

# **MORE OF ... HOW TO COOK WITHOUT RECIPES**

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# MAKING YOUR OWN FLAVOURS

## THE PIANO IN YOUR KITCHEN

*Turn something cool into a dish  
that's hot and jazzy, satin-smooth and sexy,  
or just drop-dead tasty*

Get your store cupboard right and it's like having a piano in your kitchen. You'll always be able to segue into the right tune just when you want, to turn something cool into a dish that's hot and jazzy, satin-smooth and sexy or just drop-dead tasty with a twist, a flick, a squeeze or a damn good hand full.

If you think of each of the following important store-cupboard ingredients by their essential taste or flavour family, perhaps even storing them together like that, you'll find your options for improving food increase dramatically and you'll be able to react both to cravings and disaster with equal success.

The best way really to know what is in your regular shops and supermarkets is to explore them wrong way around. Walk slowly around the supermarket starting at the checkout, and then following the reverse of your usual path. Look carefully at variations of familiar products, and you'll find dozens of new products or ideas you can use to make differences to well-known recipes or as the basis for something quite new.

The ideal is to take a neat detour with a known ingredient rather than a long journey with something unknown, perhaps simply by using a different type of sugar, by choosing a different tea, bread, pasta shape or jam. If you read the label to ensure a product is as natural as possible you can create a pasta sauce not from scratch but almost, based on store-bought ingredients. These days supermarkets are more daring in their stock lists, giving much richer fields of flavour to harvest. When canned tomatoes invariably have more flavour than fresh varieties, who would spend time skinning fresh ones unless from their own garden?

Then do the same in a Chinese or Indian warehouse, or at smaller Asian and Oriental shops. Ask about the flavour differences between the five types of basmati rice on sale, what's the difference between white, green

and black cardamom, how you tell the quality of soy sauces? It takes a bit of work, and you shouldn't expect to know it all, all at once

Here are some ground-zero suggestions for what you might like to have in your store cupboard. You don't have to get them all at once, you mightn't end up with as many, and you might well find Kaffir lime leaves or kataifi pastry, habanero chillies, Chinese rice wine or coconut cream are more vital to your style of cooking. It's up to you to work out you might also need bread, eggs, butter, eggs, lamb chops and canned tuna.

## PLAYING YOUR OWN TUNES

*. . .this allows far more opportunity  
to talk about yourself  
and the dish.  
As if you would.*

As well as having a well-stocked larder of complementary and flavouring items as your private piano, it helps to have some ingredients of your own making. If you use one of these in something you cook without a recipe, this allows far more opportunity to talk about yourself and the dish. As if you would.

**Peel, dried:** dried tangerine peel is a specially revered ingredient in China sometimes kept until it is quite black and deepened and broadened in to a magical flavour. A few pieces in a red-wine stew are even better than the strip of fresh orange peel liked by Provençals; it's an amazing addition to a Guinness and caramelized onion sauce for sausages.

Finely chopped or rehydrated and mixed into cream for soft fruits or scones and for the pastry of apple pies, dried peel is haunting and different, but everyone likes it, particularly when you add to the allure with orange-flower water, too. Do the same thing with the peel of navel oranges, Seville oranges, blood oranges, mandarins and such of the new bunch as minneolas. Each will have a unique twist and tang to its developed flavour. Iranians dry whole limes; you could save much bother but add brilliant flavours with your better dried-lime peel, especially in curries and wherever you might add fresh coriander leaf – from grilled lobster to a stew of aubergines with olive oil and garlic. And then there is lemon . . .

### **How to do it**

Cut off the inner white pith of the peel and then cut the peel into thin strips. Allow to dry naturally out of the light or do it in stages in the microwave which is by far the most sensible way of all. Smells good too. Keep the dried peel in an airtight, dark and cool place – in screw-top glass jars is best, so you can see them.

**Salt: mixed with herbs, spices and petals:** to make a herbal, spicy or floral salt choose a flaky or grainy sea salt, and then add to it whatever you wish, but it must be one which can be crushed in the fingers or dealt with by a salt grinder. Some ideas are: the seeds from inside vanilla pods (excellent on fish): high-quality dried herbs singly or by themselves, especially tarragon for vegetable and egg dishes, thyme and/or oregano for pasta and pizza, rosemary with great restraint, rose petals for salads, aged tangerine rind and so on.

### **How to do it:**

The proportions are whatever you want but generally it is best to have more of the flavouring ingredient than the salt or flavour imbalances will result. It's also an idea to mix in ready-made spice mixes, particularly baharat or ras-el-hanout, and these too should be at least in equal proportion to the salt, if not exceeding it. Oh yes, and if you must, you could mix salt with chilli flakes.

**Roasted spices:** roasted black peppercorns, cumin seeds, coriander seed . . . Keeping small jars of such spices makes me feel very secure. If in doubt or just too tired to be creative I know any of these will give a real lift to almost anything but puddings. Even then . . .

### **How to do it**

Spread your chosen spice around the edge of a plate, like a doughnut, put this in the microwave and then cook for a minute. Mix them all around, make the circle again and keep cooking in bursts of a minute and then reducing to 30 seconds or less. Remember the spices will continue to cook a little when out of the oven, so err on the under rather than over side of things. When heavily roasted black peppercorns smell a little like coffee: cumin seeds give off a disturbing hemp aroma.

It's a nice idea to make both lightly roasted and dark-roasted peppercorns, using either or both in some combination to make a notable difference even to cheese on toast or a tomato eaten from the hand. Roasted cumin seeds add zesty fresh flavour to most savoury foods, hot or cold – the only thing you are likely to do wrong is to use their fascinating citric explosions too often or too generously.

**Flavoured Spirits:** one of the best things to bring back from France is cheap eau-de-vie, bought by the litre from a supermarket. It is a cheap, clear brandy and defines firewater, horrid by itself but the perfect start to all manner of goodies, sweet, spicy, hot, fruity or some voluptuous

combination of these all. Cheap vodka and gin can be improved extraordinarily by the same merry japes: vodka in which rose geranium leaves have steeped, perhaps with the help of some added rosewater, more than proves Ogden Nash's belief

*Candy is dandy  
But liquor is quicker*

Martinis made with rose-geranium vodka or vodka that's aromatic with the sensuality of vanilla pods will validate just as quickly his lines about drinking only one martini at the most, which go on with the stark warning:

*Two, you are under the table  
Three, you are under the host*

Forgetting inhibition-free libidos, such flavoured spirits give even the most inexperienced cook a huge repertoire of ways to enhance simple, fresh, quickly prepared ingredients, giving much more flavour for far less effort. With added sugar they become liqueurs, for sipping, for splashing over ice creams and cakes, flavouring fizzy water or champagne.

One of the nicest ways to be original here is to soak dried fruits or crystallized fruits in the spirit; the fruits plump up into luscious instant treats, the alcohol is sweetened and flavoured to do with what and whom you will. The best I ever made was with small, crystallised Williams Pear halves soaked in eau-de-vie, both bought on a day trip to Boulogne. The sugar of the pears gave themselves up to the alcohol, and the added zip the alcohol gave to the pears meant you only needed one per serving. Amazing with a raspberry sorbet . . .

### **How to do it**

It's hard to go wrong, other than not using enough of the flavouring. If you use dried fruits allow enough room for them to expand as they take up the alcohol, and then leave time for new flavours to blend, a couple of months at least if you can.

For winter shots more piquant mixtures can be made. Vodka into which you have added garlic cloves, bay leaves, crushed roasted black peppercorns, lemon zest and touch of dried chilli make a very smart start to a cold day's hiking or shopping at sale time – or a pick me up on your return. It is, of course, important to keep tasting it as it matures.

**Stock cubes, frozen:** with their bank of umami taste and concentrated flavours, stock cubes can save and make almost anything. Use just one or two frozen stock cubes to add body to any sauce you are making (chicken or game bird stock to a white sauce, for instance) or use more of them as the basis of a soup. As a light, very sustaining and comforting meal, I like to dilute a handful of concentrated stock cubes and then reheat it with some stalks of parsley or other herb and then break an egg into it to poach. Enjoying the runny yolk mixed into the stock makes anything seem rosy, especially with good sourdough toast and plenty of butter.

### **How to do it**

Make your stock the usual way, and once strained and defatted, gently concentrate it over heat until it is gorgeously rich. Cool and then freeze in an ice cube container. Tip the tasty cubes out into a plastic bag, label that and store in your freezer

**Vinegars :** macerate vinegar with strong herbs, with garlic or chilli or an original mixture; ditto cider or white wine vinegars with fresh raspberries, strawberries, blue berries, rose petals, chilli, roasted spices or whole spices. Use these to make superior salad dressings or to add unexpected flavours to gravies, pasta sauces, sprinkled on to pizza or to add zing to mayonnaises.

### **How to do it**

For fruit vinegars, which can also be sweetened and then diluted as a superb summer refreshment a good basic guide is to macerate 450g/1lb of fresh fruit in 600mls/1 pint of vinegar.

Red or white wine vinegar or cider vinegar give the best results. Yet a champagne vinegar or even a luscious muscatel vinegar might be used with the right fruits. Simply put them together in a screw top jar and leave them somewhere warm and sunny for a couple of weeks, and then taste. Sometimes, as with raspberry or strawberry vinegar, the flavour is still rather diluted and so you strain off the old fruits and do it again. It's all summer's red and black fruit which give the most useful results, black berries and cherries particular. Such soft fruit vinegars make playful additions to gin and vodka martinis.

Floral vinegars are a grateful reminder of summer when brought out in winter. Elderflower vinegar with a luscious muscatel flavour is simplest, followed by rose-petal vinegar, which can become addictive. For floral flavourings don't strive for 450g/1lb weight, but only as many as will fit into a one-pint container. Check elderflowers for catty smells and remove

if found, cut the white part of rose petals away and generally check for insects or other defects. Any truly fragrant flower can be used; in fact I once made a vinegar with sensationally perfumed cattleya orchids. It didn't go well with salads, but added fantastic point to peaches and pears served with salads and salads of cold chicken. But that musky orchid scent is undefinably unsettling to some people . . . In all cases, don't be afraid to add a little sugar as this energises the floral aspects of the vinegars

Herb vinegars are a handy standby. Use the same proportions as for floral vinegars perhaps using a little more or less if the herb is comparatively weak or strong. Thyme, tarragon, dill, basil, mint, rosemary, bay, marjoram and chive all work and have their supporters, and you could make whatever mix your garden or window box provides. Lavender flower vinegar is very good for finishing fish sauces and to underpin salads which contain fresh herbs.

Piquant vinegars are a great standby of the British kitchen, made by pouring, say, 600ml/1 pint *hot* cider vinegar onto 25g/1oz chopped fresh chillies. Grated fresh horseradish or a little grated fresh onion might also be included and I'd always use some fresh red peppers to round out the flavour, too. Personally I wouldn't bother to make such unless I also included garlic and some of the above herbs or, better, whole allspice, cloves and cinnamon quill. Let such concoctions sit at least two weeks before tasting.

Spiced vinegars are incredibly useful and sometimes bring unexpected and haunting qualities. Make up your own mix of whole or only lightly crushed spices or make individual flavours, especially cinnamon, cardamom or allspice. If this seems a little curious, buy a bottle or two of Chinese spiced rice vinegar and a new world will be revealed; these are sometimes sweetened, too, and you might like to follow suit. Unsweetened spiced vinegars make incisive additions to stews and casseroles or as sprinkles on grilled meat and fish; sweetened ones contribute greatly to marinades or as a final touch in grilled peaches to accompany barbecues and grills: totally fascinating poured over ice cream.

Great care must be taken not to squash or squeeze the flavourings when they are strained away or the vinegar will become cloudy.

**Oils:** relatively bland vegetable oils can be very much perked up by macerating herbs and spices in them, but their oiliness means any subtlety

is likely to be smothered on the tongue. So go for bigger flavours, taking your cue from what you see on retail shelves. The very best flavoured oils are those made with citrus, mandarin and tangerine particularly. You could simply have a wide-mouthed container of oil into which you put citrus skins as they materialise. But it is worth getting rid of as much of the white pith as possible before you do, because this will muddy the clarity of flavour with bitterness and other off flavours. The ideal is to spend a year or more making heaps of aged tangerine peel, and then to use that.

## **STORE CUPBOARD TASTES AND FLAVOURS**

*. . . so you can ring the changes  
without  
wringing your hands . . .*

To complement what you make yourself, but to have on hand anyway, here is a checklist of what you might find most useful, so you can ring changes without wringing your hands in despair.

### **SALT TASTE**

Anchovies, anchovy sauce

Fish Sauce: *nam pla* if it is from Thailand

Iodised salt for cooking: sea salt: flavoured salts (vanilla, smoked, truffle, etc); salt mixed with dried herbs or petals (English lavender, mint, rose petal, rosemary, tarragon, thyme)

### **SWEET TASTE**

Sugar: caster, demerara, molasses, icing and home-made vanilla sugar

Maple syrup, maple sugar; palm sugar.

### **ACID TASTE**

Vinegars : balsamic, cider, fruit, sherry, wine esp. red, muscatel, champagne and chardonnay. Vin cotto/sapa especially flavoured with with fig or raspberry.

Bottled lemon or lime juice, but fresh is better

### **BITTER TASTE**

Beer, stout

Coffee essence

### **UMAMI TASTE**

Soy sauces: Worcestershire sauce, fish sauce *nam pla* and equivalents, tomato sauce and ketchup; *dashi* powder

## **STORE-CUPBOARD FLAVOUR INGREDIENTS**

### **CANS/CARTONS:**

Fruit – lychees, alfonso mangoes/ mango puree: solid-pack, pie-style apples, apricots or plums

Pulses - canellini, chickpeas, black beans, red kidney – and baked beans, of course

Vegetables - tomatoes, whole, chopped or as passata; artichoke hearts or bottoms in brine (not acetic acid or vinegar): celery hearts, palm hearts, perhaps

### **CONDIMENTS – in addition to those above**

HP sauce: horse radish; choice of American mustard, Dijon mustard, English mustard powder, a French seed mustard: sweet chilli sauce: Tabasco – red, green or both: tomato sauce/ketchup

### **DRIED:**

Mixed fruit salad, apricots/ peaches: porcini/cep and or morilles and/or fairy ring mushrooms: decent stock powder

### **FLAVOURINGS:**

Boyajian citrus oils (lemon, lime, orange): cocoa powder, chocolate (low in sugar, high in cocoa solids, 70% or more): rose water, orange-flower water: vanilla extract; decent stock powder

### **FLOUR:**

Plain and self raising, strong bread-making flour: wholewheat or buckwheat for adding to others: cornflour for thickening, spelt flour

### **FROZEN:**

Peas, mixed organic vegetables: butter-made puff and short pastry, phyllo pastry sheets: dairy ice cream; clotted cream

### **GRAINS:**

instant couscous: basmati, pudding and risotto rice: instant polenta, burghul/bulgar wheat.

### **HERBS:**

Fresh: bay, parsley, tarragon, mint, thyme, coriander; basil in summer  
Dried: bay, tarragon, oregano (for that supermarket pizza) mint, thyme (if very fresh) NO MIXED HERBS

### **OILS:**

Extra virgin olive oils, including one for cooking: walnut or hazel: black or white truffle, mandarin, lemon; perhaps a wok oil with such exotic flavours as lemon grass and galangal or ginger built in.

**PASTA:** long and short dried pasta shapes (*bronzato* or bronze extruded): such stuffed pasta as tortellini, esp wild mushroom and spinach with ricotta varieties (bought fresh and then frozen).

**SPICES:**

Baharat spice mix: black peppercorns and any mixture of black, white, green and pink – perhaps with allspice too, chili seasoning ( the mixed-spice compound), cinnamon sticks, coriander seeds, cloves, cumin seeds, juniper berries, good mixed spice, paprika, sweet and hot (perhaps smoked too), pickling spice mixture, ras el hanout spice mix, whole nutmegs

# INGREDIENT SENSE

## INGREDIENT SUBSTITUTIONS

*Why would you eat an  
entirely unnatural product  
instead of  
a totally natural one?*

Butter is one of the few truly pure traditional ingredients left to us. It is just cream whipped up to make butter, with buttermilk as a by product. The only addition is salt, and in Europe some countries add a lactic culture subtly to change the acidity level and leave a mild flavour change. Otherwise butter has no colour, no flavouring, no preservatives, no nothing. Butter is the ideal modern, trustworthy ingredient, made and sold with no mucking around. It tastes terrific, too.

Most margarine and other spreads are based on making a semi-solid spreadable fat from a naturally liquid oil by the hydrogenation process, something completely unknown in Nature. As well as changing its chemistry, the oil might have colour, flavouring and other additives – just read the label. Not a very good substitute for butter you might think, particularly when the taste has no relationship to butter. Worse, experts all round the world think trans-fatty acids created by the hydrogenation process are a greater health risk than any threat offered by butter fat.

It gets sillier. The substitution of margarine for butter is commonly recommended for heart health diets, but surely it is better to cut down and eat less of absolutely natural, pure butter than it is to switch to a chemical cocktail? A sight more delicious, too.

Silliest of all, apart from some few newer products, margarine has exactly the same fat content as butter, exactly the same calorie/kilojoule count. Using butter instead of margarine makes sense, but the other way round? Even though some of the newer spreads have panicked and discovered they can be made by emulsification and not by hydrogenation, the question has to be asked, why would you eat an entirely unnatural product instead of a totally natural one?

Yet even butter manufacturers cannot be trusted to play the game. Look at the label. Spreadable or semi-soft butters were just that when introduced. With no publicity, and virtually no change of pack design, most are now butter mixed with canola or other vegetable oil. Why? For New Zealand it means the country can sell only their same limited quota of butter to the EU, but because it is now blended with oil, they sell more units and thus earn more money.

Oils are just as contentious and highly misunderstood as we move ever deeper into a multi-ethnic kitchen world. As well as knowing the difference between a virgin olive oil and an extra virgin olive oil you need to know when you use which oil, and where.

It is sad to see recipes for a really good curry start with extra virgin olive oil. The defence is olive oil is better for your heart. Oh really? A tablespoon or so of olive oil, in a curry serving six people, will be better for you than the same curry made with another oil? Ridiculous. Olive oil belongs with Mediterranean food. Vegetable oils belong to Indian cookery. Substituting any ingredients for the wrong reason and in small amounts is like trying to clean up the ocean by swishing your feet in the shallows. The rule is to use the right oil, the oil belonging to the cuisine you are cooking.

Most dithering about with butter or oils is in hope of reducing cholesterol levels. Yet most cholesterol in our bodies is made by our bodies and diet does very little to change this. Such wondrous modern drugs as statins do much more to reduce cholesterol for most people. Eating butter, but perhaps less of it, and using such helpful oils as olive and other vegetable oils in their natural liquid state is only a help, not the solution.....

## NAMING NAMES

*Calling it anything else confuses those who  
thought they knew the reality*

It's very exciting to cook without recipes, to create something entirely new and fresh. When you do this, be bold and give it a name, own it. But also be honest about it. If you make a kedgeree with salmon and herbs rather than haddock and spice, you simply can't serve it as kedgeree. It is, at very least, a salmon kedgeree. Calling it anything else confuses those who thought they knew the reality, gives a wrong steer to those coming to the dish for the first time - so that when they are served a genuine kedgeree they might dismiss it as wrong. It's enough simply to put 'my' before the name of a recipe or dish, as in MY Kedgeree.

It's equally important to shy away from using the words classic or traditional unless what you are cooking really is the genuine thing. If nothing else it sets you up for well deserved criticism.

All of this can be dismissed by the average cook cooking for family and non-culinary friends. The moment you adopt food as some sort of income producer you must be right in everything you say. This means everyone from part-time WI cooks to commercial makers and bakers, from delicatessen cooks or owners to Michelin-star chefs, from restaurant reviewers to cookery book writers. Call something the right name and people can simply like it or not. But mis-name a dish and you are fair game for any comparison and criticism thrown at you. I might be first.

## GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT

*Variety, variety, variety  
- that is the key to  
really good health and great eating*

Don't be weighing and counting and thinking about calories and kilojoules every time you cook or eat – you need a life! Instead, simply stay conscious of what you eat today and don't eat the same tomorrow. It's what you eat over a day and the week you should attempt to balance, rather than single meals.

The worst thing you can do is to pick a narrow spectrum of food you believe is healthy and eat nothing else. If you eat only a certain fish, salad, yoghurt and strawberries you'll do well for a week or so. But then your body will start to miss the essential nutrition in other types of fish, in other types and colours of vegetables, other fruits. Even different varieties of the same fruit can have different nutritional benefits, so just ringing the changes by buying different apple types each time you shop has its advantages.

It is ok to have a huge ice cream or a giant fry-up if they are offered. No-one died from a single meal, unless they ate outrageously gargantuan portions. But if you do have the fry-up, watch your fat intake the rest of the day and the next day if it was a really blow out. Eat red meat today, but fish tomorrow and cheese the day after that but never the three on the same day, or day after day. There really is no need to care about individually balanced meals, which will drive you crazy, but only to keep the broad picture in your mind.

Make the contrast as big as you can. If you have a white bread chicken sandwich today have a wholemeal ham roll tomorrow, choosing the ham roll not because it is or is not low fat but because it will have different nutrition from the chicken sandwich; even the breads do.

And the Five a Day campaign? What good sense and how easy it is to check up on yourself. The problem many have is establishing quite what a portion is. It's not exact – and it's not meant to be – but broadly speaking a portion that's right is about the size of your fist, whoever you are. So for an big adult an apple or an orange would be a portion, but it might take three plums. You can combine of course; a serving of broccoli and of peas together might add up only to a fistful. Count them as one

serving of vegetables for the day and you know where you are. Actually eating a half portion of the two vegetables is measurably better for you, because together they'll deliver a greater spectrum of nutrition than either can do by itself.

So, there's just one word to remember when you are thinking about your diet. Variety. Consciously eat the greatest variety of foods and try not to eat tomorrow exactly the same as you eat today. That way you get the important spectrum of nutrition and shouldn't fall into the trough of eating so much of the wrong stuff you develop food-related health issues – like becoming obese, or risking stomach cancer because you eat barbecued meat most days of the week.

Whether to vary your diet or to find more exciting ways to cook, use the following lists as a stimulus to think laterally and thus to widen your ingredient horizons. These are the edibles commonly found as a complement, in both important and in supporting roles. Each complement group offers a huge choice of flavours and textures. Identifying something you know and then moving sideways to something new is a simple gateway to new pathways when you want variety. As you develop your range of interests, buy product-specific books to help you become even more creative but correct.

These lists introduce some of the acceptable alternatives to what you eat already. Next time you shop reach for a ciabatta rather than a sliced loaf, a different mustard or cheese, a grain that's new to you, and so on. Your diet will suddenly have much more variety and even simple meals will be more exciting.

### **Some variety choices**

#### **Breads and bakery:**

Include such ethnic styles as naan, ciabatta, sourdough, baguette, wholemeal

#### **Charcuterie:**

As well as hams look at salami and other cured and air-dried meats

#### **Drinks (non-alcoholic):**

Ginger ale and lemonade, including home made versions: fruit juices. Coca-Cola as a cooking medium for ham and an ingredient in cakes and more – well, Nigella does, so it must be OK.

**Coffee:** experiment with or without milk, light, dark or medium roast, lightly spiced, finely, medium or coarsely ground, instant, essence, espresso, cona, filter, liqueur – and iced

#### **Condiments:**

Mustards, sauces, chutneys and pickles – and then keep them in the refrigerator to guarantee long life

**Dairy produce:**

Break the mould and choose something different each week from fresh cheeses, fresh creams, soured creams, aged Parmesan-style cheeses, blue cheeses, yoghurts, ice creams, goats milk produce including butter: salted butter, unsalted butter, sweet butter, lactic butter

**Dried vegetables:**

Add instant variety with dried mushrooms, sun-dried tomatoes or capsicums

**Fats:**

Use all butter types, and beef dripping or pork lard or coconut cream

**Fruits:**

Pick different types and varieties of fresh, different varieties of dried; eat them raw or cooked

**Grains:**

It's easy to play among the choice of pasta, couscous, rice, wild rice, burghul, polenta, quinoa, amaranth, millet . . . and all the variations

**Herbs:**

Use them fresh or dried, singly rather than in mixtures, herb jellies or sauces

**Jams and jellies:**

Get out of a life time habit and try another fruit's jam, a darker or lighter marmalade and then look at savoury jellies based on wine or berries or fruit

**Nuts:**

Crack on to something different: fresh, dried, flaked, sliced, slivered, nibbed, ground – and any of these roasted or toasted to a greater or lesser degree.

**Oils:**

Instant flavour changes with a variety of olive, nut, seed, vegetable and flavoured oils

**Pickles:**

Find something new amongst the shelves of olives, capers, onions, beetroot, lemon or the mixtures like piccalilli

**Preserves sweet or spiced:**

Deliciously different treats in syrup or in sweet-sour mixtures: peaches, plums, figs, cherries or mango, or Italy's peppery-hot-sweet *mostardo di frutta*

**Pulses:**

Have plenty of cans on hand of chickpeas, flageolet, butter beans, lima beans, red, white or black kidney beans

**Sauces:**

Nothing wrong with using ready-made or cook-in sauces if the contents list looks nothing like a chemical formula

**Spices:**

The instant pick-me-up, especially when you also think about using a different texture: there's fresh, roasted, combinations, ground, pounded and chopped for a start.

**Spirits:**

Whatever floats your boat, and then something special for the weekend: cognac or brandy, gin and Genever, white, golden and dark rum, vodka and flavoured vodkas, single malt or blended whisky, US whiskey and bourbon, unsweetened fruit brandies (eau-de-vie), sweetened liqueurs

**Starches:**

Buy different sizes and varieties of potatoes; try sweet potatoes and yams, taro, chestnuts, rice, almond and wheat flours – and then it's back to the top and breads – but see Grains, too

**Sugars and sweeteners:**

Dip your spoon into white sugar, demerara, moist brown, muscavado sugar, palm sugar, honey, maple syrup, golden syrup, corn syrup (USA), pomegranate molasses, wines, spirits, liqueurs. And now there is fruit sugar and a new low-cal ingredient made from sugar

**Tea:**

No reason not to have a wide choice of black, green, oolong, white, flower-flavoured, spiced: tisanes of all kinds

**Vegetables:**

Simple to try something new, or a new variety of something you thought you knew all about, including salads. Frozen veg are a top way to ensure variety and nutrition.

**Vinegars:**

Sharpen up everything from salads to sauces, even ice cream: old, new, balsamic, Orleans style, wine based, sherry based, ale based, fruit flavoured, herb flavoured and such individual grape variety vinegars as champagne, muscatel, cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir and their relations.

**Wines:** of course

# HEALTH AND SENSE

## IS IT GOOD FOR ME?

*No common food is intrinsically good or bad for you;  
how each affects you  
depends on how much of it you eat*

All round the world manufacturers are required more carefully to label their products. As well as listing ingredients in descending order of presence, there is a move to more accessible information about energy/calorie/kilojoule content.

Don't for a second think this movement means the public is safer or better informed.

Manufacturers do not use labels and labelling laws to be transparent, they bend them to hide reality from their customers. They play games with words to persuade customers. How many customers know the difference between Strawberry Ice-cream and Strawberry Flavour Ice cream? Do you? The first will have real strawberries; the second will be flavoured with something artificial. The word 'flavoured' tells you the food associated with it is not the real thing. Just as 'fruit juice' will be what it says, 'fruit drink' means the product is largely water and inevitably has added sugar, too.

Subterfuge is an important part of labelling, making any product seem as appealing and healthy as possible without telling outright lies. Sugar content is usually the worse culprit, because it is so easy to disguise. Most people know ordinary white sugar is sucrose: they might not know every ingredient ending in 'ose' is also a sugar. Lactose, glucose (in several forms), galactose and fructose are all as pure and natural as you would want and they make food taste good and feel good in the mouth. But they are sugars and increase the energy/calorie/kilojoule count.

Dried fruits, and honey are other ways up bumping up the sugar factor without appearing to use sugar. Don't fall for the hoary chestnut about natural sugars being better for you: the nutritional difference between white and brown or raw sugars is infinitesimal in a balanced and varied diet. Whatever they have decided to use, the manufacturer has spread his

risk, hidden his recipe from the public by using an array of sugars. It's not just for calories or the pleasure of sweetness, but because sugar also gives such great mouth feel to a product. Tricks are just as common in low-fat foods.

When you see a food item advertised as 97% fat free it's pretty certain you judge the product a better choice *overall*, yet what the label or sign means is nothing more than says, it's 97% fat free: it promises and guarantees nothing else and if you check its sugar, colour or preservative content they regularly equal or exceed the norms; most fat-free versions have a higher calorie content than the originals. Fats are important energy sources, and it is commonly thought reduced fat or low-fat labels signify a reduction of the overall energy count. It can do, but if the energy value of the removed fat is replaced or exceeded by adding extra sugars the product will be just as fattening in an unbalanced diet. The label will tell you all you need to know – if you remember to look. Some of the biggest surprises are 'health' bars: they are proudly fat free yet stuffed with sugars and honey, including the natural sugars of dried fruits and nuts – just look at their kilojoule/calorie counts if you don't believe me.

If you otherwise eat sensibly, a naturally low-fat diet with plenty of sugar from fresh fruits and vegetables and very little fatty take-way food you are far better off buying full-fat yoghurt. It will taste better, be closer to nature, can have fewer calories/kilojoules than low-fat choices and be altogether more enjoyable.

Man-made sweeteners can successfully be used to sweeten products with a lowered fat content but here some other product must be added as a thickener of some sort to bump up mouth feel. Up to you - artificially sweetened products are part of the modern choice, and we must never forget no food except poison is intrinsically bad for you other than eating too much of the same thing.

The content of sugar or fat in any one product is not likely to harm you or anyone else unless there is a diagnosed medical condition. Trouble starts only when you discover too much of something in your overall diet. That's if you can add it up. Calories are now said to be a discredited way of counting energy content. Instead much food has a kilojoule count, but this replacement for the readily understood calorie count is almost universally confusing to the public – exactly what many manufacturers want.

Many people do not buy food where only a kilojoule value is listed, because it is so difficult to convert to calorie measures and there's never been a campaign to tell us equivalences. No wonder. Kilojoules are an industrial measurement, introduced to labeling by industry and Government and welcomed by industry as a way to disguise reality. When have they told the public how a kilojoule relates to a calorie or to a recommended daily intake? – where is that information available?

Whatever the scientific defence, the kilojoule game was introduced knowing it would confuse the public, and the ball is still most definitely in the manufacturers' court. Manufacturers who care about customers show both calorie and kilojoule values, and more and more of them do.

If not, here is how you translate:

To translate kilojoules into calories, approximately:

Divide the kilojoules by four

To translate calories into kilojoules, approximately

Multiply the calories by four.

Yet eating a single 'health' bar, scoffing three tubs of ice cream or eating only fish and chips for a day won't affect your health. No common food is intrinsically good or bad for you; how each affects you depends on how much of it you eat. In the past few years young marathon runners and disco dancers have died from drinking too much water, actually dissolving their brain tissue. Yep, even water can be bad for you if you drink too much of it.

When you think about the edict to drink this or that many litres of water a day you must also adjust this according to your body size and weight. At 65kgs-ish there is no way I need as much water as a 6-footer, man or woman. And then take in to account how much water you are eating in your food: rice and pasta contain lots of water, so do fresh fruits and vegetables. The fruit juice you drank at breakfast, the quick salad for lunch also come with lots of water. This is how the human race flourished for countless centuries without carrying bottles of water them every time they left their cave, hut, castle, cottage, council house or high rise development.

We are already eating more food than most humans in history, and that means we are probably better hydrated too. Without sucking water from a plastic bottle every few steps. So ugly.

## ALLERGIES AND INTOLERANCES

*It is important  
not  
to take food scares  
at face value*

Food allergies are often cited as a reason for someone not eating this or that food. True food allergies are very rare. Allergies mean swollen eyes, blocked airways, swelling, itching and more, including death; true food allergies are life threatening and some can kill in minutes.

Most claimed allergies are minor food intolerances, i.e. there is something in the food your body does not like and probably cannot digest easily. The symptoms can range from stomach cramps or diarrhea, to rashes, headaches or, commonly, excessive intestinal wind often accompanied by unpleasant smells, a sure sign food has not been digested properly.

Onion is the most common cause of such eating problems, particularly when raw or partly cooked: over 50% of men and women of Caucasian origin have trouble digesting onion properly but eat it daily, to the irritation of themselves and others.

Most of the world's population cannot easily digest cow's milk after infancy – for many it is a struggle even then, and this is not an allergy but a lack of necessary enzymes in the digestive system. When seafood upsets you – a rogue oyster or mussel perhaps – this is called an allergy but is not: if you had an allergy you wouldn't have been able to eat seafood in the first place and some time later you can usually go back to them safely.

Then there are the preservatives, the colourings etc, hidden behind code numbers in food labelling. Don't mock anyone who has a problems with an ingredient, but keep it clear in your head, even if you don't say it out loud, they are more likely to have a food intolerance than an allergy.

It is important not to take food scares at face value. Comedian Pamela Stephenson and other personalities waged public war against a particular spray used on apples. They are so quiet about it now you would think

they had major success. Not at all. It was pointed out a glass of freshly-squeezed orange juice contained a greater, naturally-occurring amount of their devil-chemical than was ever on an apple.

Equally, who hears about Chinese restaurant syndrome these days? The worldwide hysterical outburst against mono-sodium glutamate was ill-informed. Half or more of China's two billion population would also have developed equal reactions of dizziness, palpitations and more if they had eaten Chinese food the wrong way.

A good Chinese cook uses proportionally more MSG in the thin stocks served as a soup, so they taste as strong and rich as possible and stretch as far as possible. It is true that some chefs use too much, but that is now rare.

In a traditional Chinese meal soup is slowly sipped all through, to refresh and moisten the palate. But Westerners order soup to guzzle down on an empty stomach and there the trouble lies, that's when dizziness and other symptoms might occur. The same thing would happen to Chinese diners who ate all their MSG-rich soup on an empty stomach. MSG was not the culprit, it was Westerners who imposed their way of eating onto another culture.

MSG is used in very small amounts and is an outstanding help to heart and obesity patients who must eat bland salt-free diets. Tiny amounts of MSG instead of salt give great savoury flavour to food, and help prevent the patient straying to fatty or salty foods through palate boredom. Equally, when salt is not medically forbidden but does need to be cut, a mixture of MSG and salt is ideal, the MSG heightening the effect of the salt. It's extraordinary the number of people who claim to be 'allergic to MSG' but happily shake on soy sauce. Soy sauce works because it is a major source of MSG.

So, don't throw up your hands when you detect the presence of MSG on a label, but welcome what it can do and don't eat huge amounts on an empty stomach. If you do, there will be effects, just as there are if you eat a whole box of chocolates. Where's the worldwide movement to ban chocolates?

## **COOKING FOR VEGETARIANS**

*Teenagers who become vegetarians without understanding the needs of their maturing bodies or how vegetarianism works are on a guaranteed route to extreme ill-health*

We could save the world by switching to vegetarianism. Meter by square meter it is phenomenally more productive to grow vegetable protein than to raise cattle, pigs and the like. Sure there'd first be the problem of gobbling up or otherwise disposing of the last cows, pigs, chicken, crocodiles, ostriches and so on. All that furious breeding up of old-breeds would have been in vain and what is the future of those handy experts who collected sperm for artificial insemination . . .

Traditional vegetarian dishes from around the world are possibly the most inspiring culinary resource of all. Certainly, exploration of vegetarian cooking is a terrific focus for your travels and reading, too. Without shopping as I travelled I would never have found the book on Nepalese curries, the one written by the king of Thailand's aristocratic relative, by the ladies of the Nyasaland, by my relations on Pitcairn Island or the Alaskan book which told me how to make seal-blubber ice cream (at last!). Even in your local village or High Street ethnic shops quietly sell cookery books published in the proprietors' country of origin; the best Indian cookbooks I've ever found were bought in a sari shop in Auckland; my favourite is *Cooking without Garlic and Onions*, a brilliant book. Such finds are treasure chests and have a better chance of being authentic than something published in Sydney or New York City.

Much of the world, most perhaps, is far more vegetarian than meat eating. Mexico, Nepal, Peru, Sri Lanka, China, Japan and dozens more rely on plant-based foods to survive. Their cuisines offer fantastic resources for ever-more delicious food, sometimes reproduced as an authentic recipe, sometimes as a version of an authentic recipe. Superior ingredient knowledge is what will see you prosper, and make your contribution to erasing the all-too-real image of vegetarian food being boring, brown and lumpy, tasting of under-cooked onion, stale mixed herbs, a foreign flavouring or two and melted cheap cheese.

But if you want to become a committed vegetarian – particularly if you are very young – there is a problem.

Vegetarianism is not simply rice or other grains served with many delicious vegetables. A diet of grains and vegetables alone is actually *unhealthy*; it does not provide the complete spectrum of proteins needed, particularly vital to the body when teenagers need maximum nutrition of all kinds to grow, mature sexually and have the strength to get through what is happening to their bodies and minds as well as doing well at school. Teenagers who become vegetarians without understanding the needs of their maturing bodies or how vegetarianism works are on a guaranteed route to extreme ill-health.

Commonly, girls who turn to incomplete vegetarianism before they menstruate, or who turn to it soon after menstruation starts, fail to develop normally, due largely to serious iron deficiency. What a grown adult might get away with in an unbalanced vegetarian diet is a serious threat to girls in early teenage. If it goes too far conditions develop which doctors cannot reverse with a simple tablet, an injection and a good steak.

Cheese, milk and eggs provide the same protein spectrum as animal flesh and there are no vegetarian dietary problems if they are eaten. Otherwise you relinquish your place in Western mainstream and must rely on tofu, made from soy beans, and the only vegetable product with the same protein spectrum and attributes as meat, milk, eggs and cheese.

Soy milk is made by crushing soy beans, boiling and then straining off the white liquid or soy milk. Tofu, or bean curd, is soy milk solidified to a consistency varying between a silken jelly and a crumbly cheese. Whereas meat is up to 15% protein, tofu is close to 70%, so a little goes a good long way towards balancing a vegetarian diet. It should not just be seen as an independent ingredient substituting for meat on the plate, but as an ingredient to soak up other flavours, something it does superbly. This ability to disguise its own taste is a gift for proto-vegetarians who don't like the taste of tofu – as with any other agricultural product, different varieties have different flavours and some have a distinct bean-taste loved by some, loathed by others. Still, when so little is needed and it can be made to disappear in other flavours tofu should not be difficult to incorporate in to the diet.

Teenagers on a tofu-based diet should be persuaded to get professional advice on how much he or she should minimally eat, and also ensure

they are regularly assessed for Vitamin B-12 deficiency: even tofu is not perfect all the time. B-12 deficiency can be given a quick fix with an injection, and longer term more mushrooms should be eaten as they fill the gap nicely: they are the only fruit or vegetable with B-12, which actually makes them an almost-meat.

Nature has worked it so neither pulses (peas, beans and such) nor grains (wheat, rice etc) have all the proteins a human diet needs. This is why a diet based on rice and vegetables alone is ultimately dangerous unless milk cheese, eggs and/or soy is included. Luckily, what one lacks the other has, and if you eat pulses and grains together in about the proportion you'd tip baked beans (the pulse) over a thick slice of wholemeal toast (the grain) the result is very close to the full protein count needed. Other examples of the pulse/grain substitute are serving a lentil dhal with rice, as do Indians, or the mixed rice and bean dishes so enjoyed in the Caribbean.

To summarise the vegetarian safety base - vegetarians should eat cheese, milk and eggs, or eat tofu, or eat a balance of pulses and grains every day— and growing teenagers need to be more careful about this than others. It's simpler and safer if vegetarians choose to be ovo-lactic-vegetarians and, thus eat cheese, milk and eggs.

Vegans are quite a different thing altogether and won't have a bar of cheese, milk or eggs. Cooking for vegans, like cooking for people with specialist medical-requirement dietary needs, is best done by a real specialist or with the input and guidance of an experienced vegan. The key to their healthy continuance is the protein in grains and pulses or the protein of soy.

# SHOPPING AND SENSE

## Beware the ‘traditional’ label . . .

Treacle has a big challenging flavour, dark and rich, almost too sweet. Treacle Tart is a hugely popular British tradition, an open tart of sweet pastry filled with a mixture of breadcrumbs, egg and . . . . no, not treacle. There won't be 10 people in 100 who have ever wondered why, and fewer still who would dare make Treacle Tart with treacle.

Treacle is a natural by-product of refining white sugar from cane syrup, and Treacle Tart seems commonly once to have been layers of pastry spread with treacle and then baked. Golden Syrup, which began to be made in bulk in 1883, is an industrial mixture of sucrose with invert sugars, glucose and fructose, which give a less challenging colour and flavour. Once golden syrup appeared breadcrumbs were added because it is rather thinner than treacle and the Treacle Pastry became Treacle Tart, but without any treacle.

Yet you see writers tell readers treacle tart (made with golden syrup) has been a British favourite for centuries. It can only have been a favourite since the 1880s. Use treacle instead of golden syrup, but still with breadcrumbs etc and serve your real treacle tart with clotted cream. It's so good you'll never go back to the now ‘traditional’ substitute.

## ORGANIC INGREDIENTS

*Taste is not related  
to the way something grows  
but to the  
genetic make-up  
specific to each variety*

The world of organics is a morass of mis-information, a maze of confused expectation. Ask almost anyone what they believe are the two most important advantages of organic food, and amongst the answers are: better for you and taste better. One of these answers is contentious, the other is usually wrong.

The real point of organic farming is to separate fresh produce from artificial agricultural chemicals, in the belief this would be better for the sustainability of the land and only incidentally produce better and healthier food for us. It's a good argument as long as you remember chemicals of some sort have always been used to produce our food – a liquid fertilizer made from seaweed or from comfrey leaf works because of its chemicals. And mis-use of natural chemicals can be quite as deadly as those manufactured. Indeed a backlash against intensive organic farming is based precisely on the harm being done on a new sort of imbalance it can create. Organic mono-culture on an industrial scale can be just as harmful to the soil as non-organic mono-culture. Like our bodies, the land prospers most from yielding a variety of produce.

Essentially produce from organic farms or factories should mean nutritional excellence free from modern agricultural chemicals. Yet some organic fruit and vegetable farms are so small they do their own deliveries from country into village, town or city. In summer you see them driving about in a charming old flatback truck stacked with fruit and vegetables. Later the same day the truck will be parked outside yet another earnest health food shop, still in full sun, still making deliveries. The produce harvested freshly – it is hoped - in the morning is by now deflated and dehydrated before it is on the shelves, and because both heat and light quickly degenerate the nutrition of almost every fruit and vegetable, the produce has lost a great deal of its nutritional value. Then it is put out for sale in the open air or at high ambient temperatures in which

it will continue to deteriorate nutritionally. Yet it is sold at a price premium, and it sells.

So, (1) you pay more money and (2) you get something free of modern chemicals yet (3) the food is nutritionally lacking because it has not been kept cool and out of sunlight since harvesting and whilst on sale. It doesn't add up. If I had to buy organic vegetables anywhere other than from the garden which grew them, I'd buy them from a supermarket which at least knows enough to keep them chilled and away from sunlight.

This is why frozen vegetables are so very good for you. They or the soil which produced them might have a little chemical residue, or they might not, but at least they have every possible scrap of nutrition it is possible to deliver. Most are frozen within hours of harvesting and that protects their nutritional content. This is commercial growing, processing and retailing enormously profitable to the *consumer*.

As to organic produce tasting better, this is definitely not a universal truth. Taste is not related to the way something grows but to the genetic make-up specific to each variety.

There is no such thing as a pumpkin or a strawberry or cabbage or apple. Apples like Braeburns, Cox's Orange Pippin, Granny Smith or Pacific Queens look and taste different from one another because they are genetically made to be that way. Yes, some have been engineered to make the most of their genetics, but that is only what farmers have been doing since man first settled in one place. Call it selective breeding, call it cross-breeding or cross- closely-and-hope-for-hybrid-vigour, the way it's done with cats, dogs, birds, orchids and other plants. Modern life would not be possible if what we eat and drink had not had man's interference in their genetic make-up one way or another.

These old processes are different from what is meant by modern GE or GM, genetic engineering or genetic manipulation, when elements of two radically different species which could never breed naturally, are combined in a new sentient or agricultural product. This is a story to watch for a long time, to ensure you know enough to avoid making mistakes.

Given the same amount of sun and water, any given variety will taste pretty much the same whether grown organically, hydroponically, on a chemically fertilized farm or in a window box of compost.

However, many organic farms grow older varieties of fruit and vegetables, for which we must be specially grateful and these often have marked flavour advantages. Anyone not familiar with varietal differences can pick an organically grown apple, or pull a carrot, eat them shortly - cooked or raw - and find them spectacularly good tasting. This pleasure comes partly from the freshness, but is mainly due its variety, perhaps a variety not popular with modern agriculture because the yield is too low, or the tree grows too high or the fruit/vegetable does not ripen within a reliable time frame. Many of the smaller established organic farms grow old varieties, superceded because they did not crop enough for modern farming or were too unreliable or disease prone. These small organic farms and their produce should be protected fiercely, even if it means driving into the country to buy their produce.

So, it is the varieties grown which can make some organic produce taste so wonderfully good: they don't taste better just because they were organically grown. Big organic farms will have moved on to grow new varieties needing less care, no chemicals and no spray but with bigger cropping than old varieties. If these new varieties are insipid, with flavour sacrificed for colour or size or cropping, organic farming will produce boring flavours just as reliably as a chemically treated, fertilised and sprayed farm. If only the push and publicity was less on the word organic but more on what organic farmers could and should grow and how they should properly harvest, distribute and sell.

There will be no stopping the behemoth of organic foods, well not shortly anyway. Yet one day someone powerful will realise this: if organic foods are really better for us, the people who would most benefit simply can't afford them. It can't be right so much campaigning is put behind organic foods when this is essentially driving a wedge between the haves and the have-nots: what will happen when the have-nots demand the same organic harvest as the haves?

Fresh or frozen, stored properly are the key words for nutrition, carefully chosen varieties are the key to flavour. Just note how much better British strawberries taste now the Cambridge varieties have given way to El Santa for much of the season. Bet most of them are not grown organically, but the taste advantages are amazing . . . let's hope we have seen the last of crisp strawberries. Crisp?

## FARMERS MARKETS

*. . . there are three or more generations  
with absolutely no direct contact with  
continuous food heritage*

Don't be fooled. Many of the weekly food markets which have burgeoned in the past few years are indeed marvels, allowing you to buy excellent produce direct from the producer; those in Wales are amazing. But just as many are wicked and opportunistic, simply shops without walls offering high priced goods without much hygiene or quality control, and with no middle-man to share the profits or overheads. There are several ways to tell.

The biggest clue is in the name – if it is a Farmers Market it should be what it says, and usually is, a place where producers can sell direct to the consumer. But look again, often the sign only says it is a food market and then it is very much *caveat emptor* for these moveable feasts are the plaything of Yummie Mummies and Deceitful Daddies with no interest in food other than how much they can make out of flogging it you.

The Saturday market outside swanky Partridges in King's Rd, Chelsea, is not strictly a Farmers' Market but is an outstanding place to shop because it is run by Partridges to offer their better suppliers a chance to sell direct. Customers enjoy this immensely, and that's largely because Partridges have pre-selected their suppliers and so know the quality of what is going on to the stalls. Partridges are, after all, By Appointment to Her Majesty the Queen, so it's a bit like shopping in Buckingham Palace's larder.

Many other markets are, frankly, a disgrace, one I know selling eggs which are weeks old, baked goods nothing like their names suggests, and which have been made with anything but the butter you expect. These let down the fascinating, hard-working woman just opposite, who is selling artisan cheeses made with the milk of her own buffaloes. The difference between this and markets in Wales and Partridges is very simple; those paragons both have market controllers who know about food, and who regularly inspect what is going on.

One of the fear factors to watch for is the age of the vendor. If they are under 25 you have to wonder how much they really know about what they are selling, supposedly made by themselves – few who sell both

sorts of loaves ever seem to know *pain au levain* and sourdough bread are the same thing. That's because they are mere agents, selling on behalf of the baker.

Don't suspend suspicion and disbelief simply because you are buying from a stall. As any of us know who have judged in The Great Taste Awards or the True Taste of Wales, being made in a sweet cottage using local organic ingredients, spring water and/or free range eggs is no guarantee a product will (a) be what it says or (b) taste any good at all. If the manufacturers are young we sadly must also remember that in Britain, anyway, there are three or more generations with absolutely no direct contact with continuous food heritage. It is such people who don't know two slabs of non-butter pastry meanly filled with a few teaspoons of currants is not an Eccles cake, and are often too arrogant to do any research, in which case they would know Marks and Spencer bake-on-site shops make spectacularly good-tasting Eccles cakes the heritage way, and sell them cheaper too.

Many years ago I wrote an article saying I thought there was more job potential in small food manufacturing than in any other part of commerce. The markets and the interest in locally produced foods are slowly proving me right. But the food must be what it says it is, it must be better than a commercially produced product and, because it is being sold direct to the public should be at very competitive prices, prices which make a tidy profit for the producer but which do not put their produce out of the way of the ordinary shopper. True hospitality and pride in good food made and sold honestly are never successful bedmates of greed. . . not for long, anyway.

## **THE SMALL STUFF - Buying small kitchen appliances**

*Fact: I'm too poor  
to buy cheap stuff*

*Fact: buy expensive and you cry once;  
buy cheap and you cry twice*

Good tasting food served nicely has never relied on the cook's income. So forget any idea you need a flash kitchen with expensive saucepans and lots of gadgets to be a better cook. What gives you an edge, keeps your focus on flavour rather than fuss, could be coping with limited bench space or blunt knives or a measuring cup you also use to dole out pet food

Happy times in a domestic kitchen usually means there's a comfortable mix of what is new and useful and what is old and trusted, and you can be as eccentric as you like. If it amuses and gratifies you to think of great-grandma as you mince meat through an ancient, hand mincer, then do so. Your mind could as easily turn to thoughts of food processors when the time comes to clean and sterilize all its awkward bits.

There are no real rules about which appliance is better than any other, just a mix of features, sizes and prices, and each is better suited to one person than another – either for matters of practicality, budget or posh.

Consumerist magazines which fearlessly compare models are very useful, but only if you have your own opinions, too. Domestic espresso machines are a prime example. The choice seems overwhelming. Yet once you nail down just how many drink how much coffee at what time, and what coffee styles they prefer, the choice narrows. Two people who drink black espresso a couple of times a day need quite a different machine from two people who drink lots of milky coffees. A house where everyone drinks at the same time needs quite a different machine from one where people make coffee any time.

But how much to spend? Nothing resonates with more good sense than the adage of being too poor to buy cheap things. High quality lasts: low quality needs replacing again and again and is ultimately more expensive.

As you shop, remember no TV-chef designed bowl and no saucepan which costs the same as a space shuttle ever made food taste better. If the bowl is fit for purpose, the food will be just as tasty made in second-hand Pyrex you rooted out of Portobello Road's stalls

**Blowtorch:** a bit of fun rather than a necessity, hardly as vital as a citrus zester or a range of sieves and strainers. But TV cooks have made the culinary blowtorch seem such an imperative I went to check out their prices. Turns out they are not that expensive; where I expected to snort at fifty quid price tags many are well under £20. Just right for a present and they can be used for more than crème brulee or meringues. Can't they?

**Bowls:** you cannot have too many. The best are transparent, heat resistant Pyrex or the like, as they can do almost anything for you. Some should be straight-sided to use for soufflés or to double as serving bowls. All except the very biggest should fit into your microwave. Most of mine have come from junk shops, charity shops and market stalls.

It's good also to have a dozen or more ramekins, practical for cooking as well as for sorting out ingredients before you cook. The ideal is to have eight of each of two or three sizes: I know you can only seat six, but I always buy eight or everything so I can afford to break two but still have the full set. Ramekins earn their keep on your table, for dipping sauces and salsas, for delicate baked egg dishes like savoury or sweet custards and for individual hot or cold puddings: serving individual untouched soufflés is always better than serving up a big soufflé which generally looks somewhat expectorated when spooned out in servings.

**Brushes:** an ordinary paintbrush about 3-5cms wide is cheaper and more practical than special culinary brushes for such as painting water or butter onto pastry so the top lid sticks nicely to the bottom. For phyllo and other Middle Eastern pastry types you need a brush 10-15 cms wide, so it's practical to be brushing butter or oil onto sheet after sheet after sheet . . .

To clean, squish them in very sudsy hot water and then rinse with hot water and stand to dry with their bristles up, which stops them going out of shape.

**Chopping boards:** the ideal is a single piece of wood cut through a branch or trunk, so your knife cuts into the grain rather than across it and this means there is less resistance and jar when you are chopping. The Chinese do great boards like this, which you can usually find somewhere

in those chaotic Chinese supermarkets. The French make them expensively and you can also get cross-grain boards made of a multitude of small pieces – IKEA do one for the Swedish equivalent of peanuts.

Remember the rules always to wash and bleach a board after you have cut or chopped meat on it. This also means when you have used the chopping board to carve meat – those juices which have been absorbed might taste delicious today but in a few days can be very nasty for your insides. To avoid buckling, always wash and wet both sides evenly and dry standing on edge.

Plastic/ man-made boards are a good choice, particularly if you get a couple which can go into the dishwasher. Yet beware; it's now reckoned one of these boards can be more dangerous than a wooden board once it is scratched, cut and pitted; plenty of bleach and good hot dishwasher washings are the answer. Only restaurants need to use different colours for different foods, but if you have a busy kitchen with a number of people cooking you'll need a number of boards anyway and so going the colour way will help prevent cross contamination when the right hand doesn't know or care what the left hand is doing.

**Citrus juicers:** for goodness sake don't risk ruining your hands any more by straining out the pips of oranges and lemons between your fingers, no, not even if this is what Jamie chooses to do. Mechanical ones, which work when you apply pressure, are very good, and even non-mechanised squeezers are better than they used to be. Outflanking all are the flash models relying on elbow grease applied to a phallic extremity, Italian of course. Whatever you end up with, make sure they also strain out the pips.

You get more juice from any of these if the citrus has been microwaved whole for 10 – 20 seconds only, so it is warm not hot. This can double the amount of juice you get. Rolling your oranges, lemons and limes to break down some of the internal divisions also gives a better harvest.

**Citrus zester:** a kitchen treasure to which I, like many cooks, would choose to be invisibly attached. It's a short, palm-length handle on top of which is a metal flange in which there are five or six holes: each of those holes is shaped to have a cutting edge.

Draw your zester over the skin of any citrus fruit and you get long pieces of peel with virtually none of the bitter white. You must do this close to and directly over the food it is meant to flavour, so you collect every bit

of the flavoursome oils otherwise that is invisibly squirted wastefully into the ether. I actually use it with the citrus fruit on top and the zester beneath, as this further ensures you trap the nimbus of oil.

The zester is the piece of equipment most food writers would grab if their house were burning. When buying one jiggle the pierced flange. If it bends where the metal narrows to join the handle it is no use, for it either forces you to use too much pressure and go into the bitter white, or it will break.

**Colanders:** these should have feet so they sit firmly in the sink while you are pouring something into them, cooked pasta and its water perhaps. It's good to have one colander with large holes and one with smaller piercings. The holes should have been punched as far as at least a third of the way up the sides, or the draining takes too long.

Colanders should not be used for steaming vegetables unless you are going to use the steaming liquid in the finished dish. For instance, if you steam cauliflower over milk, you then have cauliflower-flavoured milk to make your cheese sauce. If you steam over water and then discard that, you are also throwing away much of the flavour and nutrition of the cauliflower, because it has been dissolved and dripped into that water.

**Culinary thermometers:** the greatest comfort offered by a culinary thermometer is to signal if your oven is hotter or cooler than indicated. In fact it's worth buying a hanging oven-thermometer and leaving it permanently in the oven as a constant check. A second culinary thermometer must be able to check the temperature of oil or fat and to do the same for sugar syrups. You can do without such aids, but if they are there or someone wants to know what to buy for your birthday . . .

**Egg beaters:** many very good cooks swear by the old-school, hand-driven rotary beater. They say by adjusting their speed and where they put the beaters they can best control the end result of eggs, cream and the like. You can often pick them up for very little in junk shops but it is best to get modern versions: they should feel sturdy in the hands and quieter ones with siliconised or plastic bearings make kitchen life altogether more serene.

If you are a baker and biscuit maker you might feel happier with a well-powered electric hand beater, a mainstay in the kitchen for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even if you use them only properly to cream butter and sugar, something woefully few of us ever do, they will give big results.

Cake mixtures clearly take longer to beat with a hand-held beater than with a big food mixer, and the recommendation is to choose only an electric beater that comes with a bench stand of some type so it is able to stand and beat independent of human help: best choices are the models with a turning base, so the bowl rotates and the mixture is evenly beaten, something easy to overlook if you are doing it by hand. When your beater is able to work away itself the mixture is more likely to be beaten the proper length of time, rather than being cut short because your arm hurts. See Whisks

**Egg slicers:** who slices eggs? These are terrific for slicing soft mozzarella cheeses or chalky goat cheeses. And kiwifruit, although I think they look better cut into lengthwise segments. Each to his own, mate.

**Food mixer:** for large-scale food preparation there is still nothing to compete with a husky and heavy food mixer like the Kenwood Chef, the crack Commando Force of the kitchen, powerful enough to use continuously for hour after hour, year after year. It has a choice of big capacity bowls and plenty of attachments: with the right ones you can mince meat, fill sausage casings, collect citrus juice, whisk egg whites wonderfully, make huge cakes and plenty of biscuits, and knead every type of yeasted dough.

You might not need to use one of these much – getting by with an egg beater and a food processor attachment - but when you want what they can do, they seem heaven sent. When you start, spend money on the power and leave attachments until you are sure you need them. An attachment you might consider early on is the dough hook, which takes the work out of bread making and heavy fruit cake mixtures: with the latter, a dough hook is less likely to break or squash dried fruit in the mixture.

As kneading dough is one of the most potent symbols of domestic comfort, try it by hand first, to absorb the pleasures and learn the targets. If this doesn't work for you, get yourself attached. Old models work brilliantly well, so don't ignore second-hand or hand-me-downs. The socially insecure will love the slick and sassy new models in fire-engine red and stainless steel; they are so sturdy you can balance a glass of water on top of one even when whisking at the highest speed.

**Food processor:** when the food processor hit the market in the 70s, it entirely changed the way people cooked and what they cooked. Suddenly here was something which could do the miserable tasks of a cook or cook's assistant, those servants once commonplace in all but the least houses, but who began to disappear in the Twenties and Thirties. A food processor could chop, puree, blend and slice with ease, so lighter but more complicated food became possible again: anyone with a processor could serve food once needing one or two staff in the kitchen.

Then for many years, decades perhaps, the food processor was the most used piece of kitchen equipment and some food writers went berserk, even changing blades to chop a tablespoonful of parsley - an example of the brainless techno-phile sort of cook-writer who believes using clever equipment makes a better cook and/or writer.

The food processor has little competition when it comes to chopping or chopping and mixing, but it can't make a smooth mixture from a wet lumpy one. It simply can't produce a good result if you add cooked vegetables together with lots of stock or water to make a soup – you will always have lumps. The technique is to drain away the liquid and to process the solid food first, and then to add back the liquid – but see liquidisers.

Food processors can't whisk egg whites, because their rotary action does not incorporate air, as is needed. Many newer processors come with a whisking attachment, but frankly there are easier ways to whisk eggs. For chopping small amounts of herb, a mini processor is simpler and actually better. So are knives.

Now the processor has been put much more in its place. Yet for creaming the butter and sugar and then making superbly light cake mixtures the food processor excels if you change to the plastic rather than metal blade: my banana cakes zoom off into another world. A processor will puree cooked or raw fruits in a trice, chop big quantities of nuts, make terrific chopped meat mixtures for hamburgers or skinless sausages or pate.

**Frying mesh:** a lid on a frying pan is first line of defence for *neatnik* cooks, who would rather have a tidy kitchen than good food. But do this and steam can't escape and will condense, falling back onto the food to make it soggy or falling into the oil to spit, spark and explode.

A frying mesh is the answer. This is a pan-sized circle of mesh held by stout wire and with a handle. The mesh fits over a frying pan, and whereas steam can escape – as it should - spitting fat or oil gets caught. When you are done the mesh washes quickly in hot soapy water or goes in the dishwasher. Being able to see the food cooking is an added advantage.

**Graters:** graters should have several sizes of gauge, and if you do not run to a separate mandolin qv, one of the graters should have a long single slot for cutting very fine vegetable slices: it's quite the best way for cutting thin cucumber or potato slices. Be determined and buy only graters that do not buckle when you press hard on the centre of each side. Food processors with slicing blades do it faster.

**Hand blender:** think of this as a liquidiser without walls, for the blades look similar and work the same way.

Also called a wand, the hand blender is not an egg beater and will not whisk egg whites or beat up cream. But it will get the lumps out of almost anything and, marvellously, do it right there in the bowl or in the saucepan without damaging either. Easy to clean, easy to maintain, these are a modern day must. The most powerful models will chop ice cubes.

Some also come with an eggbeater attachment and these are the recommended choice if you are not likely to be using this every day.

**Knives:** spending heaps on knives will not make you a better cook or chef. Yet it's a comforting thing to have knives you can rely on to perform when they should, in the way you want, and at the price you are prepared to lavish.

There are two benchmarks for kitchen-knife safety. The most dangerous thing in a kitchen is a blunt knife, and for general use the bigger, heavier and longer the knife blade, the easier it is to use. Nothing is more self-defeating than using a small blade to do big jobs; you'd be faster and safer with a bigger, heavier blade.

Blunt knives are dangerous because you have to use more force to make them work, thus if you slip the knife cuts with all the force you have been using. It can be very nasty. A sharp knife has not required such force, and if it slips hardly cuts at all. Comparatively.

It's common for amateur cooks to try most kitchen jobs with a knife too small and too blunt. They often know it's time-consuming and wasteful and stress inducing yet resist buying or using a bigger knife. If you are one of these, stop mucking about and get a couple of better, bigger knives. The bigger the knife the longer the cutting edge, and the longer the cutting edge the more control you have and the faster the job is done.

Most cooks tend to use just two or three knives, and if you are starting off, that's all you need too. These should be a small knife, usually sold as a paring or peeling knife and a 20cm/ 8" cook's knife and a heavier knife that's 25cm/10" or 30cm/12": knives specially for boning or for cutting ham can wait.

When choosing, hold each knife in your hand a good decent time to see if they are balanced – this means something different to everyone but as you are the one paying and using it is only you who counts. Generally there is an expectation knives should balance around the point the blade meets the handle.

For most slicing, professionals are taught to hold a knife with their thumbs on top of the handle, running parallel with the blade. Non-professionals tend to have their forefinger on top of the handle, considered the sign of an amateur in many kitchens. Try holding your knives with your thumb on top of the handle. It does give you much more power, and you'll be certain no-one will call you names when you perform publicly.

Good knives are expensive. To get your money's worth, there are marks of quality. The metal of the knife's blade should continue up through the handle as one continuous piece: the metal that's part of the handle is known as the tang. The universal sign of quality is to find the two sidepieces of the handgrip attached to the tang by rivets, which go through from one side to the other. If there is also a generous guard of metal where the grips meet the blade, so much the better.

These days there are also knives cast of metal in one piece including the handle, like the brilliantly designed Australian Furi brand; I say brilliant because the handles are the opposite shape to what you expect, tapering backwards, but this is exactly the shape of your hand when holding a knife. I'll say it again. Brilliant, and you feel much safer with them.

For hygiene's sake these and other one-piece knives are best of all because moisture and bacteria will eventually get into any joins on other

knives – this is why all other knives must be put into a dishwasher with the blade down, handle up, so water cannot seep between the grips and the tang.

**Liquidiser/ Blender/Vitamiser:** A liquidiser cannot chop dry food, whether nuts, herbs, vegetables or meat –a food processor does this. A liquidiser is the only equipment other than a hand blender/wand qv able to take a predominantly wet mixture of cooked food and liquid – a soup mixture for instance - and then make from it an homogenous end product: a gorgeous velvety vegetable soup rather than a reminder the cat is not well.

The very shape of the liquidiser is planned to hurl the solids back onto the blades again and again, and their high speed emulsifies the pureed solids with the liquid. When it first came on to the market not long after the end of WWII a favourite demonstration was to put a banana and some milk into a liquidiser and then to add a whole egg, shell and all. The liquidiser did such a good job you could not tell you were drinking egg shell.

Unless your food processor has a liquidiser attachment you think is solid and reliable you can never go wrong also having a liquidiser at hand, if only for milk shakes or smoothies..

**Mandolin:** all kinds of these are around, from expensive stainless steel ones for slicing truffles to those sleek plastic ones hucksters hawk at food shows. They make a professional difference to cucumber slices you salt and drain for sandwiches, make deep-fried beetroot, carrot or ginger slices practical and cut remarkably deeply if you do not concentrate, so the huckster type which comes with a device which fits between your hand and the blade is a good choice.

**Measuring cups and jugs:** you can't have too many but buy only the heat and shock-proof glass ones that go anywhere, take anything and have easy to read scales on their sides. An excellent use is for cooking rice or for making sauces in your microwave: do the measuring as you go, cook and serve all in the same jug. Unless you have company you think is better than you are.

Microwaved white sauces, custards, chocolate sauces and all their mates are a dream made in a jug which can then go directly to the table, and lumps are unknown.

Beware the great cup divide. Few books and fewer cookery writers seem to know there is a difference between what an American means by a cup measure and what a Briton means. The British pint is 25% bigger than the US pint: converted to fluid ounces this means a British pint is 20 fl ozs but an American one is only 16 fl oz; thus a British cup is 10 fl oz and an American one is only 8 fl oz. In modern talk this means the British cup is 300mls and the US cup is but 250mls.

Today Australia and New Zealand both use the American system of 250ml cups but this happened as they changed to metric systems: when I was growing up they used the English cup and sometimes used both; a teacup measure was the smaller, a breakfast cup the bigger. It's worth remembering these differences when cooking from books you have inherited. Cooking with cup measures rather than measuring is very much faster and simpler, as long as you're consistent with the cup you use throughout a recipe

**Measuring spoons:** vital for small amounts. Get Imperial measurement spoons too. But don't be hung up on exactitude. Very few dishes recipes will be ruined by too much or too little of an ingredient. Anyway, if your cinnamon is a bit old – you might have to use twice what you first thought to get the flavour. But do *think* about it – is a 1/8 teaspoonful going to make a difference or is it there because it sounds good? If you cannot identify the flavour or the effect of an ingredient in the cooked dish, leave it out, or use more. Much more.

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**Mortar and pestle:** you might not think you need this most ancient of kitchen equipment, but once you get one it becomes an essential. A mortar and pestle are the only way authentically to make the thick flavouring bases for much Asian and Oriental food, particularly those from Thailand: you can make something similar in a food processor, but this doesn't express the vital oils and juices, because it is cutting finely rather than bruising and breaking down the fibres the way your mortar and pestle can do to release the oils.

There's no other way to crush sugar and mint together for a true mint julep, no better way to crush spices, from black pepper to cardamom. From there it is but a skip and a jump to pound up quantities of such mixed-spice exotica as ras el hanout or za'atar.

Very big mortars can be too heavy to lift to and from a shelf for some people, so think carefully and if in doubt buy smaller than you first thought. Metal, stoneware or wood will be a preference you develop,

remembering wood might absorb some of the very fragrance you are hoping to obtain. Wipe out or wash your mortar and pestle each time you use it, and from time to time scald them with very hot water and a tiny amount of detergent. This will remove the top layer at least of oil residue, which undoubtedly oxidizes over time and might affect fresher flavours.

**Pasta maker:** only if you really must. It's a bit poncey to make your own when fresh pasta is so readily available. If you do, remember it is only commercial manufacturers which have the grunt to roll pasta made with hard durum wheat flour. Home makers always used soft flour because its lower gluten content makes it a heap easier to roll. Soft 00 grade Italian flour is best and many supermarkets sell it in their specialty rather than flour sections.

**Scales:** modern electronic ones are by far the best. They can be pocket sized yet be adjusted to take the weight of heavy bowls and solid measuring jugs into consideration. Leaving a part-filled bowl or jug on the scale, you reset the scale to zero and then add the next ingredients thus using only one bowl. Most such scales will also convert from metric to imperial weights: it is an advantage if the switch for this is easily reached and not on the bottom of the base. There are versions of these add-on scales that are not electronically powered and they are very inexpensive. No small kitchen should be without one of either kind. The dishwashing they save is fantastic.

**Sieves:** two or three sieves of different sizes and mesh gauge are indispensable; use them over bowls to drain and steam-dry pasta before it is sauced or quickly to drain summer berries, but only wash these if they were noticeably polluted. All sauces are improved by being sieved or *passed* as professionals say, even if they are not lumpy. Sieves save the day if you think you dropped your ring in the custard. And you'll never make truly wondrous mashed potatoes without pushing them through a sieve.

Whatever you are pushing through a sieve, do it with the back of a soup ladle and it all happens much more speedily, and you can use lots of pressure too so the yield is greater. In the olden days, yes, even as long ago as the 1960s, you could buy wooden mushrooms for the purpose: if you see one in a junk shop, buy it.

**Soup ladle:** for ladling rather than pouring, but also see Sieves.

**Timers:** plural. Have at least one which you can take into another room so you really don't miss the alarm. There are really groovy expensive designer timers, but the retro wind-up model for less than a fiver from John Lewis does me well.

**Toaster:** is toast why life was invented? What's better comfort any time of the day, made with chewy sourdough or proper white bread, bread that doesn't squash down into glop but makes toast that fights back and bites back in the mouth with the taste of good flour. Make sure your toaster can adjust to a choice of widths, so you can toast crumpets, or waffles or cinnamon bagels - whatever. If you fancy the romantic idea of toasting bread and crumpet by the fire, there is a proper technique. First the slices must be heated through at some distance from the fire, and only then do you advance them close enough to brown. Put them close to the fire from the start and they will burn on the outside but turn out to be cold inside, a bit like many first dates.

Please don't lay toast down and butter it directly from the toaster but stand it up first to steam dry and crisp on the outsides. Definitely do not go girlie and fold it into a napkin, guaranteeing steamed sogginess. That's why you need a . . .

**Toast rack:** choose one which does not have solid dividers – these are usually made of china or porcelain. The metal ones you can buy second hand for less than the verse of a song are just the thing. The toast must be put into the slots the moment it comes from the toaster so it steams itself crisp on the outside from the very start. It's a very luxurious thing to be given toast in one's own rack, so if you encourage sleepovers, live in a flat which has pretensions to couth, or simply want to bring up children knowing the best things in life start with crisp toast in the morning, individual racks are the way to go. If you know why so many people eat warm, crushed mush and yet call it toast, please tell me.

**Whisks:** for small amounts of liquid and for egg whites, the metal whisk or balloon whisk is what professional kitchens are more likely to use than an electric beater. This is partly because they love doing things the harder, longer way and also because it gives absolute control over final texture. They can be very hard work if you are not used to them. There is a scientific basis for a copper bowl giving greater volume to beaten whites so that is a combination well worth the effort – except you get the same increased volume if you use an electric beater with a copper bowl. It's the interaction of the egg's albumen with the copper which works the magic.

Have one or two small whisks always handy for little jobs – lightly beating together some eggs for an omelet and hang some bigger ones conveniently close. You can safely leave the really big ones to the boys in the professional kitchen. But don't be precious about beating. Often a fork will do just as well.

**Woks:** if you cook for just one or two a wok can be fun. For more than this buying a wok is a waste of time. It simply can't get hot enough to do what a real wok does in its countries of origin: you are just as well off with a deep frying pan, and even so, even with a so-called wok-burner, you might only be stirring a steamy fry-up. Pointless. There is a surprising solution in the section on microwave techniques in the book. If you have a useless wok, turn it into the star of the household by using it to smoke something, a technique also in the book..

# MORE RECIPES FOR YOUR BASIC REPERTOIRE

The problem with today's many How to Cook books is they tell you only how to cook the author's latest recipe. Once you've done that there's little chance you can go off and create your own recipe, because the basic stuff you need to know is camouflaged by caramelized chilli jam, a *frou-frou* of broad beans and several dots of something you thought was supposed to make a sauce.

So here are basic recipes for a range of dishes and goodies which prepare you to take off into your own flights of fancy – to cook without even these recipes.

Day to day food is quite simple again even when entertaining, and thus many people (and rather a lot of restaurants) cook in a style which needs only marginally good technique, that is an ability to poach, grill, roast or bake acceptably. Each of the following recipes also has the mastery of an important cookery technique as its goal. But some of the basics, like grilling, I have left for you to sort out. It shouldn't take time to learn using too much heat means charred outsides and raw insides. But it can . . .

These recipes complement those Basic Repertoire recipes in the book:  
HOW TO COOK WITHOUT RECIPES (PORTICO)

## BAKING

Scones

The Essential Sponge Cake

Orange Syrup Cake

Mellow Yellow Banana Cake

The Ultimate Chocolate Cake/Dessert

Bread – The White Loaf

## ROASTING

Slow-roasted Pork Belly

Goosing your Spuds

## BOILING

Bouillabaisse

## BRAISING

Game Birds

## SIMMERING

Vegetable soups – single, mixed and roasted

Onion Soups

Barley/Pulse Broths

## STEWING

Beef stew

## MICROWAVE STEAMING

Steamed Garlic Prawns

The Essential Steamed Pudding

Marguerite Patten's Perfect Christmas Pudding

Tumbled Potatoes

## MICROWAVE SIMMERING

Cajun Smoky-Lime Chili Beans with Chocolate

## THE MICROWAVE RISOTTO

## STOCKS AND SAUCES

Vegetable Stock

Rich Brown Chicken Stock

Fish Stock

White and other Thickened Sauces

Guinness/Beer Sauce for Sausages

Custard Sauces

Chocolate Sauces

Cream Sauces

Tomato Sauces

Salsas