

MUMFOOD: RECORDING THE EVERYDAY

My little rant about recipe books.

Alison Vincent

Life without good food would be at least as impoverished as life without good art, and ... culinary art should take its place alongside the other arts. But its value lies more in its daily practice than the exceptional achievements of its finest practitioners. It is an art of the everyday, and all the better for that.

Julian Baggini¹



Because I'm interested in food and cooking I have a large collection of recipe books. Some I use all the time to check on quantities or methods or simply for inspiration. Some I keep for sentimental reasons or for research. Most of these books contain recipes I have never attempted and am never likely to try. I have great respect for all those authors who take the time to test their recipes and hand on their hard-won knowledge, however it seems to me that many of the recipe books clogging the shelves in bookshops these days have a number of shortcomings. Significantly they fail to reflect the realities of everyday cooking.

By their very nature, recipe books present a scientific, practical approach to cookery dealing in precise measurements and step by step instructions. Recipes rarely recommend alternatives or substitutions. All authors assume that your oven thermostat is reliable or at least you know how unreliable it is. Many assume that we all have kitchen scales accurate to the nearest gram and have no trouble measuring out 155ml of water while

¹ Julian Baggini. *The Virtues of the Table. How to Eat and Think* (London: Granta, 2014), 232.

stirring constantly. Most recipe books take for granted that the reader has the necessary skills to peel, trim, slice and chop and can recognise a 1 cm dice or a 3mm slice at a glance. At the same time recipes can be maddeningly vague – how large is a large potato, how small is a small onion? How rough is roughly chopped, how fine is finely sliced? How deep is a deep roasting tin?

In the main, cook books concentrate on the what, with long lists of ingredients, and the how, with careful instructions and details of equipment required, while providing very little information about the why? What catastrophe awaits if I add the ingredients in the wrong order or my onions are not chopped roughly enough or my baking dish isn't exactly 7 cm deep? Sometimes I suspect that, because recipes are written to a common format, they simply repeat what amounts to standard practice rather than relaying necessary procedure. Usually there is a sound, practical reason for a particular method based on scientific principles, cooking is after all food chemistry. Sometimes the reasoning is just as sound but not quite so scientific, like the apocryphal story which, in its Australian version, tells of the family who always roasted the Sunday leg of lamb according to grandma's method. Step one in the process involved sawing the joint into two pieces. It wasn't until someone asked why that grandma admitted this had only been necessary because she didn't have a roasting tin big enough to fit the whole leg.

All too often recipe books present a highly romanticised version of domestic cooking. They make kitchen work sound like a blissful and totally fulfilling experience. The home cook is presented as a domestic goddess working her magic to ensure that she (and it nearly always is a she in the recipe book as romance) and everyone around her has a truly wonderful time. The food is always indulgent, the sauces always unctuous, the crockery and table settings are always perfect. The romance genre also includes all those books written by authors who enthuse about their marvellous vegetable garden which flourishes effortlessly and provides them with a wondrous year-round bounty. These are the writers who spend all their spare time making jam and pickling things. In addition to the raw materials they produce themselves, they have a pantry stuffed with endless supplies including a dozen different types of vinegar. The

romantics are always making gallons of their own stock and they are sufficiently well organised to take the time to carefully label everything they store in the freezer. No unidentified frozen surprises for them.

It goes without saying that kitchen goddesses also invariably have a kitchen big enough to house every appliance known to man.

Many books are also unrealistically exotic. These are the ones that lure you in to believing that it is possible you can whip up authentic Vietnamese, or Indian, or Greek, or Iranian or Turkish or whatever other flavourful foreign cuisine you like to name in the privacy of your own home any night of the week. The recipes in these books are rarely, I suspect, based on the recipes and the everyday experiences of ordinary home cooks in any of these countries. Fascinating and informative as these books may be their recipes are not always suited to the everyday experience in my kitchen either.

Recipe books don't have to invoke exotic cuisines to require too many unfamiliar ingredients that are not easily available or include highly complex preparations that involve numerous separate processes. These are the recipes that demand the use of every saucepan you own and assume you have all day to get dinner ready

On the other hand, too many cook books fall into the overly simplistic category. This group includes all those books which try to tell you that you can have a three-course meal on the table in 30 minutes or that you can prepare dinner from only three ingredients. If only a this were true. By emphasising the idea of efficiency, ease and speed these books trivialise the everyday. They promote the assumption that it is the product and not the process that matters, that preparing food is not an activity that has value in and of itself.

These books stand in stark contrast to those that focus on the exotic and the complex, those that tend to categorise food making as a highly intellectualised, theoretical activity, and classify cooking as a special leisure activity rather than an everyday necessity. Everyday cooking has little to do with leisure, it isn't a hobby. Cooking every day, even in my comfortable, middle class, suburban environment is fundamentally about eating to survive.

RECIPE BOOK WORLD MISSES MOST OF THE REALITIES OF EVERYDAYLAND

In *Recipe Book World* no one has to remember to take the reusable shopping bags and then spend hours negotiating the aisles of the supermarket. No one hassles with trying to find a parking spot near the butcher. *Recipe Book World* always has access to the best tomatoes or the ripest avocados at the green grocer. Recipe books either ignore nutrition and moral questions surrounding animal rights, sustainability and the like or are righteously obsessive about them. No one in *Recipe Book World* troubles themselves much with budgets and cost effectiveness. No one struggles home with bags of groceries, unpacks them and then tries to find somewhere to put everything.

No one scours the fridge for what needs to be eaten quickly or has already reached its beyond redemption date. Unlike *Everyday Land*, in *Recipe Book World* there are no mouldy leftovers in the fridge and there is nothing decaying in the vegetable crisper. And no one ever has to clean up, wash up and then put everything away.

Which brings me to *Mumfood*. Long before my children started to do their own everyday cooking I decided to write them their own recipe book. I wanted to arm them with a set of instructions that would be immediately useful, which would give them ideas for dishes they could prepare easily, requiring minimum gadgetry and no great expense. At the same time, I also wanted to preserve the recipes and stories around the food that we had eaten as a family while they were growing up and set them on the track to experimenting for themselves. *Mumfood* then is intended to be informative and instructive but is also guided in part by Elizabeth David's belief that the best writing about food should invite the reader to use their own critical and inventive faculties and should encourage them to make their own discoveries, to make observations and to discover things for themselves.

So how is *Mumfood* different from any other recipe book I could have presented them with, given that I have to include lists of ingredients, measurements and step by step instructions to make the recipes workable? Well for one thing I haven't included any recipes for dishes I haven't made myself. All the recipes then meet the criteria Helen Leach listed in

her presentation as representing the everyday – they are ordinary, made regularly, familiar, affordable, identified with the home and most importantly transmitted both vertically (through immediate family connection) and horizontally (through recipes I have gleaned from books and from friends).

There are no recipes requiring ingredients such as pigeons or tripe or okra or kangaroo or witlof or Jerusalem artichokes, not because these are not worth cooking, but because they are not part of my everyday repertoire. The recipes have a provenance. I don't claim to be a creative genius. If the recipes come from someone's published recipe book then I say so and note the changes, the additions, subtractions and substitutions I've made. Similarly, if they are recipes from friends or family the source is acknowledged and because this is a family recipe book I also try to explain how what I cook has been influenced by what my mother cooked and how my interpretations have been modified over time.

As far as possible I have tried to explain the why of the process, or at least make clear where it is important to be precise or where some caution might be necessary. In most cases there are suggestions for substitutions and ideas on how to build on a basic concept to produce different results. But most importantly *Mumfood* is a book of ideas written as a conversation. My intention was that it should be the next best thing to standing next to me in the kitchen while I explained what I was doing and why.

The truth of the matter is, of course, that like every craft, cooking is only possible to learn by doing. No book can tell you everything about everyday cookery. You learn to cook by doing cooking. Lisa Heldke talks about cooking as bodily knowledge.

The knowing involved in making a cake is "contained" not simply "in my head" but in my hands, my wrists, my eyes and nose as well. The phrase "bodily knowledge" is not a metaphor. It is an acknowledgement of the fact that I know things literally with my body, that I, "as" my hands, know when the bread dough is sufficiently kneaded, and "as" my nose know when the pie is done.

To know food and how to cook it she says, does not require an "abstracted, measurement-conscious knowledge (a kind of knowledge which imitates the allegedly disembodied nature of scientific, theoretical

knowledge), but rather a knowledge in the eyes and the hands.” Cooking requires both physical and sensory involvement. Words can’t explain what you must learn using your hands and nose and mouth and ears. It is the smell coming from the oven or the sound of the fat sputtering or the water boiling that signals how the cooking is coming along rather than the theoretical cooking time indicated in the recipe.

Everyday cookery also requires a memory of gestures, and of consistencies, the feel of the dough, the stiffness of the batter, what soft peaks of whipped egg white look like or when to stop beating the cream, or when the steak is on the verge of being more than just medium rare. Everyday cooking requires programming, calculating both preparation and cooking times, planning the right sequence of operations and setting up the ordering of the dishes so that the jelly has time to set and all the vegetables are ready for the table at the same time as the roast. Everyday cooking also requires creative ingenuity to be able to cope when the battery on the electronic scales gives out half way through making the cake, or when someone has eaten for lunch something which was meant to be a vital part of dinner, or when your daughter arrives home with a vegan friend for a meal.

Everyday cooking requires intelligence, an intelligence gained through apprenticeship and experience. An intelligence that Giard calls subtle “full of nuances and strikes of genius, a light and lively intelligence that can be perceived without exhibiting itself”. With the knowledge gained from experience a recipe is no longer required, it becomes little more than the stimulus for further invention.

Doing-cooking ... rests atop a complex montage of circumstances and objective data, where necessities and liberties overlap, a confused and constantly changing mixture through which tactics are invented, trajectories are carved out, and ways of operating are individualized. Every cook has her repertoire, her grand operatic arias for extraordinary circumstances and her little ditties for a more familial public, her prejudices and limits, preferences and routine, dreams and phobias. To the extent that experience is acquired, style affirms itself, taste distinguishes itself, imagination frees itself, and the recipe itself loses significance, becoming little more than an occasion for a free invention by analogy or association of ideas,

through a subtle game of substitutions, abandonments, additions and borrowings.

Mumfood is not the sort of book anyone would consider publishing. It will only ever exist as a limited edition of two — two folders of recipes and notes printed on white paper with no illustrations and a few pencilled corrections and additions. In fact, by the time I gave *Mumfood* to my children it was largely redundant. Thanks to our time spent in the kitchen together and the discussions we had had about the food we were eating at dinner times they were already competent cooks. They had moved on to developing imaginative dishes of their own and sourcing recipes from the Internet complete with YouTube videos explaining the necessary techniques.

If *Mumfood* has a message it is that everyday cooking should not be underrated. To quote Luce Giard again

Doing cooking is the medium for a basic, humble and persistent practice that is repeated in time and space, rooted in the fabric of relationships to others and to one's self, marked by the "family saga" and the history of each, bound to childhood memories like rhythms and seasons.

Everyday cooking is messy and time consuming, it is not always fun or glamorous, there are many disasters, there are nights when egg on toast is the best, if not the only option, but in the end it is worthwhile, And the work and the intelligence involved is worthy of respect. The satisfaction gained from cooking everyday comes from the exercise of that intelligence. And the food you produce is good, not because it is fancy and tricky but because of the emotional attachment you have both to the knowledge you have acquired and to the people for whom you are cooking.

As for recipes, the best everyday meals are those that don't have recipes at all, those unrepeatable, spontaneous, serendipitous combinations that get created, often on Friday night, from what's left over from meals eaten earlier in the week, plus what happens to be lurking in the recesses of the fridge. These require all your intelligence, memory and creative ingenuity, and incorporate all the knowledge of your senses. That is what everyday cookery is all about. One final quote from Giard aptly sums up the inspiration behind *Mumfood*:

Provisions, preparation, cooking, and compatibility rules may very well change from one generation to another, or from one society to another. But the everyday work in kitchens remains a way of unifying matter and memory, life and tenderness, the present moment and the abolished past, invention and necessity, imagination and tradition.

A RECIPE FROM MUMFOOD.

Spicy Eggplant, Chinese-Style

The original recipe calls for 3 eggplant (of unspecified size, so use what you have and fiddle with the amount of sauce later). Cut these into batons (as though you were cutting potatoes to make chips) or bits/chunks or into small rounds if you're using long, thin eggplant (in which case use 5 or 6). Put the pieces into a colander or something similar and sprinkle with salt (use your hands to make sure the salt gets reasonably evenly distributed). Leave for about an hour (less or more doesn't really matter.) I wouldn't normally bother with this but salting is supposed to minimise the amount of oil the eggplant soaks up. If you don't have time for this step don't worry just press on. If you've done the salting, rinse the eggplant pieces to get the salt off and dry them as best you can (lay them out on tea towels rather than use paper towel – the paper sticks!) Try to get them as dry as you can so that they don't cause the oil they will be cooked in to spit too much.

Cook, that is shallow fry, the eggplant in hot oil. Aubergines are nature's sponge so they will soak up as much oil as you give them. Use some innocuous vegetable oil, and a generous sprinkle of sesame oil if you like, enough to ensure that the pieces are cooked (they go shiny and soft). Cook the eggplant first before fussing with the sauce.

For the sauce you need: 2 cloves of garlic, crushed; a chunk of ginger, grated; 2 tblspn chilli bean paste; 4tblspn soy sauce; 5tblspn rice wine/dry sherry; 1 tspn sesame oil; 4tblspn sugar.

Fry the garlic and ginger gently in a little oil then toss in the other ingredients and mix together. Throw in the eggplant and heat it through. There should be enough sauce to coat all the eggplant, with a bit left over. If you think there should be more sauce add some water, maybe ¼ cup water (or see suggestions below). If you have them, chop some spring onions and sprinkle these on the top for a bit of crunch. Serve with plain rice or fried rice.

This is the vegetarian version. If you want, you can add 300g pork mince and cook that along with the garlic and ginger. Chicken or even beef mince works just as well.

A combination of eggplant and capsicum also works. Cook the eggplant first, then quickly fry some capsicum strips and add both to the sauce.

Mumversions

If you don't have rice wine or sherry then white wine will work. If you don't have anything winery just substitute water and then perhaps add some flavour depth with one or other of the additions suggested below. The sesame oil isn't really essential either, it just adds that certain something.

4 tablespoons of sugar sounds like a lot but it does help to balance the flavour.

You could add anything else that's a bit oriental – a slurp of hoi sin sauce or oyster sauce or plum sauce or at a pinch maybe even a dollop of plum jam (in which case don't add the sugar until you've tasted the sauce). Taste the sauce before the eggplant goes in and see what it might benefit from, you may prefer a bit more of a chilli hit for example.