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Love Your Lunchbox

Written by James Ramsden

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LOVE YOUR LUNCHBOX

JAMES RAMSDEN

101 recipes to liven up lunchtime



LOVE YOUR LUNCHBOX

JAMES RAMSDEN

PAVILION

101 recipes to liven up lunchtime



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INTRODUCTION

For many children of my generation, the lunchbox was a treasured possession. My Thomas the Tank Engine one was so cool that my five-year-old self practically paraded down the street to school; its contents, whatever they were, however similar to yesterday's pickings, offered fresh promise, new excitements, and something to look forward to at midday. Would it be a cheese and pickle sandwich or a ham and lettuce bap? Would there be a chocolate biscuit or a fruit roll-up? Capri Sun or Um Bongo? Golden Delicious (thumbs up) or Granny Smith (thumbs down)? The intrigue!

With this book I want to re-inject that sense of potential, that sense of anticipation, that frisson of a well-whetted appetite to the often-too-ordinary midweek lunch. But for grown-ups. Why should kids get all the fun while the grown-ups eat the same lunch in front of their computers each day? Why not follow the Japanese and dive head first into a steaming bowl of slippery noodles, or the New Yorkers with their pastrami and rye bread, or our Mediterranean cousins with their fresh salads and nourishing grains? These lunches are resourceful, creative and practical. But in every case, it is flavour that comes first, with convenience a happy corollary and not the other way round.

Of course, moveable lunches needn't be restricted to the office – many of the dishes here will be just as happy on a beach, up a mountain, by a river, or in the park. Wherever you find yourself unwrapping your lunch, I want it to have all the delight of a Christmas stocking, and none of the disappointment. We don't want the same sandwich every day any more than we want the same pair of socks every Christmas.

Love Your Lunchbox is a book for anyone who wants better socks. Or, rather, lunch. For anyone for whom lunch is something to enjoy rather than endure, to linger over rather than bolt down, to make yourself rather than make yourself walk to the shops in the rain for. If that sounds like you, then you're in the right place.

This book is about the spirit of the lunchbox, rather than the vessel itself. A trend for vintage lunchboxes would be a happy thing (there's no shortage online), though a Tupperware and a carrier bag will do the trick. As mother always told me, it's what's on the inside that counts.





COOKING

These recipes are written to be prepared and cooked in advance and eaten later that day, or the following couple of days. Some of them are doable in a matter of minutes on the morning you plan to eat them, others may require a bit of time the evening before. This isn't necessarily a book for every day. Instead, it's for those evenings when you find you have a slice of time to prepare a lunch or two, or a Sunday afternoon to put a few bits in the freezer.

REHEATING AND EATING

Although these dishes are intended to be made in advance, clearly there is nothing stopping you devouring the thing on the spot. It would, however, get a little repetitive of me to say 'eat now or chill for later' on each recipe, so you can assume this is the case with all the recipes unless otherwise stated.

You will generally need a toaster, a microwave, or a kettle to finish those recipes that can't be eaten cold.

ON MICROWAVING

Ignore the baseless claims about microwaves 'nuking' nutrients and embrace their incredibly efficient means of heating up, and indeed cooking, food. Generally dishes should be covered with clingfilm to reheat, if only to minimize spattering, with a few holes poked in the clingfilm. Avoid putting any metal, including foil, in the microwave.

SERVINGS

Most of the recipes in this book serve two, meaning you can either lovingly prepare lunch for yourself and your other half, or lovingly prepare lunch for yourself for the next two days, or lovingly prepare yourself a single lunch of quite unnecessarily large proportions.

COST

Each recipe aims for a cost of less than £5 a head (often considerably less). At the time of writing, the average cost of lunch for an office worker is reported to be £7.81, so less than a fiver seems about right for a homemade lunch that leaves you with a few quid for a Coca Cola/Snickers fix.

A caveat: I don't know what's in your fridge or cupboard. There will be recipes in this book that cost you a little more to shop for, but that's because you may need to buy, say, rice vinegar, or a spice of which you'll use only a tablespoon. In all these cases, I've done my best to make sure such items are not perishable, and can be used and reused. Those that aren't can be frozen.

ONE LAST THOUGHT...

There has been some debate recently about the relative merits or otherwise of eating lunch at your desk, with a health minister labelling the practice 'disgusting'. I say it's entirely up to you where you strap on the nosebag, though perhaps be aware that some colleagues might object to a particularly pungent curry distracting them from crucial research on the *Daily Mail* website.

CHAPTER 1
WEEKEND LOOSE ENDS

This chapter presupposes that you will cook certain things over the weekend. And when I say weekend, I mostly mean Sunday lunch. Your weekend may follow many paths. There might be a bowl of pasta on Friday night, curry on Saturday, a breakfast somewhere along the way, perhaps involving muffins and croissants and bacon. An entire day might be lost to pints and pork scratchings, or to prams and tantrums and takeaway pizza.

But Sundays, on the whole, are more predictable. Sundays are for a roast. Pork belly or roast chicken or a rib of beef. There will be roast potatoes, which I've yet to fashion into anything decent the following day, and so are absent from this chapter, though roast root vegetables (p.12) are always very fine and very adaptable.

And, after all, Sunday is the plum day for preparing a couple of lunches for the week ahead.

Serves 2

Roast vegetables with lentils, chilli and feta

The temptation with leftover roast vegetables – by which I mean any or all of: beetroot, celeriac, butternut squash, parsnip, red onion (always), garlic (ditto), swede, turnip, and so on – is to boil them briefly with stock and blend them into a soup. It's a temptation worth submitting to every now and then, creating a rich and deeply flavoured soup. But for something a little lighter and more textural, this salady number is a winner.

If you fancy making it from scratch, veg and all, then cut root veg into 2.5cm/1in cubes, toss with olive oil, salt, pepper and unpeeled garlic cloves, and roast at 200°C/400°F/Gas mark 6 for 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Prep time: 10 minutes
Cooking time: 20 minutes
Freezable? No

85g/3oz/scant 1/2 cup green lentils
400g/14oz roasted vegetables
a good handful of rocket (arugula)
85g/3oz feta cheese, lightly crumbled
salt and pepper
For the dressing
1 red chilli, deseeded and finely chopped
a good squeeze of lemon
4 tbsp olive oil
a handful of parsley, finely chopped



AT HOME

Rinse the lentils under running water, then cook according to packet instructions. Drain and rinse under cold water to prevent overcooking. Shake until dry.

Toss together the roasted vegetables, lentils, rocket and feta. Season with salt and plenty of pepper, and store in the fridge for up to 2 days.

To make the dressing, mix together the chilli, lemon juice, oil and parsley. Season with salt and pepper. Taste and adjust with more lemon, olive oil or salt as necessary. Store in a small pot in the fridge.

IN EACH LUNCHBOX

Portion of roast vegetable and lentil salad; portion of dressing.

TO FINISH

Dress before serving.



Serves 2

Caesar salad

I was as disappointed, as no doubt you will be, to discover that this salad was not invented by the great warrior, dictator and leader of the Roman Empire Julius Caesar, but an Italian–American chap called Caesar Cardini. This excellent salad pales somewhat when you realize it wasn't concocted between invasions of Britain and bloody encounters with Gauls. But no matter. It's still a superb dish and dead easy to chuck together.

This is something of a base recipe. By all means gussy it up with whatever bits and pieces you fancy – bacon, tomatoes, squirrel...

Prep time: 15 minutes
Cooking time: 5 minutes
Freezable? No

2 tsp olive oil
a sprig of rosemary
a few small chunks of bread
crisp lettuce leaves, such as romaine, cos or little gem
150g/5½oz roast chicken, shredded
10 anchovy fillets (optional)
For the dressing
1 egg yolk
1 tsp Dijon mustard
100ml/3½fl oz/scant ½ cup olive oil
1 small garlic clove, peeled and crushed to a paste
15g/½oz grated Parmesan cheese
juice of ½ lemon
a few shakes of Tabasco sauce
salt and pepper

AT HOME

Heat the oil and rosemary in a frying pan over a medium heat, add the bread and fry, tossing occasionally, until golden and crisp. Drain the croutons on kitchen paper, discarding the rosemary.

Wash and dry the salad leaves if necessary, then assemble with the chicken, croutons, and the anchovies, if using. Cover and store in the fridge for up to 24 hours.

To make the dressing, whisk together the egg yolk and mustard, then very slowly add the oil, whisking continuously to emulsify. Add the garlic, Parmesan, lemon juice and Tabasco, and season with salt and pepper. Store in a jar in the fridge.

IN EACH LUNCHBOX

Portion of salad; portion of dressing.

TO FINISH

Dress the salad and eat.



Rice and peas

Serves 2

Also known as *risi e bisi*. For many people, Sunday lunch isn't Sunday lunch without peas. They provide comfort and nourishment and nostalgia – the hangover's enemy, the hangover sufferer's friend. I always make too much. Here's what to do with the leftovers. (And obviously it's not too onerous to cook some peas specially for this.)

Prep time: 25 minutes
Cooking time: 25 minutes
Freezable? Yes

olive oil
1 small onion or shallot, peeled and finely chopped
salt and pepper
750ml/1¼ pints/3 cups chicken or vegetable stock
125g/4½oz/generous ½ cup risotto rice
about 200g/7oz/1½ cups cooked peas
20g/¾oz Parmesan cheese, grated
a few dots of butter, to finish

AT HOME

Heat a splash of oil over a low heat and add the onion. Season with salt and pepper, and cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally, until soft. Meanwhile, warm the stock in another pan.

Add the rice to the onion and stir over a medium heat for a minute or two. After this, you can cook the rice in risotto fashion, stirring continuously and adding stock a ladle at a time. But if you prefer, add a third of the stock, stir, and leave to simmer for 6 minutes. Go and do something else. Perhaps stir every now and then. Add another third, simmer for another 6 minutes. Add the remaining stock and the peas. Simmer for 3 minutes, stir in the cheese, and take off the heat. It should be wetter than a risotto.

Leave to cool. Store in the fridge for up to 2 days.

IN EACH LUNCHBOX

Portion of *risi e bisi* (in a microwaveable container); a few dots of butter.

TO FINISH

Put a few dots of butter on the rice. Reheat in a microwave on medium for 4–5 minutes, stirring halfway through.

Beef and potato pasty

Serves 2

Ne'er was there a morsel so fraught with controversy. Devon or Cornwall? Side crimp or top crimp? Swede or no swede? These are all very important questions, but as long as the thing tastes good, I couldn't give a stuff.

Now, I'm all in favour of making your own pastry, but in this case – by which I mean the case of making your lunch – it may be a little too much to ask.

Prep time: 20 minutes
Cooking time: 30–40 minutes, plus chilling
Freezable? Yes

300g/10½oz shortcrust pastry
20g/¾oz/1½ tbsp butter
1 onion, peeled and chopped
salt and pepper
1 tsp chopped thyme
2 tbsp chopped parsley
125–150g/4½–5½oz leftover beef, chopped
100g/3½oz cooked potato, cubed
100g/3½oz cooked swede (optional: use potato instead if preferred), cubed
1 egg, beaten

AT HOME

Preheat the oven to 180°C/350°F/Gas mark 4. Divide the pastry in two and roll out to about 5mm/¼in thick, then cut out two rounds, each about 20cm/8in in diameter. Chill.

Melt the butter in a saucepan over a medium–low heat and add the onion. Season with salt and pepper, and cook until soft, stirring occasionally. Add the herbs, beef, potato and swede, if using. Give it a good mix. Taste for seasoning and leave to cool.

Top each pastry with the filling and fold over. Crimp to seal, then brush with the beaten egg. Prick a couple of times to let the air out, then bake for 20–25 minutes, until golden brown. Cool, cover and store in the fridge for up to 2 days.

IN EACH LUNCHBOX

A pasty.

TO FINISH

Reheat (if you wish) in an oven at 180°C/350°F/Gas mark 4 for 10 minutes. A microwave will heat it, but will also make it a little soggy.



Serves 2

North African–style chicken broth

In truth, you could do this with any leftover meat. Lamb or beef will benefit from a longer, gentler cooking time.

Ras-el-hanout is a North African spice blend that you can find in the spice section of most supermarkets these days.

Prep time: 15 minutes
Cooking time: 20 minutes
Freezable? Yes

olive oil
1 small onion, peeled and finely chopped
1 garlic clove, peeled and finely chopped
salt and pepper
2 tsp *ras-el-hanout*
½ tsp chilli flakes
400g/14oz canned chopped tomatoes
400ml/14fl oz/1 ⅔ cups chicken stock
a pinch of sugar
50g/1¾oz/5 tbsp couscous
70–100g/2½–3½oz cooked chicken, shredded
2 preserved lemons, flesh discarded, peel roughly chopped (optional)

AT HOME

Heat a splash of oil in a saucepan over a low heat and add the onion and garlic. Season with salt and pepper, cover and cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally, until soft.

Turn up the heat to medium and add the spices. Stir briefly, then add the tomatoes, stock, and a pinch of sugar. Simmer for 7–10 minutes.

Meanwhile, boil a kettle and cook the couscous according to packet instructions.

Stir the cooked couscous and shredded chicken through the soup. If using, add the chopped lemon. Cool, cover, and store in the fridge for up to 2 days.

IN EACH LUNCHBOX

A portion of broth (in a microwaveable container).

TO FINISH

Microwave on medium for 4 minutes, or gently reheat in a saucepan.

Chicken and pearl barley broth

Serves 2

Leftover chicken can be a misused creature. Chicken risotto, for example, is often a chalky, pale, bland affair, while chicken pasta is just all kinds of wrong (is it the texture?). Some sort of brothy experience is, I reckon, best, and rather gentler on the belly than, say, a chicken sandwich, which always requires at least a litre of mayonnaise to make it not stick to the roof of your mouth like clingfilm. This is a good'un, or try the North African chicken soup on p.19.

Prep time: 15 minutes
Cooking time: 1 hour
Freezable? No

olive oil
1 small onion, peeled and finely chopped
1 celery stalk, finely chopped
1 small carrot, peeled and finely chopped
salt and pepper
50g/1¾oz/¼ cup pearl barley, rinsed
800ml/1½ pints/3 ⅓ cups chicken stock
a good handful of cooked chicken, shredded
a handful of finely chopped parsley
zest of ½ lemon

AT HOME

Heat a splash of olive oil in a saucepan over a low heat and add the onion, celery and carrot. Season with salt and pepper, cover, and cook for about 10 minutes, until soft.

Add the barley and stir briefly, then add the stock and bring to a boil. Simmer very gently for 45 minutes. If you need to add a splash more stock or water, go ahead.

Stir in the chicken, parsley and lemon zest. Taste for seasoning, then cool. Chill for up to 2 days.

IN EACH LUNCHBOX

A portion of broth (in a microwaveable container).

TO FINISH

Reheat in a microwave on medium for 4–5 minutes, stirring halfway through, or gently reheat in a saucepan.

Lamb pilaf

Serves 2

A pilaf is all about gentle spicing and comforting grains – nothing overpowering or too bullish. There's a certain amount of fear around cooling and reheating rice (have you ever met anyone who got ill from rice? Me neither), but as long as you get it in the fridge relatively sharpish after cooking, it's fine.

You can save time by using a generic spice mix, garam masala or whatever, but if you have a spare few minutes (and that's really all it takes), then it's worth going for whole spices.

Prep time: 20 minutes
Cooking time: 25 minutes
Freezable? No

vegetable oil
1 small onion, peeled and finely chopped
salt and pepper
1 garlic clove, peeled and finely chopped
1 tsp ground cumin
2 tsp ground coriander
1 star anise
1 clove
1 cinnamon stick
about 150g/5½oz leftover lamb, quite finely chopped
125g/4½oz/scant ¾ cup basmati rice, rinsed in a sieve under cold running water for a minute or so
250ml/9fl oz/1 cup chicken stock
To serve
plain yogurt
a small handful of coriander (cilantro)
a handful of flaked almonds (optional)

AT HOME

Heat a splash of oil in a saucepan over a medium heat. Add the onion, season with salt and pepper, and cook for 7 minutes, stirring occasionally, until beginning to brown, then add the garlic and spices. Stir briefly to coat the onion in spices, then add the lamb and cook until it has taken on some colour.

Add the rice and stock, and bring to a boil. Set the heat to very low, and cover the pan. Cook for 12 minutes without lifting the lid. After 12 minutes, remove from the heat and leave for 5 minutes, keeping the lid on.

Take off the lid and leave to stand for 2 minutes. Fluff up with a fork, cool, and store in the fridge for up to 2 days.

IN EACH LUNCHBOX

A portion of pilaf (in a microwaveable container); a little yogurt; a few coriander leaves; flaked almonds (optional).

TO FINISH

Microwave on medium for 4 minutes. Serve with yogurt, coriander and almonds.

Serves 2

Burrito

The most crucial thing to remember with this behemoth is that the meat is slow-cooked. This isn't much cop with a rare slice of sirloin, which will in all likelihood come out in a single piece, leaving you with a hollow, vegetarian burrito and a piece of pink flesh hanging out of your mouth. But slow-cooked beef shin, or brisket, or shortribs, or leftover pork shoulder, all melting and wibbly, will be what is known as 'the business'.

Prep time: 15 minutes
Cooking time: 6 minutes
Freezable? No

For the beans
150g/5½oz canned black-eyed beans
vegetable oil
1 small garlic clove, peeled and crushed
½ tsp smoked paprika
salt and pepper
juice of ½ lime

For the guacamole
1 avocado
2 tbsp finely chopped red onion
2 tsp finely chopped red chilli
juice of ½ lime
a small handful of chopped coriander (cilantro)

For the rest
2 large wheat tortillas
200g/7oz slow-cooked beef or pork
a good handful of shredded lettuce
chilli sauce (I like Cholula brand)
2 tbsp sour cream

AT HOME

Gently boil the beans for 5 minutes, then drain. In the same pan, heat a little oil over a medium heat and add the garlic and paprika. Cook for 30 seconds, stirring continuously, then add the beans. Season with salt, pepper and a squeeze of lime, then mash roughly. Set aside to cool.

To make the guacamole, mash the avocado with the onion, chilli, lime juice and coriander. Season with salt.

Briefly warm each tortilla in a hot frying pan (this makes it easier to wrap), then lay on a sheet of foil. Spread the guacamole over the tortilla, then spread over the mashed beans. Lay the meat down the middle of the tortilla, and top with lettuce, a few sploshes of chilli sauce, and a spoonful of sour cream. Carefully roll up, then wrap tightly in the foil.

IN EACH LUNCHBOX

A burrito.

TO FINISH

You can eat the burrito cold — or at least at room temperature — though it's also good hot. Warm in the oven at 150°C/300°F/Gas mark 2 for 10 minutes. The foil causes problems with microwaves... ka-boom.





Serves 2

Rillettes

Amazing how easily a joint of pork turns out to be insurmountable. What seems like an appropriate – even modest – piece of pork belly so often turns out to defeat everyone, its heady combination of rich fat and sweet meat being somewhat more filling than you'd accounted for. But no matter! Here is a quite splendid thing to do with the leftovers.

Prep time: 5 minutes
Cooking time: 45 minutes
Freezable? Yes

250–300g/9–10½oz leftover fatty pork (belly or shoulder)
2 tbsp pork fat, dripping or oil
1 tbsp brandy (optional)
a sprig of thyme
a bay leaf
a few peppercorns
a pinch of salt
To serve
toast or crusty baguette
cornichons (baby pickled gherkins) or pickled shallots (p.190)



AT HOME

Roughly chop the meat. Heat the fat in a saucepan over a low heat. Add the meat, brandy, herbs and pepper, and season with a pinch of salt. Cover and cook gently for 45 minutes, stirring occasionally. Don't let it colour too much, if at all.

When the meat is über-soft and tender, take it off the heat and remove the herbs and peppercorns. Tear it to shreds with a couple of forks or pulse in a blender. Press into a ramekin or bowl and cover with the liquid left in the pan. Cover and chill for up to a week.

IN EACH LUNCHBOX

A pot of rillettes; crusty bread; cornichons or pickled shallots.

TO FINISH

Take out of the fridge perhaps an hour before eating. Make some toast or tear up a good crusty baguette. Eat with cornichons or pickled shallots.



4 large or 8 small buns

Spiced lamb buns

These are quite nifty for a picnic or a long walk, particularly if made smaller, though as a big bun with a surprise filling they're deeply moreish. The recipe makes more than two people will manage at lunch, but the buns freeze very well, or alternatively will make you very popular in your office.

Prep time: 30 minutes, plus rising time
Cooking time: 40 minutes
Freezable? Yes

500g/1lb 2oz/4 cups strong white bread flour, plus extra for dusting
7g/¼oz/about 1 tsp fast-action dried yeast
250ml/9fl oz/1 cup warm water
4 tbsp olive oil
3 tbsp plain yogurt
1 tsp salt
For the filling
1 onion, peeled and finely chopped
olive oil
1 garlic clove, peeled and finely chopped
1 tsp ground cumin
2 tsp ground coriander
1 tsp chilli flakes
salt and pepper
400g/14oz leftover lamb, chicken or beef, chopped

AT HOME

Tip the flour into a bowl and make a well in the centre. Pour in the yeast, water, oil, yogurt and salt. Mix the wet ingredients together then, using your hand like a claw, bring in the flour, adding a little warm water or olive oil if necessary. When it has all come together, turn it onto a lightly floured surface. Knead for about 7 minutes, until smooth and elastic. Cover with a tea towel and leave to rise in a warm place for 30 minutes.

To make the filling, cook the onion in a little oil until golden and soft, then add the garlic and spices and season with salt and pepper. Stir for a minute or so, then mix through the chopped meat.

Divide the dough into 4 large or 8 small balls. Roll out each ball on a lightly floured surface to a round about 8mm/⅜in thick. Put a good handful of the filling in the centre. Fold the outsides into the middle and pinch to seal. Place, seam-side down, on a lightly floured baking sheet. Repeat for the remaining dough, then cover with a tea towel and leave to rise in a warm place for another 30 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 220°C/425°F/Gas mark 7. Brush the tops of the buns with a little olive oil, then put in the oven. Turn the heat down to 190°C/375°F/Gas mark 5 and bake for 25–30 minutes. Cool on a wire rack.

IN EACH LUNCHBOX

A lamb bun or two.

TO FINISH

Serve cold, or reheat in a microwave on medium for 3 minutes, or in an oven at 150°C/300°F/Gas mark 2 for 10 minutes.





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Notes

1 teaspoon = 5ml; 1 tablespoon = 15ml.
All spoon measurements are level.

Medium eggs are used, except where otherwise specified. Free-range eggs are recommended. Note that some recipes contain raw or lightly cooked eggs. The young, elderly, pregnant women and anyone with an immune-deficiency disease should avoid these, because of the slight risk of salmonella.

To sterilize jars for pickles, sauces and jams, put the jars in a preheated oven at 150°C/300°F/Gas mark 2 for 20 minutes.

Microwave timings are for an 800-watt oven: if your machine is more powerful, reduce the timings slightly; increase timings for a lower wattage oven.