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SIMPLE

effortless food, big flavours

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To Lucy, with love and thanks

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introduction

In 2004 I wrote a book called *Cook Simple*, full of the kind of dishes I began to make when my first child was born. He cried constantly, so I was always carrying him and had no hands free. The more elaborate cooking I'd enjoyed before his arrival went out the window. In fact I ate takeaway pizzas for quite a few weeks after his birth, often through tears as I wondered how I would ever manage to cook again. Gradually, I started to make dishes that were just stuck in the oven. I didn't mind if they took a long time to cook, only about whether they took a long time to prepare. I couldn't do stir-fries – too much chopping – and rarely made risottos. It has meant a lot to me that people cite *Cook Simple* as a cookbook that really helped them. It's not because it is a book of quick food, but a book of *low-effort* food. Non-cooks and unsure cooks use it as much as people who feel totally at home in the kitchen.

Now the baby that forced me to change my cooking style is 17. I still – certainly during the week – like to cook food which doesn't take much hands-on time, and still bung a lot of dishes in the oven. But my life has changed; I can now manage risottos midweek, also fish or meat cooked on a griddle and served with a relish, or cooked in a frying pan in which a simple sauce is made. There are a few things – dals and other pulse dishes – which can simmer away on the hob while I do something else. So I felt it was time for a follow up to *Cook Simple*, time to offer a new collection of simple dishes that use a wider range of techniques.

I still think in 'blocks' when I wonder what to make for supper every day: fillets of fish – salmon or cod – or whole small fish, chops, sausages, pasta, chicken thighs, or potatoes for baking. I'm sure most people approach the evening meal like this. We buy what we can pick up easily on the way home, often from a small supermarket, or a local butcher or fishmonger. But this range of blocks has expanded. Our eating has changed in the last decade. Now I consider grains – often whole grains – pulses and a lot more vegetables, too. They don't have to be 'sides' to meat or fish, and this shift is reflected in the book.

UNUSUAL INGREDIENTS

The range of uncommon foodstuffs we eat – miso, pomegranate molasses, specific varieties of chillies – has also grown in the last decade. I don't use these just for the hell of it, but because I think they make eating more interesting, or are part of a cuisine I like. Most unusual items are now available online (and supermarkets have a vast array), but I've given alternatives where possible. There's a list of stockists at the back of the book, too. The matter of unfamiliar ingredients divides people: I get as many letters telling me they love discovering something new as I do from people complaining that they can't get pomegranate molasses at the corner shop.

HOW MANY PEOPLE DO THE RECIPES SERVE?

This was one of the hardest things to decide when writing the recipes. People have different appetites and I think we all, generally, eat less than we used to. My partner will always eat two chicken thighs, for example, but my kids only ever have one. So think who you are serving and what their appetites are like. When it comes to grain, salad and vegetable recipes, the question is even more difficult, as now we eat vegetable dishes as a main course. I've given as much guidance as I could. As a general rule, when it comes to vegetable dishes that serve six as a side dish, the recipe will serve four as a main meal.

COOKING EQUIPMENT

I never read those pages where writers lay out what you should have in your kitchen. For years – even after I started writing about food – I had the worst-equipped kitchen: not enough saucepans; one frying pan; a limited range of knives... But, apart from basics, there are a few things that will make cooking from this book easier. I often use a shallow broad cast-iron casserole with a lid that is 30cm (12in) in diameter. It's the most useful dish in my kitchen, and many of the recipes were tested in it so the cooking times are right for this size and dimension of dish. It's brilliant for bung-it-in-the-oven dishes as it allows chicken and vegetables to lie in a single layer and roast, rather than sweat as they would if they were piled on top of each other.

Roasting tins of various sizes are useful. If I say a leg of lamb or a chicken has to fit 'snugly' into a tin it's because the juices (especially when there's honey in a marinade) will burn if the space around the meat is too great. A gratin dish is important and a pudding or pie dish, too. I also have a food processor and wouldn't be without it. Electric beaters – you don't need a food mixer – are good for batters and whipping cream and are not expensive. It seems a small thing, but for grating ginger and garlic – and they appear a lot in this book – I use a Cuisipro fine grater. They're not cheap but they save time and hassle and are the best on the market, in my opinion. Finally, a mortar and pestle. I realize that might seem a little old-fashioned, but there are a lot of dishes in this book which require a bit of bashing. I like texture and sometimes food processors chop things too finely, especially if your attention wavers for a moment. So, a shallow casserole, a pie dish, a few roasting tins, a gratin dish, a mortar and pestle, a good grater and – if you can – a food processor are good to have.

There are two types of dish in *Simple*. Most are dishes you can cook midweek for your family, or for you and your partner; some are for weekend meals – Friday or Saturday night supper or Sunday lunch – to serve to friends (these are still simple, but take a bit more effort). There's no one who can't cook. You don't need many skills to feed yourself, your friends and family well. If you can shove a tray of red peppers into the oven, or cook pasta until al dente, you can make great food. What we mostly lack are ideas. That's what I tried to give in *Cook Simple* and, again, here. You don't have to be a chef. I'm not. You just need some inspiration to help you turn the ordinary – the building blocks of meals – into something special.

warm salad of squid, bacon, beans & tarragon

IF YOU BUY CLEANED SQUID – and that's easy to get now – this is very quick to put together. It makes a good starter, light lunch or supper. Add warm sliced waxy potatoes if you want to make it more substantial.

SERVES 3–4

For the dressing

2 tbsp lemon juice, plus more for the squid
2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
6 tbsp double cream
leaves from 6 sprigs of tarragon, chopped
salt and pepper

For the salad

600g (1lb 5oz) squid (preferably small), cleaned
½ tbsp olive oil, plus more for the squid
2 shallots, finely sliced
200g (7oz) bacon lardons
225g (8oz) French beans, topped but not tailed

For the dressing, mix the lemon juice, extra virgin olive oil, cream, tarragon and 2 tbsp of water in a small bowl. Season.

Cut the wings from the squid and put them aside with the tentacles. Cut the bodies down one side so they open out. If your squid are big, halve the body lengthways. Wash and dry the squid well on kitchen paper, then put in a bowl with enough regular olive oil to moisten them.

Gently cook the shallots in the ½ tbsp of regular olive oil until they have lost their rawness but aren't soft. Put into a broad shallow serving bowl. Add the bacon to the same pan and cook over a high heat until golden all over and cooked through. Add to the shallots. Cook the beans in boiling water until al dente. Drain and run cold water over them. Pat dry and toss into the bowl.

Heat a frying pan until very hot. Season the squid and cook it quickly on both sides in batches; you want to get a lovely golden colour. Squeeze over lemon juice as soon as it's ready. Toss it with the other ingredients in the serving bowl. Spoon on the dressing and check the seasoning.



harissa roast carrots, white beans & dill

I LOVE TO LOOK at an ingredient in a different light. After years of regarding dill as the quintessential Scandinavian herb, it was a pleasing surprise to find it's used just as much in the Middle East, Turkey and Greece. The fresh piney-ness is gorgeous against the oily heat of harissa.

SERVES 6

For the carrots

750g (1lb 10oz) slim carrots, with green tops
1 lemon, very finely sliced (flick the seeds out),
plus juice of ½
2 tbsp harissa
4 tbsp olive oil
2 tsp cumin seeds
2 garlic cloves, crushed
2 tsp honey
250g (9oz) Greek yogurt
2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil, plus more to serve
4 tbsp buttermilk, or whole milk

For the beans

2 tbsp olive oil
½ onion, roughly chopped
1 garlic clove, crushed
2 x 400g cans of haricot or cannellini beans,
drained and rinsed
about 60ml (2fl oz) chicken or vegetable stock
salt and pepper
3–4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
good squeeze of lemon juice
15g (½oz) dill fronds, plus 1 tbsp to serve

Preheat the oven to 200°C/400°F/gas mark 6. Trim the carrots, leaving green tufts. If the carrots are chunky, halve lengthways. Put into a roasting tin in a single layer (but without masses of room, or the juices burn). Add the lemon slices. Mix the harissa, regular olive oil, cumin, garlic, honey and lemon juice and toss with the carrots. Roast for 30–35 minutes, turning halfway, until tender. For the beans, heat the regular olive oil in a saucepan and gently cook the onion until soft but not coloured. Add the garlic, beans, stock and seasoning. Cook over a medium heat for two minutes. Stir in the extra virgin olive oil and lemon juice, then the dill. Taste for seasoning.

Mix the yogurt with the extra virgin olive oil, buttermilk or milk and seasoning. Put the beans into a dish with the carrots and lemon slices on top. Spoon a little yogurt over (serve the rest on the side), then scatter with the 1 tbsp of dill. Pour a little extra virgin olive oil on top and serve.



black linguine with squid & spicy sausage

BLACK PASTA is easier to find than it was. Its main advantage is that it looks so dramatic, especially if you serve something white – squid, prawns or scallops – with it (all are good here), but you can of course use regular pasta. Don't add too much parsley, as it can dominate. Look for spicy Italian sausages in a good deli, though supermarkets sell spicy sausages, usually smoky Spanish-flavoured varieties, which work, too.

SERVES 2

150g (5½oz) black linguine or spaghetti
salt and pepper
300g (10½oz) squid, cleaned
150g (5½oz) spicy sausage
3 tbsp olive oil
2 garlic cloves, finely sliced

1 red chilli, deseeded and finely chopped
1 tbsp finely chopped flat leaf parsley leaves
juice of ½ lemon
extra virgin olive oil, to serve

Cook the pasta in plenty of boiling lightly salted water according to the packet instructions. Meanwhile, get on with the squid and sausage.

Cut the wings off the squid. If they are large, cut them into three or four strips, but it's usually fine just to halve them. Slice the bodies down one side, then cut into 1.5cm (½in) strips. Separate the tentacles, halving if they're big. Blot the squid with kitchen paper: if it's wet it won't fry well.

Remove the casing from the sausage and break the meat into little nuggets a bit bigger than a pea. Heat 1 tbsp of the regular olive oil in a large frying pan or a wok and cook the sausagemeat over a fairly high heat until browned all over. Lift out with a slotted spoon and set aside. Add the rest of the regular olive oil and increase the heat to high. When it is very hot, throw in the squid and cook for about a minute, then add the garlic, chilli, seasoning and the sausage. Toss it around for another 30–40 seconds (you want the garlic to be pale gold, but not to burn).

Throw in the parsley and squeeze on the lemon juice. Quickly drain the pasta and throw it into the pan. Toss everything around, add a good slug of extra virgin olive oil and serve immediately.



spelt with blackberries, beets, walnuts & buttermilk

I STARTED OUT MAKING a Scandinavian-influenced dish here – spelt, berries and buttermilk are such northern ingredients – but because blackberries are so loved in Georgia I went off on another tack, adding spices and heat. You can leave the spices out – or use more Scandi flavours, caraway for example – depending on what you want to serve it with. It's surprisingly good with salmon and mackerel.

SERVES 6–8 as a side dish

150g (5½oz) pearled spelt

2½ tbsp olive oil

juice of ½ lemon

1 tsp white balsamic vinegar

salt and pepper

½ red onion, very finely sliced

1 tsp ground coriander

1 tsp cayenne pepper

35g (1¼oz) walnut pieces

2 cooked beetroots, cut into matchsticks

150g (5½oz) blackberries

1 tbsp chopped dill fronds

1 tbsp chopped coriander leaves

For the dressing

200ml (7fl oz) buttermilk

smidgen of Dijon mustard

pinch of caster sugar

1 garlic clove, crushed

2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil

Cook the spelt in boiling water until tender (20–25 minutes, but check the packet instructions). Drain and run cold water through it. Shake off the excess water and put into a serving bowl with 2 tbsp of the regular olive oil, the lemon juice, vinegar and seasoning.

Make the buttermilk dressing by mixing everything together. Taste for seasoning.

Heat the rest of the regular olive oil and cook the onion until it has just lost its rawness, then add the spices and cook for another two minutes. Add this to the spelt, then toast the walnut pieces in the same pan for a minute or so, until they smell aromatic. Tip them into the bowl along with all the other ingredients and gently toss together.

Drizzle with some of the buttermilk dressing (offer the rest in a jug) and serve.



lamb chops with fennel & parsley-anchovy relish

OKAY, THIS HAS THREE ELEMENTS – the chops, relish and vegetables – but each is quick to put together. Use whatever kind of chops you want (cutlets, chump...) and, another time, try the relish and vegetables with baked bream, red mullet or sea bass instead.

SERVES 6

For the chops and vegetables

2 small fennel bulbs
juice of ½ lemon
400g (14oz) waxy potatoes (no need to peel)
extra virgin olive oil
salt and pepper
12 plum tomatoes, sliced 5mm (¼in) thick
12 lamb loin chops, or cutlets

For the relish

50g can of cured anchovies, drained of oil and chopped
2½ tbsp chopped flat leaf parsley leaves
6 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
juice of ½ lemon

Preheat the oven to 190°C/375°F/gas mark 5. Quarter the fennel bulbs. Remove the thick outer layer, trim the tops and the bases and remove the cores. Keep any little fronds. Slice really finely. Put it in a large shallow ovenproof dish (I use cast iron, 30cm/12in across) and toss in the lemon juice. Cut the potatoes in slices as thick as a 50p coin and toss them with the fennel, 2½ tbsp of olive oil and seasoning. Lay the tomatoes on top, season and drizzle with a little more oil. Bake for 45 minutes, or until you can feel that the potatoes are tender.

To make the relish, just mix the ingredients together, seasoning generously with pepper.

When there are just eight minutes before the vegetables are ready, brush the chops with olive oil and season. Cook them in a very hot frying or griddle pan: start on a high heat to get a good colour (and brown the fat, too), then reduce the heat and cook until done the way you like them; I like them rare. Serve with the vegetables and relish.



turkish mocha pots

MOST PUDDINGS IN TURKEY are fruit- or pastry-based, but I ate a spiced chocolate mousse when I was last there and decided to combine it with the flavours of a Turkish coffee. This is easy to make and there's no last-minute faffing about. Make sure you cover the pots with cling film, or they'll pick up other flavours while they're in the fridge.

SERVES 6

250ml (9fl oz) whole milk
 250ml (9fl oz) double cream
 ground seeds from 5 cardamom pods
 ½ cinnamon stick
 4 tbsp soft dark brown sugar
 2 tbsp cornflour
 4½ tsp instant espresso coffee
 200g (7oz) good-quality dark chocolate (70% cocoa solids), broken into pieces
 25g (scant 1oz) unsalted butter
 1 tsp vanilla extract
 200ml (7fl oz) whipping cream
 2 tbsp icing sugar, or to taste
 chocolate-coated coffee beans

Put the milk and cream into a saucepan with the cardamom and cinnamon. Bring to the boil, then take off the heat and leave to sit for 30 minutes so the spices can flavour the milk. Strain.

Mix the sugar, cornflour and coffee together in a saucepan. Whisk in the milk mixture, adding it slowly so that no lumps form. Set over a medium heat and bring to the boil, stirring constantly, then take off the heat. Add the chocolate, butter and vanilla and whisk until the mixture is completely smooth and the chocolate has melted. Divide between six little pots or coffee cups. Cover with cling film and refrigerate for at least two hours to firm up.

Whip the cream, add the icing sugar and use it to decorate each pot or cup. Sprinkle with the chocolate-coated coffee beans to serve.

