



# GATHERINGS

Recipes for feasts great and small

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MITCHELL BEAZLEY

## **TO MUMMA, FOR EVERYTHING**

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## INTRODUCTION

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I have spent my whole life in the kitchen. I don't recall a single week in my 20 years during which I haven't cooked or at least attempted to. From offering to stir and pour things at a young age, to serving hearty plates of pasta, some sort of elaborate sponge or even knocking up a simple salad, I have always found myself padding about the kitchen barefoot and occasionally donning an apron. It's not coincidental that food is in my nature. My mother is an excellent cook, her mother is an excellent cook, my dad's mother is an excellent cook, my aunties are excellent cooks, my cousins are excellent cooks. It was an inescapable fate. The position I am in now, however, was less than expected. Food was never considered as a career path, not even for a minute. I remember, aged 15, when tentatively broaching the "what on earth shall I do with my life?" subject, my mum declared I was definitely not to go into catering, a business, she described as thankless and brutally exhausting, having worked as a cook for years. I spent all my weekends from the age of 13 waitressing in various cafés, and occasionally helping Mum out with weddings or parties in the evenings, so I was well aware of the hours of graft that go into it. I knew she was right and set off to meet a careers advisor to talk all things academic.

Cooking remained a hobby, and when I left home to study architecture in Edinburgh, I am willing to bet I was the only student who arrived with nine cake tins, four spatulas, a paella pan, my mixer and enough ingredients to fill every cupboard in the flat. A year in, I was left uninspired, spending more money and time at farmers' markets and restaurants than I was in the library and, if I am honest, pubs and clubs. I returned home during the spring exam period feeling quite heartbroken that it had not been the dream I had anticipated. My cookbook collection had doubled but, alas, I was not to be the next Zaha Hadid.

I moped about the kitchen for a month or so, cooking and eating obscene quantities of food and thoroughly irritating my parents and sisters. Then one Tuesday, late at night and in a state of panic, I emailed a local gallery and asked for a job. I have since re-read the somewhat desperate email to my great embarrassment. Hugh the gallery owner did, however, agree to meet me and a week later I was helping hang an exhibition. I stayed at the lovely Frames Gallery in Perth for a year and a half, establishing a happy routine of working, food shopping and spending any time off in the kitchen. It was at Frames that I began my blog. I was doing a semi-grown-up job, feeding my family and saving (a little) money while the rest of my friends were running wild at university. It was a little isolating if I am truthful, and so I settled on the idea of my own wee project. I am a very visual person in all elements of my life, and having spent hours decorating bakes or styling food just so, I wanted to do a decent job when it came to pictures of my food. I saved up for a month and bought myself an old wedding photographer's

camera off eBay. After that, florashedden.com was born, and I was thrilled to have an excuse to cook and share plates and bakes slightly more adventurous than my then ten-year-old sister's palette. It has very much been a learning curve, but I love having a wee space on the internet to natter ridiculously about exceptionally good-looking radicchio, or some cookies that had turned out well 217 attempts later. It was at this time that I discovered people actually do have and enjoy careers in food, careers that don't solely depend on doing two days' prep, a manic flurry of service, then 7 tonnes of dishes at 3am. There were jobs for home cooks that relished in nothing more than pottering, experimenting and styling. I was delighted by this well-kept secret.

Early in January 2015 I stumbled upon a second secret. I had submitted a form to a small baking show on the BBC. It occurred only after many friends and family members had sent me links to the applications page, some even printing off copies for me. My middle sister, Hebe, punched me on the arm multiple times. I succumbed 4 hours and 37 minutes before the deadline and sent off my long-winded and, in hindsight, cringe-worthy answers and images. I received a call from a London number three days later. Many stages followed, including a trip to Manchester with my dad driving and me sporadically shouting "The cake!" when he took a sharp corner. There was also a snowstorm at Gatwick when I was due to land early one Saturday for a final audition, meaning I practically ran to a kitchen in Hackney, arriving flustered, sweaty and two hours late. Somehow, somewhere in this chaos, I found myself in a hotel in sleepy Newbury one April evening being introduced to cast and crew.

I spent the next nine weeks trekking up and down the country, exhausted, often in a sugar coma and regularly cursing my poor judgement on éclairs and custards. The ironic thing was that I spent more time cooking than I did baking prior to this bizarre *Bake Off* turn of events. I try not to spend too much time reflecting, but I would like to say a huge thank you to everyone at Love Productions, the lovely crew that never failed to make me laugh, the bakers for being as loony as I was and thinking no one would watch and all the viewers who watched each week despite our car-crash-baking and general madness. My fondest memories are of people coming up to me in supermarkets, on the street, in cafés, shops and cinemas only to say a hello. And to everyone on social media, I adored seeing your pictures, hearing about parties, your granny's comments on a certain male judge and your general well wishes. I loved meeting and speaking to every single one of you, and had it not been for your kind natures, I wouldn't be sitting here, wrapped in a blanket, blethering about food late into the night. Thank you.

Post-cakes, bakes and reality telly, my cooking style has noticeably changed. I moved to the coast, for a start, and I desperately craved a return to savoury. Fish became a regular feature as a result of my flat-sitting right on the glorious St Andrews harbour. In fact, the majority of this book has been written while intermittently watching the tide, the boats, the surfers, the dog walkers and the late-night couples go

about their business. I got to know the lovely local fishermen, too, who have provided me with the best fish and seafood I have ever feasted on. And I have spent more time cooking for others than I ever have before. It had been an intense year and I was desperate to catch up with friends I had neglected, family I had missed and generally gather round the kitchen table for a good old natter. I made big, colourful salads, cooked joints of meat for hours and hours, fried, roasted and braised my way through everything edible and occasionally returned to baking for a wee sponge to enjoy mid-afternoon on a wet, windy day. And so when the question of a book came about, I knew I wanted to write about cooking for others.

Food for me is an excuse to gather people – for at least one meal a day, when you can sit, socialize and share stories about your day, or about others. It isn't just about eating, it is all the things that come with that process: passing the bread, tales that come when someone is a little over-tipsy, sticky fingers, dishes that remind guests of previously visited places or anecdotes. It is as much about fuelling as it is about good hearty laughs. Cooking is the rewarding route you take to get there.

*“So what is the plan for tonight?”*

*“Nothing complicated – just a wee gathering”*

A gathering is an easy way of hosting: it means there is no pressure, no code of conduct and everyone – cook included – can actually enjoy themselves. For my age group particularly, dinner makes us think of something formal, involved and maybe even exhausting. A gathering is the opposite. I wanted to reflect this relaxed style of eating in a collection of easy and accessible recipes that are not daunting but enticing and encouraging to those of us who want to have people over, make supper or lay on a spread without sliding into full-on panic mode. Those who want to create something that will echo the mood, something humble, yet appetizing, and delicious. What's more, I wanted to show how this is all possible after a long day at work, after a weekend spent out and about or even after decking the halls.

I am from the generation with arguably the most delusional approach to food. We were born when all sorts of chemical-based and processed snacks and meals were the norm, but soon the scaremongering came and we were told to say no to most additives, E numbers and the like. Suddenly, at the age of five, I was asking Mum things like “Is there any MSG in these?” or “Are they organic?”. We were terrified – and so were our parents. I have been fortunate enough never to have experienced a troubled relationship with food, principally due to having an excellent and stubborn mother. I have, however, been very close to people less lucky and seen first-hand how earth-shattering eating disorders are. At the age of 14, a boy told me “don't even consider eating that bagel”. I had just been in PE and it would apparently counteract any physical exercise I had just done, and I would therefore gain a million stones there and then. This is a daunting prospect for a teen attempting to find a normal approach to food.

When I browse bookshop shelves nowadays, I am often surprised by the sheer number of juicing, carb-cutting and sugar-free “cookbooks” on offer, the majority of which are brought to you by authors of a similar age to myself. In a world already cluttered with lifestyle contradictions, it worries me that people so young can easily read and follow such a drastic diet change. I have no training in this field and cannot promise nutritional science or calorie-counting, but I can promise common-sense food – proper and honest ingredients that will both fuel and satisfy you. I am not on a mission, and I am certainly not one to preach, but I would urge everyone – from those stepping into the kitchen for the first time to those simply trying to fix something for dinner – to consider just how sensible cutting entire food groups from your diet can actually be. Life is a balancing act and your dinner plate shouldn’t be any different.

This book contains recipes for what I believe to be a mixture of balanced modern dishes, staple snacks, salads and sides, interesting bakes and puddings perfect to end a meal with. Nothing overly fussy or complicated, just tasty and pretty plates of food. This book, I hope, reflects the fact that there is a huge surge in the amount of people young and old who want to eat proper food off real plates in good company. Ultimately, I feel cooking should be about beautiful yet affordable and achievable dishes, and this was my aim with these recipes. I give you a mixture of ideas for your gatherings small and large, those planned out in advance or assembled at the very last minute, and those that are remembered long after the washing-up is done. Now to set the table...

With love,

Flora

Scotland, 2017



