

A yellow graphic element consisting of two L-shaped brackets. One bracket is on the top-left, and the other is on the bottom-right, framing the text.

LIFE THROUGH
FOOD



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Life Through Food

Free eBook

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LIVING IN THE MOMENT...

We celebrate life every day and we don't even know it. We celebrate our achievements, our relationships, our good health, we even celebrate time spent alone. Our lives are made up of a series of moments that we connect ourselves to, and in this space of living, it's easy to allow the moment to pass us by.

But I believe that cooking, and as a result eating, is the easiest way to connect us to the moments that make up our lives.

This can be as small as the popcorn on a cosy night in with your partner or an entire banquet spread for a friend's birthday. The moment shouldn't be for the food, but the food should very much a part of the moment.

Think about it. The "dinner" we cooked in University halls, the first thing you cooked your partner, your mothers stew, the bacon sandwich you eat when you're hungover. There is a language to food and cooking that acts as the connective tissue between who we are and the moment we're serving.

However, having said this, so many people

write off cooking, and the food it produces, as mere sustenance or something that *'has to happen'*. And while there are degrees of truth to this, these people are missing the magic that happens in the middle.

The magic being that food can root us to life in a very gentle yet meaningful way. Don't get me wrong, nobody has time to dedicate their lives to cooking, but I wanted to write this eBook to highlight the connective power that food can have when it's adapted to suit our lives.

This is a collection of life-friendly recipes that tell the story of everyday living.

These recipes aren't trying to shame you into the Kitchen. Quite the opposite. I'm going to show you the small joys that food can have in connecting you to a moment, to a person, to yourself.

A life through food is not a life where you are tethered to a Kitchen and forced to a life of Cinderella stove slavery. A life through food is one where you can still experience the joys

of living but introduce food and cooking as the emotional markers for them.

Cooking and food needn't be the reason to celebrate. Friends don't have social gatherings purely to celebrate food. Actually, mine might. We gathered to celebrate a pie once. But you have gatherings to mark special moments, and what you eat while you do, plays a part in the memory of this celebration.

Food can support the foundation on which we live our lives. And that's what this collection is all about.

Because if food has the power to tell the story of your life, then cooking has the power to let you write it.





USEFUL BITS

Useful bits are the backbone to a home cook's repertoire. Having a couple of Mary Poppin tricks up your sleeve can make your life a lot easier and tastier without needing to call yourself an amazing cook.

Half of cooking is tuning your instinct and giving a little thought to what food is right for the moment. Going with your gut on what food fits in the right situation. If the food doesn't serve the moment, don't bring it in the room.

So, I've started this collection with a few useful recipes that have helped me in my life. The kind of recipes that are easily adaptable to whatever ingredients you have in the house but always good to have up your sleeve for when the time calls.

Sometimes somebody pops over last minute and you don't want to put out half a box of stale crackers and the arse-end of a cheese block as a welcome spread.

It takes seconds to whip up an amazing hummus using some store cupboard bits, so why not familiarise yourself with how to make it so you have this cooking nonsense on standby?

And in fact, sod your friends, sometimes it's nice to eat hummus alone.

So, this section is a handful of very easy and resourceful recipes that you can take with you through life and never have to worry about what to make for a quick breakfast, what to quickly serve if somebody pops by and even how to use up all the leftover vegetables at the end of a weekend.

French Bagels with Blueberry & Orange Compote

A breakfast that consists of anything more than sliding bread in a toaster or throwing some kind of oatly flake on a yogurt should be reserved for the weekend, when you can really enjoy the process.

These bagels are exactly for that moment. That moment when you're hunkered around a table with your muckers or your family, passing around the sauce, pouring coffee and discussing the fun of the weekend to come or the shame of the night that's passed.

This is also good for using up those two or three buzzing bagels you got hanging about at the bottom of the bag. You know the ones. You could also do this with stale bread, if you have it.

Makes 4 bagels

For the compote:

150g blueberries

1 orange

1 tbs maple syrup

For the bagels:

2 bagels

150ml full-fat milk

2 eggs

1 tbs soft brown sugar

1 tsp vanilla extract

1 tsp cinnamon

For the cream:

200g cream cheese

1 tsp vanilla extract

Start with your compote so at least it's done. Combine the ingredients in a pan with a tiny splash of water, give everything a stir and put it on the hob with the heat on high. Once everything comes to a bubble, drop the heat low and let it simmer gently on your lowest heat.

For the bagels, you want them stale, hard and unappetising. If they're soft and fudgy, slice and toast them slightly first. When they're tough, combine the bagel mix in a shallow tray and drop them cut side down to soak up the mix. Leave them to soak it up for roughly 3-4 minutes.

In this time, you may as well mix up the cream ingredients until the cream cheese is soft and *dollop-able*. Put it to one side for later.

In a frying pan, melt a dab of butter, swirling it around so it coats the whole pan. Take your soaked bagels, give them a gentle shake to get rid of any 'batter excess' and drop them face down into the buttery pan. You want to cook them for about 2-3 minutes before flipping it and cooking for a further 1-2 minutes.

By this point, the compote would have reduced to a sexy, jam like sauce. Get the bagels served by pouring over the cream cheese, dribble over the compote, and have a good day.



Orange Olive Oil, Coconut & Apricot Granola

Remember that oatly flake thing I mentioned in the last recipe? This is that oatly flake thing. Designed specifically for the moments when you wake up, you're 5 minutes late, you've still got crust in your eyes, your clothes aren't ironed and a you stink of gin. We know the feeling well, right?

The best thing about this recipe is that you make it on a day where you're free and less rushed, so all you must do in the morning you need it, is to throw it on some yogurt or into a bowl with some milk over it. This enables us to do more important things. Like get our entire lives together in the space it takes for us to get to work. Good luck, though.

Makes 1 big jar

150g jumbo oats

90g mixed seeds

100g whole almonds

1/2 tbs cinnamon

2 oranges

70ml olive oil

100ml honey

1 tbs vanilla extract

50g dried apricots

50g desiccated coconut

100g raisins

Preheat the oven to 180C.

Combine the oats, mixed seeds, almonds and cinnamon in a big bowl. Squeeze over the juice of one of the oranges, pour in the oil, honey and vanilla extract and mix everything so it's all coated.

Tip the mixture across two lined baking trays and give them a shake so the oats sit in even layers. Once the oven is preheated, slip the trays in the oven for 15 minutes.

Take the trays out, give everything a little rustle around (don't burn yourself for Christ's sake) and put them back in the oven for another 10 minutes. While they bake, finely chop the apricot pieces just so that you're ready. If this takes more than 10 minutes, have a word with yourself.

After the granola trays have had a full 30 minutes, take them out of the oven and throw over the cut-up apricots, the coconut and raisins. Slip them back in the oven for a final 15 minutes.

Take them out and let them cool before storing in a big container. Or do as the millennials and I do sometimes and store it in a big old antique looking jar. It apparently makes us look cooler.

It'll last for a month, so all your lazy mornings are covered.



Tunisian Hummus

I remember eating hummus with my best friend from University, lying on our stomachs and watching an old country-western film. We weren't sober, so don't question our movie choices. We dipped pita breads into big, gritty tubs of the stuff. It was only when I realised how easy it was to make did I swear off the store-bought packs and started playing around with recipes. This one holds its own against some of my favourites.

I recommend making a bowlful the morning some of your mates are coming over and keeping it in the fridge so all you must do is rip up some pitas, whip out the bowl and greet them when they arrive. No lack of sobriety and country-western movie required.

Makes around
400ml

1 x 400g can of
chickpeas (about
240g when drained)

½ tbs oil from the jar
of sundried
tomatoes

1 garlic clove

6/7 sundried
tomatoes

1 tbs harissa paste

½ tsp cinnamon

1 tbs tahini paste

1 tsp lemon juice

To serve:

A handful of
pumpkin seeds

Torn up toasted
pitas

Drain a can of chickpeas and throw them into the bowl of a food processor.

From your jar of sundried tomatoes, dribble some of the oil into a frying pan. Raw garlic has a real acrid taste to it so to take the sting out, grate it into the cold oil. Turn the hob on to a medium heat and cook the garlic until it starts gently sizzling. Add the sundried tomatoes and cook for a few minutes.

Add the harissa paste and cinnamon and stir everything until the paste loosens a little and becomes spiked with the aromatic garlic. Take the pan off the heat and allow to cool.

Once cooled, scrape the garlic harissa paste into the processor bowl with the chickpeas before adding the tahini paste and lemon juice. Add a little salt and pepper and blitz the mixture until it's smooth, but you may need to scrape down the sides now and then.

Empty the hummus into a bowl and just before serving, scatter with some pumpkin seeds and some pitas which you can just char up in a toaster and snip with a scissors.



Whipped Feta & Honey Turmeric Tartine

Okay. I understand this title may sound as though this is going to be served to a sophisticated bunch, but, it stemmed from a rowdy pre-sesh gathering. But lowkey, I don't even need company to indulge in this – it's only a handful of ingredients.

So, a tartine is literally just a fancy word for 'open sandwich' (or some bits on toast, basically) so don't be off-put by the word. Whipped feta requires just a quick whizz, but if you don't have an electric whisker, break it up into pieces and beat as hard as you can with a spoon.

Also, if you're feeling like a twist, swap the pomegranates for figs or some seedless green grapes.

Makes around 5/6 tartines

1 baguette style bread

100g feta cheese

4 tbs sour cream

2 tbs honey

¼ tsp turmeric

1 tsp cider vinegar

1 tsp extra virgin olive oil

100g pomegranates (from a packet)

Preheat the oven to 200C and slice your bread into little discs. I won't annoy you and give you a measurement, just cut them into little canapes to give you roughly 5/6 baguette disks. You also get longer, bigger tartines if you cut on the diagonal.

Put the feta into a bowl and break it up as best as you can, either with a fork or an electric whisker. Add the sour cream and give it a whisk.

You need a good Michelle Obama bicep for this if you don't have an electric whisker, but consider it your weekly gym alternative, yeah?

Combine the honey, turmeric, cider vinegar and oil in a little bowl. It won't create much, but you won't need a lot of this golden, Midas dressing. Just a dribble is enough,

Place the baguette disks on a baking sheet and slide them into the oven for about 6 or 7 minutes until they are golden.

Once the baguettes (now tartines) are nice and toasty remove them and carefully place on a plate. Spread the whipped feta over the little disks, dribble each with the honey turmeric and then dot with the pomegranates.

Serve with something fancy. Just because of showing off, you know.



Firecracker Sauce

There are two types of people in this world. Those that like spice vs. those that don't. You can pretend you're in between if you want, but if you feel like you're in between, you can't handle spice. If you're still here, this sauce will blow your face off.

It originally had the name of Honey Chilli Sauce but my photographer, who tasted this during our photo session (who can handle spice better than anyone I know) said you could fly a plane with it and took some home. I quickly renamed the recipe because I felt 'honey chilli' was too soft and it needed a subtle disclaimer. For those that like spice however, this is a very good dip/sauce that can hold its own served cold with some nachos but could also be drizzled over some noodles and warmed up.

Makes about 200ml

2 garlic cloves

100g red chillies

5 tsp any flavourless oil

5 tbs honey

The juice of 1 lime

In a frying pan, gently fry the garlic cloves in some olive oil until they start to brown. Once browned, chuck them into the bowl of a food processor.

Add all the other ingredients and blitz to a puree. Decant it into a sterilised jar or tub of some description and store until you need it. Also, allowing it to rest a little before you serve it will turn it a sexy, dragon colour and the flavours can amalgamate. I love that world.

Before you serve, read the recipe introduction to your mates and don't apologise to anyone who say it's too hot.

It's their fault.



Quick Mint Lemonade

I once read an article in a magazine that had tips on how to make it look like you have your life together. One tip was to have black and white pictures in frames. Another was to constantly have fresh flowers in vases everywhere. My favourite was to have a jug of water with lemons in it ready for your visitors. I do all three, but this recipe takes it a step further.

However, this isn't done for 'life together' delusions. This is done because it's genuinely an easy and quick alternative to tap water for when your friends are coming around. As I have always said, the only things that deserves water straight from the tap are kettles and house plants.

Makes 1 big jug

A handful of mint leaves

100ml maple syrup

6 lemons

1 litre soda water

To serve:

A handful of ice

Place the mint leaves between two pieces of kitchen towel and bash with the back of a spoon. Get out your anger. This just wakes up the herb, and yourself if you've only just got up.

Add the maple syrup to a big jug before squeezing in the juice of the lemons. The best way to do this to not be troubled by those damn pips, is to put a sieve on top of the jug and squeeze the lemons over it.

Add the mint leaves to the jug and top up with the soda water. Throw in some ice for good measure and serve.

This could also totally be put in a blender and blitzed to a slushie, if you're feeling proper fancy. Then you can call it a Frozen Mint Lemonade.

By the way, this is also good over ice cold gin. You're welcome.



Buffalo Popcorn

Some people would advise you to pop your own corn. I'm not this person.

I like to embrace the conveniences in this modern world that makes our Kitchen a culinary playground and a microwavable paper envelope of popcorn is built for such ease.

Please pop your own corn if you'd like, but for this recipe I've specified a bag you throw in the microwave.

This snack is the stuff sofa nights simply dream of. It makes use of my favourite condiment – Frank's Hot Sauce, which I buy in bulk. A fridge without this stuff is a fridge I don't want.

Makes 1 big bowl of popcorn

1 x 100g packet of salted popcorn

70ml Franks Red Hot Original Sauce

60g butter

Preheat the oven to 100C.

Take your popcorn envelope out of the packet and cook to the packet instruction – watch your fingers for steam when you open the bag mind. Hot popcorn bags can steam like Satan's wrath sometimes.

Empty the popcorn onto a baking sheet, you may need two if one pan isn't big enough

In a bowl, combine the butter and hot sauce and pop in the microwave for about 10-20 seconds so they melt together. Pour this carefully over the popcorn and give it a toss so it lies roughly in one even layer and slide in the oven for 15-20 minutes.

Remove from the oven and give it a little shake to separate the popcorn kernels and serve.

You could put the popcorn into individual bowls to serve, or if it's just you and a loved one, take the cooled trays straight to the sofa and dig in.



Easy Stock

This is a staple in my Kitchen. Not that I have anything against a stock cube, but I find that this easy homemade stuff gives you such a deep flavour, I can't stop myself. Plus, it's so easy to make - why couldn't this be the default household stock? It's also an incredible tip from me to you on how to use up the vegetables leftover from the end of a week.

That's why listing ingredients for this recipe was a ballache because it varies every week depending on what's in the fridge, so please use the list as a template only. I also decant this stock into empty milk cartons which I store in the fridge. Another trick to feel like your life is together.

Makes 1 litre of stock

2 celery sticks

1 leek

1 white onion

1 or 2 carrots

1 garlic clove

1 tbs sea salt

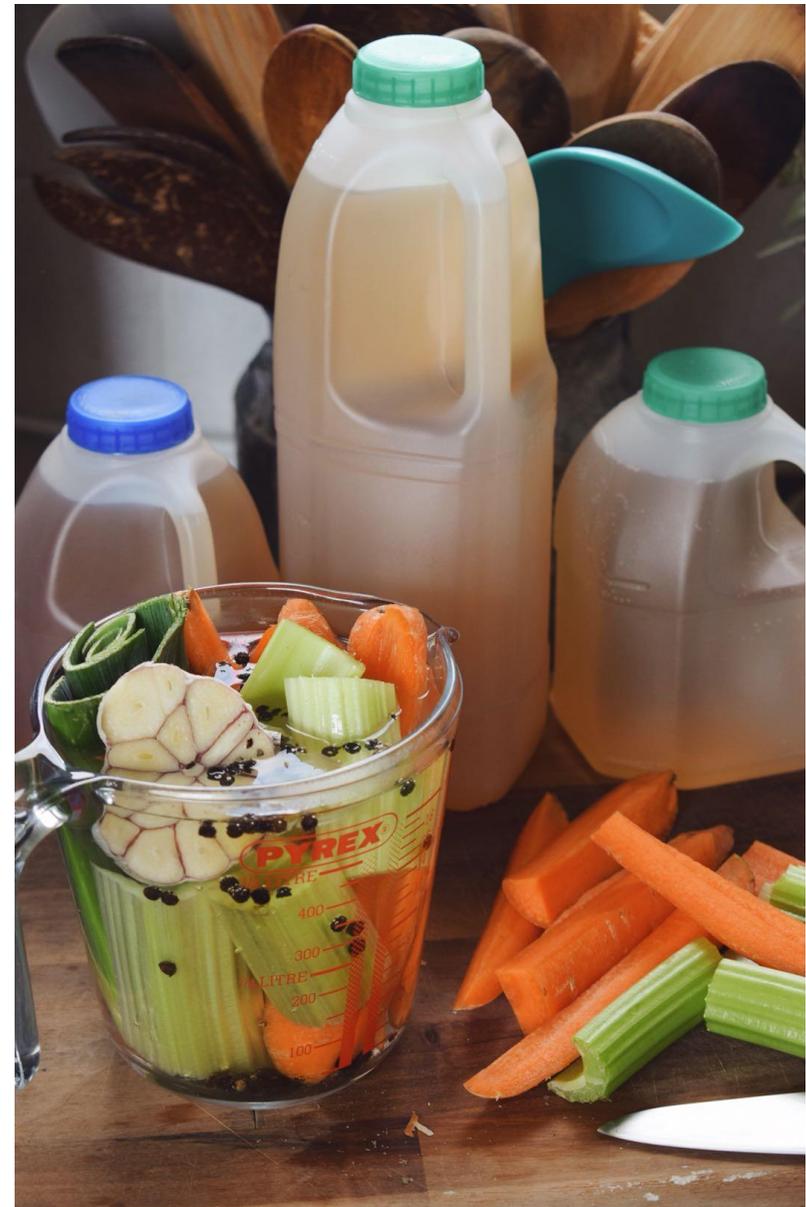
1 tbs black peppercorns

Chop up all your vegetables as sloppily as you want and add all of them into a big pan with a lid or a big jug that you can cover with foil.

Now pour over 1 litre of water from a freshly boiled kettle. Either cover with a lid or the foil. You can also do this with ½ litre jugs if needs be, just go with whatever you got. So long as you're covering chopped veg with boiling water, we're good.

Leave this to sit for about an hour but if you want a richer stock, leave it for longer. I tend to keep it a little lighter so that it can be a little more versatile in its uses.

Like I said in the introduction, I decant this into empty milk bottles and store in the fridge, but feel free to keep in any kind of liquid vestibule you so choose and keep it in the fridge for whenever you need it. It should keep for up to a week.



COOKING FOR YOURSELF

It's always amused me that we are often at our laziest (culinary speaking) when we are faced with the task of cooking for ourselves.

The attitude of *'oh, it doesn't matter if it's only for me'* is a default attitude that we are all guilty of, and we often put a lot more effort into how we cook for others over how we cook for ourselves.

But as my homegirl Samantha Jones from *Sex and the City* once said, *"I love you, but I love me more"*.

Therefore, I urge you to cook for yourself with the same approach as you'd cook for somebody else. Cooking for yourself allows you to be connected to your Kitchen in a more relaxed environment. In this calm can you truly find the rhythm of food and develop a relationship with it.

I'm not going down the meditative route here, but the act of isolated cooking (and eating) is a connection to something very simple. It's a connection to your own life and by proxy, a connection to yourself.

The pressure is off when you cook for yourself, so in this space of being burden-free, you should embrace your Kitchen.

Here I've outlined four examples of when cooking for yourself is needed: a lone evening, a feel-better soup, a salad for when you want to be good and a work lunch,

Four recipes to mark stolen moments of solitude that are rarely afforded and should be celebrated in such a fast-paced world.

Thyme, Leek & Butterbean Farfalle

Cooking pasta just seems like the go-to 'lone eating' starting point, doesn't it? It's mine, anyway. And there are a few things I will always do when I cook pasta. The first being to put a dash of the pasta cooking water into the sauce because the starch in the water recognises the starch on the pasta and then hugs it. So cute, right?

This pasta dish is perfect for when you need to eat quickly and alone of an evening. It's quick enough that you can do it still in your work clothes but it's sneakily decadent enough to feel like you've eaten a proper meal. And pasta is so safe. You know what you're getting every time so a meal like this always feels like a familiar friend to me.

Makes 1 bowl

50g butter

½ a leek

80g farfalle pasta
(bowtie!)

1 x 400g of butter
beans (about 240g
when drained)

A few tablespoons or
so of fresh thyme

To serve:

1 lemon

A grating of Parmesan
(I use a vegetarian
one)

Fill a kettle and get it boiled.

Melt the butter in a big pan on a low heat while you prepare your leek. Drag the tip of a knife gently down the length of the leek and slip off the outer skin. Half the leek and slice the one half into thin half-moons and drop them into the pan of butter, giving them a stir.

If you're stuck with the other leek half, stash it in your fridge and keep it towards making the stock on page 15.

Once the leek softens, pour your boiled water into a large pan and bring it to a boil. Tip in your pasta, salt the water, give it a stir and leave it alone to bubble for like 9 minutes or so.

Drain the can of butter beans and chuck into the leeks. Now drop in some thyme leaves (I literally just rip from the stalk) and stir everything together. Fry for the rest of the pasta cooking time and just before the pasta is done, take out a little of the cooking water with a mug.

Drain the pasta and then quickly throw the bowties into the pan of leeks and beans. Add the reserved pasta water and cook for another minute or so, stirring.

Serve with an extra twist of black pepper, a grating of lemon zest, Parmesan and another dusting of fresh thyme.



Roast Tahini Tomato Soup with Cumin Chickpeas

When people think of soup, they tend to think of endless peeling, boring step-by-step frying and thankless hankering over a big, bubbling pot waiting for some magic to happen. This soup requires none of these steps.

This soup does a soul good. The work is done in the oven and all you do at the end is blitz everything to a liquid. In fact, you don't even need a pan.

The chickpeas are a bit of a revelation to me. By roasting the chickpeas, you create a weird alternative to croutons. But by weird, I mean they are crunchy and chewy at the same time and bring a unique and perplexing texture to the soup. I've made these on their own and eaten them like cereal since this soup. They really are that good.

Makes a big pan of soup

6 vine tomatoes

1 onion

2 garlic cloves

2 tbs tahini paste

1 x 400g can of chickpeas (about 240g when drained)

1 tbs olive oil

1 tbs cumin

1 cup of water

To serve:

A handful of fresh parsley

Preheat the oven to 200C.

Roughly chop up the tomatoes, onion, garlic and throw them onto a roasting tray – preferably a deep one to catch the juices. Pour over the tahini paste, sprinkle over some salt and pepper and smush everything together.

Slide the tray into the oven for 30 minutes.

Drain the chickpeas, pat them dry and empty them into a roasting tray and dribble over the oil. Add the cumin, some salt and pepper and give everything a shake before sliding into the oven after the tomatoes have had their 30 minutes.

Let the chickpeas and tomatoes cook for another 15 minutes (so it's 45 minutes in total for the tomatoes) before taking both out of the oven.

Empty the vegetables into a blender and add the cup of water (or vegetable stock if you're feeling fancy).

Blitz everything to a gorgeous silky soupiness and serve into bowls straight from the blender jug, finished with a scattering of the chickpeas and some chopped parsley, if you feel so inclined.



Wedge Salad with Chickpeas & Truffle Feta

I am nobody's vision of health. Far from it. But I'm human and I know what it's like to be the right side of the wrong scales. Even the fit, skinny people complain about putting on weight. Damn them. But sometimes, a bit of refinement is all it takes to eat a little better.

I always avoid words like 'health foods' and 'diet'. I'd rather say I'm '*making better decisions*'. This salad is one of those choices. My mother introduced me to a wedge salad by slicing a big honking head of lettuce into quarters and then loading it with thick, creamy blue cheese sauce. Cheers Mam.

This is a '*better decisions*' version that still retains the same structure. There's a spiky creaminess to the sauce and crumbly salty feta which rounds out the moreishly bitter crunch of the chickpeas. You could always use any leftover Cumin Chickpeas from the soup on the previous page, if you're lucky enough to have leftovers.

Makes 1 salad

1 x 400g of chickpeas
(about 240g when drained)

1 lemon

1 head of Romaine lettuce

50ml coconut yogurt

1 tbs cider vinegar

1 tsp truffle oil

100g feta

Preheat the oven to 200C.

Drain the chickpeas, pat dry and add to a roasting dish. Drizzle over a tiny bit of olive oil before grating over the zest of the lemon. Add a little salt and pepper and slide into the oven for 15 minutes.

Halve the Romaine lettuce and sit on a plate. In a jug, mix together the yogurt, vinegar, oil and a twist of some fresh black pepper and leave to one side.

Crumble the feta over the baby gems.

After the 15-minute roasting time, take the chickpeas out of the oven and scatter a handful (not an actual hand, don't burn yourself) over the wedge.

Save the leftover chickpeas for another salad on another day - or make the soup in the introduction.

Dribble over the yogurt dressing and serve. To yourself. One should always serve oneself.



Cold Peanut Sriracha Noodles

Nothing frightens me more than a fridge cold sandwich from a local pharmacy or petrol station. For lunch, we all deserve better. This recipe is an ideal one for such mercy to yourself and is something that can be prepared well in advance.

I have an addiction to Sriracha sauce. Before it became widely available in popular supermarkets, any time I would see it in stores I would bulk buy. I once embarrassingly bulk bought from a Thai shop in Brighton and only realised how much of the stuff I'd bought when the paper bag ripped on the way to the car.

The best thing about this recipe? It's all the better eaten cold, so you don't even have to sit and stare at a microwave window while your work lunch heats up. If you can't get your hands on Sriracha... I have no alternatives for you. Find some. You won't regret it.

Makes 1 big bowl to last through the week

170g chestnut mushrooms

1 red pepper

2 carrots

150g sugar snap peas

400g ready-cooked egg noodles

A generous squirt of Sriracha sauce, roughly 3 tbs

1 tbs honey

20g salted peanuts

To serve:

A handful of fresh coriander

Slice up the mushrooms and heat a little olive oil in a pan. Fry the mushrooms in the oil and a little salt until they soften up. Take off the heat and allow to cool.

Chop up the red pepper thinly as possible. For the carrots, I tend to do this by using a vegetable peeler and to hack away at them until they are ribbons. I use this time to relax. Not there's anything relaxing about slicing things into ribbons, but it's repetitive and I find comfort in that.

Throw the sliced peppers, ribboned carrots and whole sugar snaps into a big bowl. Now throw in the ready-cooked noodles. If you want to cook your noodles from scratch, that meaning you get a pack of dried ones and cook them in boiling water, do so. Just run them under the cold water tap before you handle them. Finally, add the cooled mushrooms

Now it's time to spice the gaff up. Add the Sriracha sauce and honey to the bowl before scattering over the salted peanuts.

Use two utensils (or be a caveman like me and use your hands) to toss everything together. Serve with a final scatter of salted peanuts and some chopped fresh coriander.



GATHERINGS

I don't do dinner parties. I don't think I've ever cooked a roast dinner and not set off a fire alarm. That's why it's important when it comes to cooking for more than 2 people, to take the pressure off yourself. It's just you and your mates sat around eating. So, to keep yourself in this mindset when you cook for friends, I have a few things I believe make the process easier.

- Don't bother with starters. Just put some popcorn or crisps on the table
- Make 1 main, 2/3 sides and a desert that's made way ahead of time. I suggest the Salted Butterscotch Puddings on page 33
- Don't worry about table size. I cram 7 people around a table for 4. It's fine
- Go for food that tastes great at room temperature or even cold – that way it doesn't matter if you run late
- Don't plate up. Put things in different serving platters and let people fend for themselves
- Have as little as possible on the hob on the day as possible
- Have a pitcher of water or the Quick Mint Lemonade on page 13 on the table for everyone to help themselves
- Buy one bouquet of flowers and when you get home, unwrap them, trim them down and put them individually in small glasses dotted around the table
- Get a banging playlist on the go – I like a 90's urban playlist myself

I've mapped out a mini menu to guide you calmly into a gathering. With plenty done in advance, it's designed to make sure you can focus on what matters in life, which is making memories and getting pissed with your mates.



Thyme Tomato, Spinach & Blue Cheese Tart

This tart is like a big, fancy pizza. That way it keeps everything moderately casual but still has a slightly more exciting feel to it than an actual pizza. No shade to pizza. Pizza is still king. But a tart isn't on the other end of a phone the way pizza is, so let's go there.

This tart is great for a gathering because it can be made before your gaggle arrive, so you don't have to worry about cluttering about the Kitchen while they wait for you in the other room, laughing and enjoying life without you. I hate when that happens because all you want to do it go and join them.

This, combined with my 3 recommended sides, ensures you spend minimal time in the Kitchen because it's prepped beforehand and cooked alongside 1 of the sides in the oven, so all you do when people arrive is slide both things in the oven.

Makes 1 tart that serves between 6 and 8

320g ready-rolled puff pastry

200g pillow bag of baby spinach

350g vine tomatoes

150g blue cheese (like Stilton)

A light drizzle of oil

A few tablespoons or so of fresh thyme

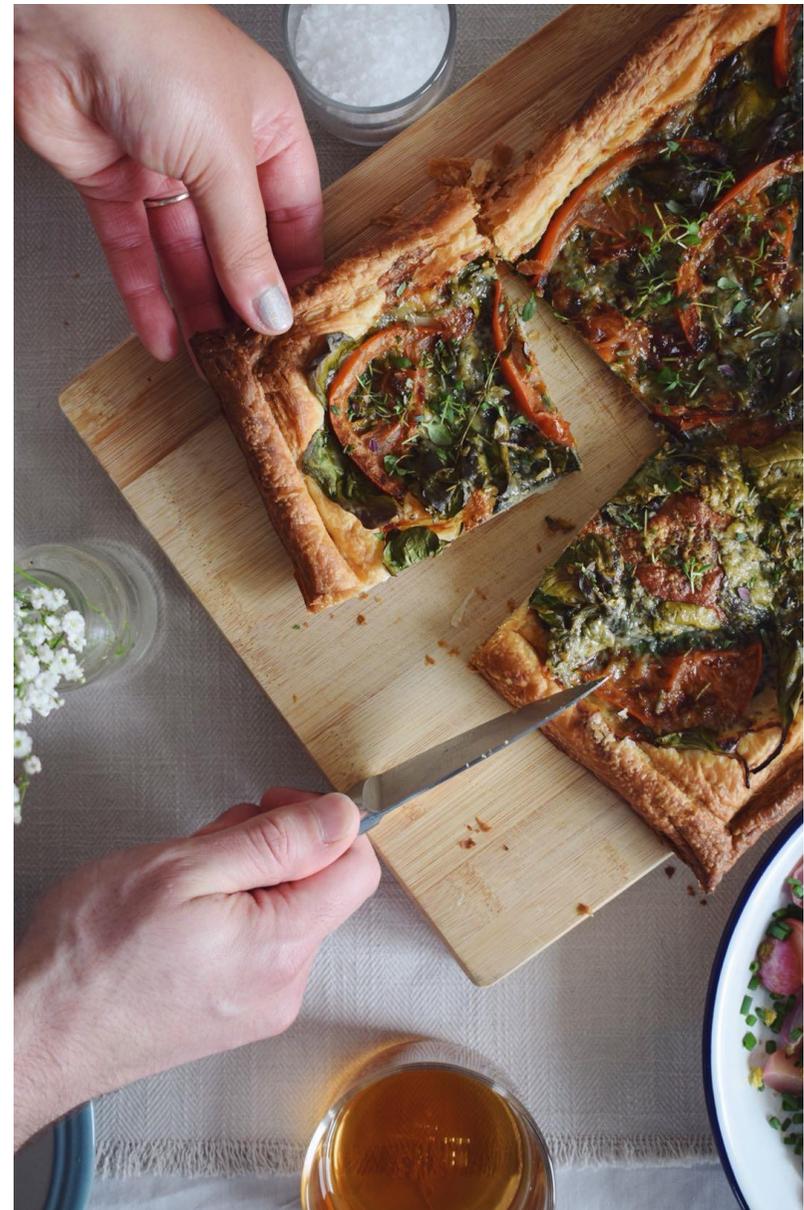
Preheat the oven to 200C.

Get your biggest baking tray and lay a baking sheet on it and then unroll the pastry onto the sheet and lay as flat as you can. Get yourself a sharp knife and gently draw your own rectangle on the pastry leaving about a 1cm gap between your rectangle and the edge.

Now into your rectangle, generously scatter the spinach leaves. Remember that the spinach will decrease significantly in size so feel free to scatter generously – just don't go over the scored border.

Finely slice up the tomatoes and lay them on top and amongst the leaves. Crumble your blue cheese over the spinach and tomatoes making sure they stay in the border but still get nestled amongst the tomatoes and spinach. Throw a small amount of salt and a lot of black pepper over the tart, drizzle over the oil and strew with some fresh thyme.

You can slide it into the oven now or wait until you're ready, but either way it will take about 30 minutes to bake until the cheese and the tomatoes are golden and caramelised.



Truffle Honey Baked Radishes

Baked radishes are banging. The pepperiness disappears and is replaced by a pleasant juiciness, especially when they are touched with the goldenly pungent truffle oil. They make the perfect, crunchy side to a dish, particularly the gentle but gutsy tart on the previous page.

These radishes may seem off-kilter because they don't look as shockingly vibrant pink once they are pulled out of the oven, but one bite of them all glamorously oiled like a poolside pink lady, it's totally different to the familiar peppery crunch we know.

The beauty of combining these radishes with the tart is that the radishes are prepared once the tart goes in the oven and can be slipped into the oven 10 minutes after the tart's gone in because they will only need 20 minutes to bake.

Serves between 6 and 8

400g radishes (that's about two packs)

2 tbs truffle oil

1 tbs honey

1 lemon

To serve:

Handful of chives

Preheat the oven to 200C.

Halve the radishes but don't slice off the little green tail thing. This looks so cute when it's kept on. Drop them on to a baking tray.

Pour over the truffle oil, the honey and scatter over some salt and pepper. Grate over the zest of half of the lemon and stir everything together so that all the radishes are evenly covered.

Slide them into the oven for 20 minutes. Serve with a final gentle scatter of salt, another little drizzle of the truffle oil (which your friends could pour over themselves at the table) and some chopped chives.



Asparagus, Plum & Pea Salad with Almonds

I recommend this salad for this menu purely because it's the only thing you need to do on a stove top on the day. The point is that not only does this salad bring a lot of vibrancy and brashness to the table, but it also brings a sharp, crunchy sweetness to the meal.

People don't usually lust for the green stuff at a dinner party, they want the juicy, gooey stuff but this salad is so rich in flavour and moreish that you don't even realise it's just fruit and vegetables.

But if plums aren't your thing, you could also do this with some pears, but I wouldn't fry them, just slice them up and toss amongst the greens and keep the crunch. It'll be a little more piquant and not as animated to look at, but tasty nonetheless.

My recommendation would be to do this while the tart and radishes are in the oven. It gives you around 20 minutes – so plenty of time to chop up some plums and fry a few bits.

Makes 1 big salad
enough to feed 6 - 8

A handful of flaked
almonds

400g asparagus

400g sugar snap peas

100g frozen peas

4 plums

1 bag of designer
leaves (usually around
100-130g, I choose
watercress)

In a dry pan, fry the almonds until they begin to brown and put to one side.

Fill a pan with boiling water. Add the asparagus and sugar snap peas, put on a lid and cook for 4 minutes. Once this time is up, add the frozen peas and cover for a further 3 minutes. Drain these and pour over some cold water from the tap, to stop the cooking process. Put the green veg between some kitchen paper to dry while you get on with the rest. This part could be done way in advance – even before the tart.

Quarter the plums (taking out the stone) and get a frying pan (or even better a griddle pan) nice and hot. Place the quarters flesh side down in the pan for about two minutes each side until they catch. Remove to a plate to cool slightly.

Scatter the bag of designer leaves on a serving plate and arrange the cooled green veg amongst them. Drop over the charred plum quarters and scatter over the almond flakes.

If you're serving with my other recommendations, don't worry about a dressing because they'll be eaten along with the truffle oil laced radishes. If you're eating this salad on its own, drizzle over some extra virgin olive oil and a scant squirt of lemon juice.



Pearl Tabbouleh

I have listed this last purely because you can make this the furthest away in advance, so it is merely an afterthought on the day when you are preparing. My favourite bit about it though is that it tastes better when it's cold because it has a fresh, bubbly contrast against its feisty counterparts.

I got addicted to pearl couscous (sometimes labelled giant couscous in shops) when I accidentally bought some thinking it was paella rice. I wasn't wearing my glasses. But this couscous really is fantastic – it doesn't have the bitterness that regular couscous has and is not as fussy as rice.

What's more, is that with regular couscous, the grains act as a vehicle to other flavours, whereas pearl couscous has its own distinct nutty flavour which can hold its own against its other ingredients.

If you're serving this alongside my other recommendations, make it the night before and fridge it.

Makes 1 bowl of
couscous to serve 6 - 8

1 cup of pearl
couscous

Half of a cucumber

A handful of vine
tomatoes

2 spring onions

A handful of fresh
parsley

1 lemon

100g pomegranates
(from a packet)

A drizzle of extra virgin
olive oil

Add the couscous to a big pan and put it on the hob on a medium heat. You're looking to toast the couscous here, so once the pan is hot, keep giving it a little shake so that the pearls roll around and start turning a varnished brown colour. Take them off the heat.

Now add 2 cups of water (or double the amount of couscous, basically) and put on a high heat. When it comes to a boil, drop the heat down, salt the water and keep it bubbling for 15-20 minutes, stirring occasionally to separate the grains.

Once the grains have absorbed the water, remove from the heat, cover with a lid and leave to sit and cool.

Once cooled, chop your cucumber, tomatoes and spring onions up into tiny chunks and add to the cooled couscous. Finely chop up the parsley and add with the juice of the lemon and finally the pomegranates.

Serve with some extra parsley scattered on top and a drizzle of oil.





THE SWEET STUFF

Seldom do I crave for something sweet. When my body starts to crave, it is usually cured by a bag of crisps. My body never naturally guides me towards the sweet section of the menu, but what I do because of this, is be very choosy over the sweet things I do eat.

The rhythm of life tells us that moderation is always a good thing and denying ourselves the pleasure of sweet eating is nothing but pointless. Not only is the art of eating something sweet a pleasure to the senses, but the cooking of it is something special.

There is no better feeling than plonking something sweet on a table. Whether this be a big, rustic looking cake in the centre of a dinner table or some brownies you snatch at throughout the week – I have always found that the response of putting out something sweet makes me feel a lot more rewarded than the reaction of putting dinner on the table.

I think this is because people think that baking or cooking sweet things takes more effort. It's more of a performance. Requires more skill. Well not my recipes.

I am not a great baker and will only bake cakes that feel familiar. I much prefer a cake cracked up and leaning towards the wall than a proud piece of performance art. But that doesn't mean I don't have fun in the Kitchen coming up with new and exciting flavours to add to a pudding. The feeling I have whilst baking or making sweet treats is the same feeling I have when I eat them. It doesn't happen too often, but every time I do it I am so glad that I did.

The following five recipes are as simple to make as they are enjoyable to eat and will give you a go-to for when you know a moment will need to be marked by something sweet.

Coconut Honey Cake with Frozen Berry Jam

Inspired by Nigella Lawson's *'At My Table'* (2017) which celebrates the joy of home cooking, this cake is heavy with nostalgia and one I am glad to see return to the table of my adulthood. It's a modern-day twist on that God-awful canteen cake you had in school. A layer cake of sponge topped with jam and then what can only be described as coconut ash and served by a miserable lady in a peppermint tabard.

Here it is, reinvented as a plump little cake that can sit proudly on a table – and accidentally vegan!

Makes 1 cake

Preheat the oven to 180C fan.

For the cake:

230g plain flour

Grease and line a 20cm loose bottom tin. My lining is shambolic, but I tend to put the tin base on a piece of parchment, draw around it and cut it out. I also don't rub butter into the tin to grease. I'm lazy and use oil spray.

1 ½ tsp baking powder

Combine the dry ingredients in one bowl and the wet ones in another, making sure the wet ones are all whisked together. Pour the wet ingredients into the dry and whisk again. Pour this into the prepared baking tin. Gently drop the tin on the countertop to make the batter fall evenly. This is habit more than necessity.

½ tsp bicarbonate of soda

100g caster sugar

A pinch of salt

Pop into the oven to bake for 30 minutes or until a skewer comes out clean. Let the cake sit in its tin proudly on a wire rack for like 20 minutes.

150ml vegetable oil

275g can of coconut milk

During this cooling time, make your jam. Combine all the ingredients in a pan with a dash of water and put the heat on high. Once the pan gets hot and starts bubbling, turn the heat down to a gentle simmer and stir until the berries burst. Keep stirring until the berries form into a thick, syrupy jam and remove from the heat to cool.

2 tbs honey

1 tsp vanilla extract

For the jam:

220g frozen mixed berries

Once the cake has cooled, remove it from its tin and just before serving, dribble over the Frozen Berry Jam and a generous scattering of the coconut.

1 tbs soft brown sugar

No need to wear a tabard on serving.

To serve:

A handful of desiccated coconut



Caramel Honeycomb Ice Cream

I have an irrational fear of technology and machinery. Lowri, my wonderful photographer, almost bought me a proper coffee maker for my birthday but stopped herself in the name of *'Mikey will hate it – it has too many buttons'*. So, an ice cream maker for me was entirely out of the question.

But I stumbled upon a recipe by my culinary hero, Nigella Lawson (who also inspired the last recipe!) where she creates a no-churn ice cream by whipping cream and combining it with condensed milk. Game changer.

This here recipe takes this method and throws a little honeyed glitter over it, for those days when only cream of the icy kind will do.

Makes 1 litre of ice cream

For the honeycomb:

100g caster sugar

4 tbs golden syrup

1 ½ tsp bicarbonate of soda

For the ice cream:

300ml double cream

397g can of caramel condensed milk

A small shot of Amaretto liquor

A pinch of salt

To serve:

Wafer ice cream cones

It's easier to make the honeycomb first. Put a sheet of baking paper on the countertop. Now put the sugar and syrup in a pan and swirl everything together. Put on a medium heat – and don't stir it at all from this point on – just let the sugars melt together.

Once it starts bubbling and turns a rich brown, take it off the heat, grab a whisk and drop in the bicarb. It's a magic moment because everything froths together. Whisk it for about a minute or 2 before pouring the contents on to the waiting sheet of baking paper.

Leave it set for a few minutes and it will harden into a huge, golden sugar disk. Now, carefully with a blunt object, bash it to smithereens. Stash it in a jar or tub until you need it.

For the ice cream, pour the cream in a large bowl and whisk until loose peaks form. Now add the condensed milk, amaretto and salt.

Whisk everything to a silky combination and then pour it into a large tub (I use an old, washed out empty ice cream one) and put in the freezer for six hours or so for it to set.

Once it's set, serve the ice cream by scooping a generous dollop on to a wafer cone and sprinkle over the golden, bashed honeycomb.



Beetroot Brownies

This is not a recipe of healthy virtue. This was the product of having beetroot leftover in the fridge and wanting to try something just a little bit different. The result was culinary romance.

So these brownies are rich in flavour, dense in chew and moist in texture – all thanks to the deep, purple wonder that is beetroot. I've added maple syrup to these brownies just so that there is a hint of sweetness to them, but I wouldn't add too much. The charm of these is their quirky depth and the mysterious, yet welcome, vibrant flavour.

Makes around 9 generous squares

3 beetroots (from a vacuum pack)

250g butter

2 tbs maple syrup

250g dark chocolate

3 eggs

1 tsp vanilla extract

A handful of walnuts

150g self-raising flour

A pinch of salt

1 tsp cocoa powder

To serve:

A dusting of icing sugar

Preheat the oven to 160C and grease/line a 20 x 20 square baking tray.

Drop the beetroots into food processor and blitz to a purple Barney hued rubble.

Place a big, generous saucepan on the hob with the butter, maple syrup and chocolate and put on a medium heat. Stir gently until everything melts together. Take it off the heat.

In a bowl, beat together the eggs and the vanilla and then bash up the walnuts.

To the melted chocolate and butter, add the beetroots, the flour, the salt, the cocoa powder and the walnuts. Mix everything together before adding the eggs and beating them in.

Pour this into the lined tin and slide into the oven for 20 – 25 minutes (you want them squishy and melty). When you take them out of the oven, leave to rest in the pan on a cooling rack so that they can set a little.

After some resting time, slice into squares, dust with some icing sugar and serve them up.



Jamaican Gingerbread & Peach Trifle

I love an assembly task. Tacos, sandwiches, burgers, lasagnes – anything that requires putting layers on top of layers. It's like factory work, except you get an amazing treat at the end of it. More so, this kind of factory work is best suited when you're in company and can enjoy the process together.

My mother loved a trifle and growing up, but I was never a fan. But much like your adoration for your mother, you appreciate them more as you mature. I've started to realise that a trifle is the best of every world – it's a cake, but it's also fruit and cream... it's a bit of everything. And who doesn't want to take advantage of an opportunity to eat everything?

Makes 1 trifle

6 peaches

1 tbs soft brown sugar

1 tsp ground ginger

1 lemon

600ml double cream

4 tbs icing sugar

2 oranges

2 x 500g shop-bought
Jamaica Ginger Cake

To serve:

20g crystallised ginger

Roughly chop the peaches and put them in a saucepan with a small splash of tap water, the sugar, the ginger and the juice of the lemon. Put them on the high heat and once it bubbles, drop it to a lower heat and stir until the peaches start burst apart with the lemon juice to create a peachy jam. Once everything has combined, take it off the heat and allow to cool.

In a big bowl, pour in the cream and icing sugar and whisk it until it's firm but not too stern and stiff. Squeeze the juice of the oranges into a glass or mug and put to one side.

Take the Ginger Cake and slice it into as many thin slices as possible, reserving the tail end for crumbs later. Now in a large bowl place out a layer of Ginger Cake slices. Now take a tablespoon of the orange juice and drizzle over the cake.

Now spoon over a few tablespoons of the peach jam to cover the cake. Now spoon over a few tablespoons of the thick cream over the jam. Take more slices of the Ginger Cake and create another layer, drizzle over the orange juice, layer over the peach jam and then another few tablespoons of cream. It's like a pudding lasagne!

Now do one more layer (cake, orange juice, peach jam, thick cream) and take your reserved end of the cakes and crush it up in your hand, dropping the crumbs over the final layer of cream. Finally, chop up some crystallised ginger and scatter over to serve.



Salted Butterscotch Pudding

If you have at least one memory of a Rolo yogurt from your childhood, you grew up in my era. The Rolo yogurt sat side-by-side with the Milky Bar yogurt and the true joy of it was the layer of thick, caramel pudding under the chocolate. They were an after-school treat that I savaged.

This version is a grown-up twist on the creamy underlying yogurt pud, with vanilla cream whipped to perfection and spiked with smoked salt crystals. Don't look too hard at the ingredients. Yes, it's naughty and not exactly going to sit next to 'Kale' on a diet recommendation, but this is not something you have to eat every day. It's a *sometimes* thing.

It's the perfect make-ahead treat you can squirrel away in your fridge and pull out of an evening.

Makes 8 pots

100g soft brown sugar

45g cornflour

1 ½ tsp sea salt

1 egg yolk

470ml full fat milk

100ml double cream

1 tsp vanilla extract

20g butter

To serve:

A sprinkle of sea salt

Combine the sugar, cornflour and sea salt in a deep pan. Hover your hand over an empty bowl and crack an egg, catching the egg in your bare hand. Hold the yolk carefully and pass it from hand to hand as the whites drip off and fall into the bowl. Add the yolk to the sugar and keep the whites for a meringue or something.

Whisk the yolk into the sugar and it will look like golden sherbet but bear with it. Pour the milk in a bit at a time, whisking as you go. Add the double cream and vanilla, continuing to whisk, and turn the hob on to a medium heat.

Allow this to cook, continuing to whisk gently, for about 7 or 8 minutes so that the pudding comes to a simmer. You'll think you've added too much milk but stick with it, the trusty cornflour will thicken it up.

Once it's thickened and it's a sexy, dribbly pudding consistency, take it off the heat and add the butter, whisking again to incorporate it. Pour this into a big jar or tub and store it in the fridge until you're ready to serve.

To stop it from forming a skin (don't worry if it does, it can easily just be whisked out!) get a damp piece of baking paper and place it on top.

When you're ready to serve, lace it with a little sprinkle of sea salt.



THE STORY IS YOURS...

The simple rituals of cooking for yourself, cooking for others, enjoying life over a dinner table and sharing these moments is what life is all about.

If hunger isn't the first thing that propels you to the Kitchen, allow it to be the idea that you are going to cook something that will form part of your life.

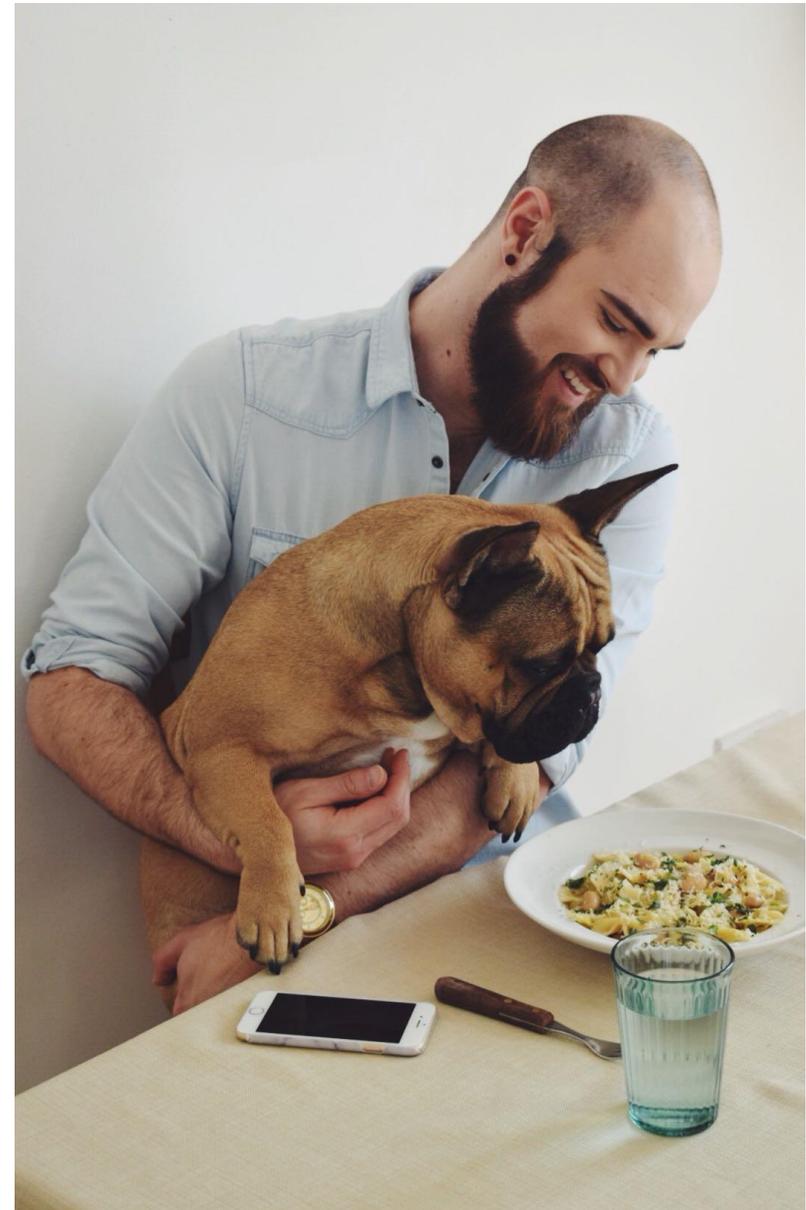
Whether this be an act of kindness to yourself as you joyfully cook for sustenance, or the act of generosity when you cook for somebody you love, the food you cook will indiscreetly tell the story of your life.

I hope you have managed to see yourself in these pages or how these pages can form part of your life. Think about the food in your life not as a collection of dishes, but more so the moments they represent and the spaces they hold in time.

You can create this space for yourself by simply cooking.

You can tell your life through food.

So, tell me... *what's your story?*





Thank you Lowri, for making me feel like a popstar hearing their song on the radio.