chickpeas. If you do this whilst the beans are hot, they soak up all the sweetly tart juices from the roasted vegetables. A good supper, but I tend to use it just as much as a salad to sit on the table when we eat outdoors, a knubbly, luscious side dish to accompany grilled lamb.

tomatoes – 6 large ones or a mixture of sizes
 a medium-sized aubergine
 olive oil – 120ml
 red wine vinegar – 50ml
 cumin seeds – 1 teaspoon
 chickpeas – two 400g tins
 large basil leaves – 12
 Spanish ham or prosciutto – 9 thin slices

For the dressing:

harissa paste – 1 teaspoon
 olive oil – 60ml

Set the oven at 200°C/Gas 6. Twist the tomatoes from their stalks. Cut each one into six pieces, then put them into a roasting tin. Discard the stalk from the aubergine, slice the flesh in four lengthways, and then into short chunks. Put them in the roasting tin together with the oil, vinegar, cumin seeds and a generous grinding of black pepper and sea salt. Roast for about an hour, until the aubergine is soft and golden brown, the tomatoes are caught slightly at the edges and the whole lot is fragrant, sizzling and juicy.

Lift the tomatoes and aubergines from the tin with a draining spoon, putting them in a mixing bowl but leaving any roasting juices behind in the tin. Mix the drained chickpeas with the tomatoes and aubergines.

Make the dressing by stirring the harissa and olive oil into the roasting juices, then tip it in with the vegetables. Leave a film of dressing in the tin. Leave the basil leaves whole, even if they are very large, and

fold them into the salad. They will wilt and soften in the slight heat from the vegetables.

Set the roasting tin over a moderate heat, lay the slices of ham in the film of dressing and cook till they start to crisp lightly. A matter of a minute or so. Transfer the salad to a small serving platter. Lift the ham out and lay the slices on top of the salad.

Enough for 4

And the best mangoes ever

From now until the end of June, the Alphonso mangoes are around. Smooth-skinned, custard yellow and heavily fragrant, they are about as sweet and juicy a fruit as you could ask for. You can pick them up by the box for a bargain price at Indian or Middle Eastern grocers'. I sometimes think they are the finest fruit on earth.

They come, six or eight to a box, each highly prized fruit bedecked with a single strand of tinsel and swaddled in yellow or magenta tissue paper. Opening a box of Alphonso mangoes is like peeping in on a carnival. Their deep orange flesh is at its most welcome after a meal spicy enough to make your lips smart.

Some new potatoes barely bigger than broad beans have come my way. They will take not much longer than ten minutes in boiling water, so I want something to eat with them that takes about the same length of time. Though grilled food always sounds the right note for me, I sometimes long for the more gentle flavours of an old-fashioned sauté. Lamb steaks, or indeed any chops, work well when cooked in a little oil in a shallow pan, remaining juicy in the extreme. If you add the torn leaves of a herb and maybe some lemon juice to the toasty sediment at the bottom of the pan, you end up with extraordinarily delicious, fresh-tasting pan juices. Just the thing to crush the new potatoes into.

new potatoes – 20 or so
lamb leg steaks or chops – 4
a lemon
mint leaves – 15–20
olive oil – 4 tablespoons

Put the potatoes on to boil in deep, salted water. Season the chops on both sides with black pepper and sea salt. Finely grate the lemon zest and roughly chop or tear the mint leaves. Mix the olive oil with the grated zest of the lemon, the mint and a little pepper and salt.

When the potatoes are almost tender, warm the oil and lemon mixture over a moderate heat in a shallow, heavy-based pan. As it starts to sizzle, lay the seasoned lamb in the pan and let it colour for a couple of

**May 7
Lamb chops
with lemon
and mint
and
potatoes
crushed into
the pan
juices**

minutes. Turn the meat over and cook the other side for a minute or two, making sure that the lemon and mint aren't burning. The meat should remain juicy, its surface caught golden brown here and there, rose-pink within. Lift the meat on to warm plates.

Squeeze the juice of the lemon into the hot pan and let it bubble for a few seconds, scraping at the gooey sediment left behind by the chops and stirring it in. Pour it over the chops and vegetables, crushing the potatoes into the cooking juices as you eat.

Enough for 4

There are already recurring themes in my shopping this month. Broad beans and ham, broad beans and goat's cheeses, broad beans and olive oil. The latter with the finger-length beans simmered whole with the oil, lemon and chopped dill, then eaten with sesame bread and thick yoghurt. The asparagus has been a good price this year, pretty much the same as last. So far I have eaten it as plain as paper, with softening, not quite melted butter, and last week grilled and tossed with olive oil and grated pecorino. Other shopping-bag regulars have been lemons, sheep's yoghurt, spinach, blueberries (Polish, Spanish, whatever), a little wild salmon and some hugely disappointing apricots.

May 8 Pancakes at the stove

A friend turns up at two forty-five in the afternoon. Too late for lunch, too early for tea.

They sit on a stool at the side of the cooker whilst I make pan after pan of thick, soft pancakes. Normally they would get a biscuit and a mug of tea, but I am testing a recipe for the column and there is something faintly relaxing about exchanging gossip whilst tossing pancakes. If I had some blueberries, I'd bubble them up in a small pan with a spoonful of sugar till their skins burst and then pour them and their purple syrup over the little cakes. I haven't, so we make do with icing sugar and a puddle of melted apricot jam. At this time of year, this is probably as near as I get to a hot pudding.

Orange and ricotta pancakes

ricotta cheese – 250g
caster sugar – 4 tablespoons
eggs – 3, separated
the finely grated zest of a large orange
plain flour – 50g
melted butter – 2 tablespoons

In a large mixing bowl, combine the ricotta, caster sugar and egg yolks. Grate the orange zest into the bowl and stir it in gently with the flour. Beat the egg whites with a balloon whisk till they are stiff, then fold