Dinner at Mine?

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Dinner at Mine?

New inspiration for everyday ingredients

Kate Young



An Apollo Book

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For my not at all nuclear family



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Dinner, at mine

There is an alternative version of me who never left Australia. She was so inevitable for so many years that I can still see her: a drama teacher, and mum to a couple of kids with curly hair and legionnaires caps and pink zinc on their cheeks. She lives a couple of suburbs over from her parents, and barbecues frequently. She has a freezer filled with emergency batch-cooked meals, hosts dinner parties on weekends, and makes packed lunches. In my teen years, reading cookbooks and dreaming of the future, she's the person I imagined I'd be when I grew up. When those cookbooks said 'serves four', I could picture that future family. That four was everything I was sure I wanted.

I left home at 21, with a one-way ticket to London in my hand and a pack on my back that pushed against the weight restrictions. In those early years, our flats had tiny shared living spaces and we each had a single shelf in the undercounter fridge. I cooked for my flatmates, and my friends, and whichever Australian we had crashing on our sofa that week. It didn't feel like it at the time, but with hindsight it's clear how much of that time I spent longing for a family. I see now my dogged commitment to casting myself as a mother-type in each of my early living situations. I was a bit lost, building a life in a new country, and I can appreciate now the innate comfort of rehearsing, of marking time, before I had the family I'd always imagined.

Instead, in the decade and a half since my move, I have built a life I couldn't have dreamed of as a teenager. I'm in my thirties and live on my own, in a flat with big windows and an even bigger dining table. I relish my independence, and am also frequently on the move. I have a spare room that often houses visiting friends, and spare rooms in other cities that house me in return. I have pals I often share tables with: some who've had kids, others who hope to, and still more who don't. I have a family of beloved pals who I travel with and eat with and spend long stretches of time with. I also have a family who treat me as a daughter, whose kitchen I have spent fifteen years cooking in, who have a room in their house that serves as mine. Really, when I think of my family, it is not in one place or in one house. When I cook 'at home' or for 'my family', there is not just one way that looks.

One of the greatest joys of coming out, of life as a lesbian, is that it has placed me within a community who live queer lives: lives outside of the heteronormative default. It has made my life, and all the love within

it, so expansive and full and hopeful and magical. It confirmed for me that I'm not marking time, that there are infinite ways for family to exist. It has made me rethink the word 'family' itself, and marvel at the ways we use it in kitchens: 'family' is the staff meal we sit down to (or stand up for) in the midst of a catering day, platters sit 'family-style' down the middle of the table at a wedding feast. Family, really, need only be a group of people gathered together around a table.

And so this is a book for a different kind of family, and a different type of meal planning. It's the only sort of meal planning that's ever worked for me: to have various ideas for each ingredient I buy, and to embrace flexibility. I'm rubbish at sitting down on a Sunday and mapping out the shape of a week; there are simply too many variables. Plans change, people drop by, an evening out falls into place. I don't want ingredients staring at me accusingly from the fridge, resentful that the plan I had for them hasn't come to fruition.

So, while I shop with plans in mind, I always have back-ups. The courgettes I thought would be griddled are pickled instead. The tomatoes I had earmarked for a curry end up in chilaquiles. A bunch of spring onions will find their way into ramen, prawn toast, and a chilli and spring onion oil. A chicken bought for a dinner for four (we ordered a takeaway instead) can be simmered gently into broth and leftovers for one. A tin of cannellini beans, a packet of rice, or a bag of potatoes will be the basis for dinner, no matter how many guests are around the table.

This book takes the fifteen ingredients most commonly found in my kitchen, and offers six recipes for each of them. One for you, one for two, one for a mid-week supper for three or four, one for a weekend feast, one for a portable dish, and something useful to keep around.

I want to make the ingredients in your fridge work for you, regardless of how many you have coming to dinner. I want to share ideas for trying a familiar ingredient in a new way – in case you're bored of courgettes, but somehow always end up with a few in the bottom of the fridge. I want to offer some encouragement for the tins collecting dust in a drawer, and the bag of peas that is still in the freezer. The ideas in this book are designed to offer inspiration, to be flexible, adaptable, and, above all else, supremely useful. I want you to have a whole kitchen full of ideas, each time you feel inclined to suggest, 'Dinner at mine?'

So.

Who's home tonight, who's coming round, what's the plan?

How many are you tonight?

One; just you!

It's easy to consider nights when you're on your own as nights when you shouldn't have to make an effort. I know this is a cookbook and probably not the place for this sentiment, but let's face it: cooking can be properly boring. It's relentless, a bit of a chore, actually, having to put food in front of yourself night after night – especially when there's no one to share the chopping or the washing up with. If you're the type of person who makes the same one-pot pasta dish every time you're on your own, or calls Marmite on toast and a cup of tea at 9pm dinner, I really, really get it.

I'm not here to say that you need to make a huge effort every time you cook for yourself. The recipes for one are mostly simple, the sort of thing you can put together while an episode of *The Simpsons* (insert your own show here, but round mine that was always the show that screamed imminent dinner) plays: pasta, noodles, good things on toast, delicious versions of egg. But I've lived on my own for the past five years, and shared flats but not always meals for the decade before that. And the reality is that sometimes when it is just me who needs feeding, I do still want to make something a little special, something I won't make every day. So I understand that maybe you do too – a perfect steak, a chicken broth and buttered noodles.

Whatever your mood, whatever time you want to spend, I want to offer ideas for something you know you're going to love. Something for when you don't want to batch cook, when you don't want to end up with the same thing four days in a row. I want to give you ideas for one perfect plate, for exactly the thing you want for dinner tonight.

A note here. If you live with one other person, as lots of people I know and love do, then these recipes also scale up nicely for the two of you, when you want things to be low-key. Otherwise, you might lean towards...

A fancy two

There's a real intimacy to sharing a meal with just one other person, to putting down on the table a dish that can't help but say: 'I was thinking of you, of us, when I planned this.' It's the primary way I demonstrate love, to invite dear friends or people I fancy for dinner, and to cook for

them. I appreciate the reciprocity of it too: the joy of a loved one cooking for me. It's such a pleasure to be present, watching someone move with ease around their kitchen or mine, offering me an occasional spoonful of something in hope of confirmation, feeling taken care of, being the recipient of the sort of generosity that makes my chest feel warm.

The recipes for two that follow are for when you want to impress – and to impress upon someone just how much they mean to you. It might be time they demand of you (a pastry to make, a pasta to shape). Some have slightly fancier ingredients (crab or clams or supremely good olive oil). Sometimes they're simply too fussy or too much effort to consider making for a larger group (a courgette soufflé or homemade fries). All of them are dishes that feel deliberate, and planned. That say to the person across the table from you: 'I love this. I love you. Let's eat.'

A weekday four

Despite living alone, I'm regularly putting dinner together for a small, low-key group. I'll have friends dropping round, with or without kids. I'll be heading to see my surrogate family, carrying a tote bag filled with ingredients. I'll be staying with friends, and we'll have been buried in our laptops and notebooks all day, and it'll be my turn to get something on the table. The thing about being a freelancer without children is that I assumed for a while that the concept of a mid-week dinner didn't really apply to me. It was the stuff I'd imagined in childhood that I'd be cooking most often, the sort of thing my parents cooked every night, with four of us around the table in Mum's house, or in Dad's. I was confident I had built a different sort of life. And after my nannying years ended, so too did the challenge of doing the school run and having dinner on the table an hour later. But then, as I settled into my flat, it became the sort of cooking I was doing regularly, the sort of meal I often needed on the table. So, quite despite myself, I now have a useful collection of mid-week dinners, things I know I'll have most of the ingredients for and won't need to think too hard about: pasta bake, toasties and soup, one-pot rice and chicken, a summer salad, sweetcorn fritters. Fewer than ten ingredients, less than an hour in prep and cooking, crowd-pleasing favourites. Stuff I return to over and over.














Weekend guests

Weekend meals are the ones I bought my dining table for. It's a big table, wide and long, for lingering and for feasting, with space down the centre for platters and small dishes and bottles and candles and a pile of serviettes and two or three glasses each. The dream, when I first started living alone, was that I would only ever *be* alone if I chose to be: that the joy and luxury of the communal spaces being only mine to fill would be a constant stream of guests, which had always felt trickier to achieve when I had flatmates who weren't also my best pals. The reality, of course, were those strange lockdown years of not being allowed to invite anyone over at all. The table, which arrived in December 2019, taunted me with its scale.

But it has found its purpose at last. And I'm thrilled, as weekend meals, for six or so, are the ones I most love planning and shopping for. I'm happy to have time to spend on slow-roasting, on fiddly little bits served in multiple bowls, on a trip to the market for ingredients, on some prep on Saturday afternoon for a dish we won't eat until Sunday evening. I love a centrepiece: a pie (apple, perhaps, or cabbage enveloped in filo), a shoulder of lamb or piece of pork belly or a side of trout or a chicken in almond sauce, a deep dish of gratin or parmigiana, a sauce of vibrant, vivid green. I love for things to feel celebratory, to feel communal, to be shared out and passed around, with enough for everyone to dive back in for seconds.

For another day

What would be sensible, I thought, looking at the first freezer I had that was larger than a shoebox, would be to fill this with meals I'll want to eat on nights I'm really busy. Things I can warm through, to make life easier. Clever little meals that reheat efficiently and easily. What a thrill it will be to have already done the work. And so I did it: I made soups and curries and pasta sauces. And for months they sat there, entirely untouched, until I needed the space for something else, and had to reluctantly defrost and grumpily eat them.

I know it's clever and useful to batch-cook. It can be a lifesaver when you're busy. But the truth seems to be that I'm simply not that kind of busy. Perhaps one day I'll be a new parent, or have a different job, or kids in school who need to be fed quickly. But right now, if I need a simple

dinner, or if there are a few of us who need instant sustenance, I don't want the box of some defrostable thing a past me has decided might be nice. I'd almost always rather have toast.

What makes sense for me, and perhaps for you too, is storing useful little bits that are versatile and delicious. Batch bits, not batch cooking. Pickles and jams, flavoured butters, chilli oils. Ice cream and falafel and dumplings and rice for congee. Things I won't eat today, but that will make my life better and easier and more delicious down the track. Bits of meals, rather than whole meals, that I can adapt and fiddle with, no matter how many people I'm feeding.

To take with you

And for nights when the food is not for eating at home? For nights when it's sunny and bright and you're gathering outdoors; for nights when you've promised you'll show up with a plate; for nights when a friend is in need? Sometimes the answer is a takeaway, or a stack of ready meals, or a selection of supermarket dips (I love supermarket dips). But sometimes you want to cook, to show up with something homemade and transportable that simply needs assembling or warming through.

I love showing up with food. I spent years in London working out the best versions of dinners to get from one place to another on a bus. I have queued in the post office and trusted Royal Mail with a loaf cake wrapped tightly in brown paper, an address printed neatly beneath the twine. I have packed the component parts of a salad into boxes for transporting, ready to toss everything together once I reached my destination. I have made the drive from Stroud to Bristol with a dessert in a dish on the seat beside me. I've shown up to a picnic with a well-wrapped sandwich and a stack of paper serviettes.

In short, if you need something transportable, I have ideas.

°

There might be a slightly more consistent four of us, one day. And there might not be. Life so far has felt pretty unpredictable, each phase something I never could have asked for, something I didn't know to want. And so I try to spend less of my time imagining what might be, and instead enjoy what is. I don't mark time. I don't rehearse. I eat alone, and with flatmates, serve special meals to people I love,

fill Tupperware boxes with dishes to be shared outside of my kitchen, and plan long lunches and dinner parties for the weekends. I have written this cookbook, a collection of ideas for all those occasions, for me. And for you, if you're someone whose family changes and morphs; someone whose family is not necessarily always nuclear.

It is at once precisely the life I hoped for, deep in cookbooks aged twelve, while being so far from where I started and where I thought I was going. It makes a strange kind of sense to me that it's a reality that exists twelve thousand miles from where I grew up. Maybe I'm not being fair; perhaps I could have been this version of myself in Australia too. It's impossible to know. What I do know is that I am endlessly grateful to my 21-year-old self for being so in love with the idea of England – an England of English literature – that she was compelled to move across the world. For picking up and leaving without a job, or a flat, or more than a handful of friends, and for setting everything in motion. She spent so many years worried that she had failed that it's impossible not to want to go back and reassure her. To tell her that one day she'll be ecstatic she came to England in search of a specific future. That she didn't find it, that she stayed regardless, and that she built this future instead.

Grocery shopping

I'm forever finding old shopping lists. In my purse, in the pocket of a jacket, tucked into a book, a few collecting in the bottom of my backpack, on the Notes app on my phone. I love coming across them later, little artefacts of a cold walk (with a cold) down the canal in pursuit of 'easy peelers, biscuits, lemsip', or a summer afternoon dreaming of 'chicken, good tomatoes, lemons, something green?, wine'. I even love lists when they're for a catering job, when the shopping is undeniably work: spreadsheets and ingredients and calculations, sectioned off into individual suppliers.

These scrappy little lists all have something in common. When left to my own devices, my shopping basket (virtual or tangible) is pretty same-y. Like most people, I return to the same reliable favourites over and over. I try new things, I test, I taste, but those same fifteen ingredients (the chapters of this book) are going to be in my basket.

Though these fifteen ingredients are the starting points, these recipes will ask for others too. Some of them (oil and vinegar, spices, flour, sugar, dark chocolate) might already live in your cupboard. Others are fresh, flavour-adding ingredients that I find useful, and pretty much always end up on my shopping list too: lemons, dill, shallots, mustard. Sometimes there will be something special to pick up on your way home for dinner that evening: a bag of clams or mussels, a piece of pork belly, a Camembert or block of Cheddar, a head of broccoli or cauliflower, an iceberg lettuce or an aubergine.

What I most want in these recipes is to help you play around, to offer some explicit alternatives where I can. No recipe is ever carved in stone – now that you have this book in front of you, it's your recipe, not mine.

Some general notes on other ingredients

Oil: I tend to have bottles of olive oil and sesame oil for cooking, nice extra-virgin olive oil for not cooking (for dressings and for drizzling), and vegetable oil for deep frying.

Vinegar: I always have cider, red wine, white wine, rice, black rice, and sherry vinegars – it's worth experimenting with different varieties in the recipes that follow, or each time you make a salad dressing. Cider

vinegar had a few big years in my kitchen, but it's sherry or red wine or black rice I'm reaching for at the moment.

Sugar: Technically, I should be telling you not to use sugars interchangeably in recipes, as each variety has specific properties. As a general rule, brown sugar has a higher moisture content, and will therefore keep your baked goods moist; conversely, caster sugar will make a biscuit more crisp. There's a reason, then, that a recipe will call for a specific sugar. But, candidly, I often substitute light brown for golden caster, or caster for granulated, when I run out of one or the other and can't be bothered to venture out – the end result will be a little different, but will still be delicious. A little note that I treat substituting in honey, maple and golden syrups with more caution, as they're less predictable.

Salt: I have regular fine salt for cooking water, kosher salt for cooking and pickling, and flaky sea salt for finishing.

Onions and garlic: I have a bowl on my countertop that always contains a variety of onions or shallots (I'll often use them interchangeably, especially when they're destined to be cooked in the base of a dish), a few heads of garlic, and a few knobbly lengths of ginger. Without them I feel a bit bereft, though I also have a jar of grated ginger in my fridge and garlic granules in my spice drawer, and I'll use them if I'm out of the fresh stuff – again, especially if I'm cooking them into the base of a dish.

Herbs: You'll quickly notice that I have favourite herbs. They don't need to be your favourites. You may not be quite the dill fiend that I am, you might find coriander soapy, you might not long for the resin-like savoury note of rosemary – or you might simply have the wrong herb in the fridge. Rather than letting this put you off a recipe entirely, a quick online search will suggest an alternative if I haven't.

Condiments and sauces: My kitchen contains a genuinely silly number of condiments and sauces given that I am just one woman. There are the hot sauces (Tabasco, Cholula, Valentina, Lingham's), the chilli oils and chilli crisps (Lao Gan Ma, Poon's, White Masu peanut rayu, Maesri, the spring onion oil on p80), the mustards (Dijon, Colman's, Swedish, French's), and the mayos (Hellmann's and Kewpie), a giant tub of tahini, and various bottles of soy, Shaoxing, and mirin. I don't have space to list the pickles. When I don't have much food in the house, I have rice, and I have condiments and I have pickles. And so I have dinner.




EGREMONT
RUSSET


Damsons
£2.50
500g






TURNIPS
£3 kg





Conversion tables

These are approximate conversions.

Weight

Metric	Imperial
15g	½ oz
30g	1 oz
55g	2 oz
85g	3 oz
110g	4 oz or ¼ lb
140g	5 oz
170g	6 oz
200g	7 oz
225g	8 oz or ½ lb
255g	9 oz
285g	10 oz
310g	11 oz
340g	12 oz or ¾ lb
370g	13 oz
400g	14 oz
425g	15 oz
450g	16 oz or 1lb
1kg	2lb 4 oz
1.5kg	3lb 5 oz
2kg	4lb 6 oz

Volume

Metric	Imperial
1.25ml	¼ teaspoon
2.5ml	½ teaspoon
5ml	1 teaspoon
15ml	1 tablespoon
30ml	2 tablespoons
60ml	4 tablespoons *or* ¼ cup
90ml	6 tablespoons
125 ml	½ cup
150ml	¼ pint
250ml	1 cup
290ml	½ pint
425ml	¾ pint
500ml	2 cups
570ml	1 pint
1 litre	1¾ pints
1.2 litres	2 pints
2 litres	3½ pints

Length

Metric	Imperial
5mm	¼ in
1cm	½ in
2.5cm	1 in
5cm	2 in
10cm	4 in
15cm	6 in
20cm	8 in
25cm	10 in
30cm	12 in

A punnet of tomatoes



I should probably confess here that, despite the collection of beloved recipes to follow, my favourite way to eat a great tomato is from my fist, like an apple, bursting with green, fragrant sweetness. In summer I keep them in a bowl on the work surface; they age more quickly this way, and I have to wave away the occasional fly in my greenhouse of a flat, but the taste of a tomato cold from the fridge is, in comparison, always a little disappointing. I'm forever chasing the flavour of the ones I ate straight from the plant while watering the garden before school on a sunny Queensland morning.

For this reason, while I am never without tinned tomatoes in my cupboard, all the recipes in this chapter take advantage of the tomato in its freshest form. There are tins and passata and tomato paste elsewhere in the book, but here, it's all fresh. If tomatoes are out of season, if they're not fragrant in the supermarket, these are recipes to look forward to for when they're back.

Pan con tomate

When my friend Berta came to stay for an extended few months, in that lonely spring of 2020, our mornings began slowly, and often with pan con tomate. I'd had it before, but she was the one to properly get me into it. We'd open the windows to watch people on their daily walks in the streets below, slice oranges into wedges, and brew a pot of coffee. Mid-morning, just before we sat down at our laptops, one of us would get out the box grater, slice some bread thickly, and heat up the griddle pan.

When tomatoes are at their best, I find myself waking up thinking about this dish multiple times a week. It's too simple to include here, perhaps, except that a section on tomatoes would have felt disingenuous without it. This is pure hyperbole, I know, but it tastes like summer, like something that has been warmed by the sun.

This could be breakfast, as it was for Berta and me. In her gorgeous book *How to Eat a Peach*, Diana Henry suggests it as a perfect starter. It's perhaps not an entire dinner, if I was having someone over. I'd be tempted to add more components, a couple of other bowls of things – olives, cured meat, cheese, a salad – for us to pick at. But when I'm eating solo, it is dinner in its entirety, at the end of a long day, when the summer sun is still high.

I start by slicing **a couple of tomatoes** in half, and then use a box grater to grate them straight into a bowl, right down to the skin (I season and snack on the skin rather than grating that too). Sometimes, the tomatoes are a bit watery; if there's too much clear liquid in the bowl, I drain it off.

With a microplane or fine grater, I'll mince **a clove of garlic** into the tomato. If it's small, I'll grate one and a half. I like this so garlicky that I end up thinking a lot about who I'm seeing the next day. I season the tomato with **a generous pinch of salt**, then add **a big glug of my best olive oil**. I'll stir it, taste it, and eat some with a spoon while I prepare the toast.

I slice **a thick piece of sourdough**, though you can use any robust bread you enjoy. I generally cook it on a griddle or heavy-bottomed pan, but under the grill or in a toaster would be fine too. I want my bread charred in places, but not completely burnt. Be generous with the heat: you want the bread well toasted or it will be too soggy once the tomato is in place. Spoon the oil and tomato generously over the toast, and eat. I always go back for a second slice.

Handmade orecchiette with tomato and burrata

for two

My pal Sonia and I came to a conclusion in the darkness of November a couple of years ago. We both had projects to work on; writing that needed to be done. It might be useful, we thought, to organize an Airbnb somewhere warm, somewhere the food was great and the sea was sparkling, where we could eat well and focus on writing, without being distracted. We wouldn't be missing anything, we thought, in England in early March. It's a real dead patch for produce, I pointed out, and Sonia texted back a thumbs up as though this was something she also thought about endlessly.

And so we booked a trip to Puglia: two and a half weeks in the southern Italian sun. We made Polignano a Mare our home, venturing only as far as we could reach in our sandals, eating out in the same small collection of restaurants, pulling together lunches on the terrace before getting stuck into an afternoon of drafting, heading down to the local bar for margaritas and a game of cards when we had finished our writing for the day. I had planned to write, not to spend much time in the kitchen – my greatest distraction when I'm working from home. But, inevitably, the ingredients on offer were too thrilling to resist. After months of winter vegetables, I approached the produce in the grocer's as though greeting long-lost friends: dark green courgettes, artichokes that fit neatly in a cupped palm, tomatoes so ripe and fresh that we could smell them before we stepped into the shop.

We had a spare burrata one lunchtime (a spare burrata!) and the last of a bag of tomatoes that were a couple of days old. We ate these happy leftovers with orecchiette from the deli, fresh basil, and a generous pour of olive oil. It was so good that we did it again the next day. When we returned the following year, it was the first thing we made.

Back home, I've taken to making this dish with friends, often shaping the orecchiette by hand. I love cooking for someone, but what I love most is cooking *with* someone: getting a kitchen messy together, feeling shared success and smugness when sitting down to eat. I love sharing repetitive, meditative little tasks, something that doesn't require much thought, something we can do while the conversation flows, no pressure to check in on the next step. Pasta-making is perfect for this: a task best shared.



Handmade orecchiette cont.

for two

180g semola (fine milled semolina), plus extra for dusting
A pinch of fine sea salt
85ml tepid water
1 burrata
Plenty of your best extra-virgin olive oil, to finish

Sauce
2 tbsp olive oil
500g tomatoes
2 tsp red wine vinegar
A pinch of caster sugar
Cracked black pepper
Fine sea salt
10g basil leaves, roughly chopped

Get the sauce started before you dirty your hands with the pasta. Warm the olive oil in a saucepan, add the tomatoes (cut any that are bigger than a walnut into chunks), and bring to a very gentle simmer so they collapse. Stir occasionally to prevent the sauce burning on the base of the pan. Once the sauce has reduced and thickened, about 20 minutes, taste and season with the vinegar, sugar, pepper, and salt. Stir through the chopped basil and set aside off the heat.

Meanwhile, tip the semola and salt into a bowl or into a heap on your work surface and make a well in the centre. Pour most of the water into the well, and bring together into a dough. Depending on the brand of your flour, you may not need to add all the water; aim for a dough that is soft and pliable but not sticky. Knead by hand for 5–10 minutes until smooth and elastic.

Cut a quarter of the dough away from the rest (cover the remainder in a tea towel), and roll out into a long sausage, about the width of your little finger. Give your work surface a light dusting of semola, check in on the sauce, then start shaping.

Slice off bits of dough, about the size of a tinned chickpea, from the sausage. Run a knife almost parallel to the work surface, dragging it towards yourself over the little ball of dough so that it spreads out and then curls up over the back of the knife. Then, push at the thin centre with your thumb, popping it out, which will keep the rolled piece open. Don't stress too much about the shape of your early ones – you'll get the hang of it! If you're finding it hard to visualise, do what I always do with a new skill and watch some YouTube videos. You might need to play around with finding the right knife too; I tend towards a flexible serrated one (a sharp little tomato knife), but you might prefer a butter knife. As you shape them, lay the pieces on a tea towel lightly dusted with semola, so you can easily shake them off and into the water once you're ready to cook. Repeat with the rest of the dough.

Bring a large pot of well-salted water to the boil and add the pasta. Cook for 4–5 minutes, then scoop out a cup of the cooking water and drain the rest. Stir the pasta through the sauce, adding some of the pasta water if it needs lubricating.

Divide between two bowls, and top each with half a burrata and some olive oil.

for four

Chilaquiles

This is a vibrant, delicious mid-week meal for a small crew of you. It's basically tortilla chips for dinner; what's not to love? It's also ideal for that punnet of tomatoes you forgot about – the one you bought in anticipation of a big sharing salad, the beautifully firm ones you bought to be sliced up and eaten on toast, the ones that are wrinkling a little – a reminder of the fact that you spent the weekend in your pants eating packet noodles and watching *Grey's Anatomy* instead.

Don't get me wrong, this recipe – a classic Mexican breakfast that's just as welcome at dinnertime – would be great with lovely, fresh, bright tomatoes. But if your tomatoes are erring towards overripe, then the dish will be even better; a little heat and a couple of eggs is just what they need, the resultant dish sharp and sweet and sour and zingy.

Salsa
800g plum tomatoes
1 red onion, peeled and halved
2 cloves garlic, still in their jackets
1 jalapeño
Fine sea salt
1 tbsp olive oil

Tortillas*
400ml vegetable oil
400g soft corn tortillas, cut into bite-sized chips
Flaky sea salt

On top
Juice of 1 lemon
1 red onion, very finely sliced into half moons
Fine sea salt
4 eggs
1 tbsp olive oil or butter

*You can buy a bag of tortilla chips if you prefer – my local supermarket has better tortilla chips than it does tortillas!

Start with the salsa. Put the tomatoes, onion halves, garlic cloves, and chilli on a plancha or cast iron pan, and char over a high heat until blackened and blistered. It will take 10 minutes or so; turn them once blackened on one side. Remove and discard the skins from the garlic cloves, and the seeds and stem from the chilli, then dump the whole lot into a food processor and blitz to a sauce. Taste, and season with salt.

Meanwhile, prepare the tortillas, if you're making your own. Heat the vegetable oil to 180°C/350°F (a steady stream of bubbles should issue from the handle of a wooden spoon dipped in the oil) in a high-sided saucepan, then fry the tortillas in batches until crisp and golden brown. Drain on kitchen towel, and season with flaky sea salt as soon as they're out of the oil.

In a wide frying pan, warm the oil and tip the salsa in. Cook down until slightly thickened, only a couple of minutes, then take off the heat and stir the tortilla chips through. You can cook the chips in the salsa over the heat for a couple of minutes, if you like, but I prefer them when they're a little crisp, so I take the pan off the heat as soon as they've been added. Leave the salsa and chips to sit while you pickle the onions and fry the eggs.

Pour the lemon juice over the sliced red onions and add a pinch of salt. Massage together with your fingertips until softened. Fry the eggs to your liking, in oil or butter. Divide up the chips and salsa, add an egg and some pickled onions to each plate, and serve.



for six

Tomato and coconut with saffron rice

Most vivid of my memories of working in an Indian restaurant through my teenage years is the pot of steaming saffron rice I stood over for a significant proportion of each weekend rush. Cooking rice in a pot so large that it could house a ten-year-old child is undoubtedly intimidating; I know for a fact that if I tried to make it now, it would end up clumping (there's a reason rice has never been on our wedding catering menus). But the chefs I worked for were masters of the perfect consistency.

It's been nearly two decades, but I can still smell the floral spice of the saffron and cloves and cardamom, still recall the satisfying feeling of plunging the first flat plate of the evening into the rice, watching the fluffy grains chase each other off it into deep plastic boxes or porcelain bowls. Across the counter, the chefs would be chopping their way through huge tubs of tomatoes and onions, spices already toasting in the pan, the tandoor already on, the temperature in the kitchen already climbing.

I've found Indian restaurants I love since moving here, of course. There's a reason we're spoilt for choice; if you haven't yet read it, Sathnam Sanghera's *Empireland* does a brilliant job of illustrating the enormous and lasting impact of Britain's colonialism, including the arrival of the curry house to the UK. But sometimes I want to stand over the scent of saffron and a dry pan filled with spices in the heat of my own kitchen. I want rice that is a vibrant rubber-duck sort of yellow, and a sauce that clings to ripe, fresh tomatoes.

I've been making Meera Sodha's tomato and coconut curry for years now, and the recipe here owes a huge amount to it: a spice profile that leans on pickling spices (nigella, fennel, fenugreek), the sweet-sourness of ripe tomatoes, and the richness of coconut milk. I've made mine saucier than hers though, mainly because I love drowning the saffron rice in the spiced coconut milk, and scooping the whole vibrant, delicious lot up with flaky paratha. It's not entirely authentic, in terms of being attached to a particular region and, honestly, it's not much like the curries of my teen years either. Regardless, it's the sort of thing that makes me feel like I'm back in the restaurant, a big shouty crowd of us passing dishes around the table.

First, tip the rice into a saucepan, then pour cold water over the top, swirl, and drain. Repeat three times, then add more cold water and leave to soak for 30 minutes. Drain, and set aside.

For the tomato and coconut, toast the whole spices (the nigella, fennel, fenugreek, and coriander seeds) in a hot, dry pan until fragrant. Keep an eye on them, as you don't want them to burn, but it will take a good few minutes. Tip them into a mortar and pestle, and pound the seeds until you have a rough powder. Add the turmeric, chilli powder, and salt, and stir.

Melt the ghee in a wide frying pan, and cook the onions for 15 minutes over a moderate heat until softened. Add the garlic, ginger, and spices, and cook for a couple of minutes. Stir through the tomatoes, followed by the coconut milk. Bring to the boil, then turn the heat down and simmer without a lid for 30 minutes, until thick and sticky. Taste, and season with more salt, if needed.

Meanwhile, while the tomatoes simmer away, melt the ghee for the saffron rice over a moderate heat in a large saucepan. Add the cardamom pods, bay leaves, cinnamon sticks, and cloves, and fry for a couple of minutes until fragrant. Add the drained rice to the pot along with the saffron threads, and stir through.

Season with a pinch of salt and pour in 1 litre of water (it should come one knuckle higher than the rice), then bring to the boil before turning the heat down to a simmer. Cover, and cook for 15 minutes. If you have the heat up too high, the water may steam away before this point, so do keep an eye on it, though try not to take the lid off too often. Once the water dips just below the surface of the rice, turn the heat off, and allow the rice to steam for a further 10 minutes before turning it with a fork and removing the whole spices.*

Bring the tomato and coconut and the pot of rice to the table. Serve with naan or paratha, some samosas, for joy, and a jar of lime pickle.

*The spices in the rice at the restaurant were whole, and I'd sometimes bite down on a cardamom pod or clove when halfway through staff dinner at the end of the night. I'm wary of giving anyone else that same experience, so I count the spices out after the pot has had its steaming time, reassured by their removal.

Saffron rice

420g basmati rice
2 tbsp ghee
5 green cardamom pods
3 bay leaves
2 cinnamon sticks
4 cloves
A generous pinch of saffron threads
A pinch of sea salt

Tomato and coconut

2 tsp nigella seeds
2 tsp fennel seeds
¼ tsp fenugreek seeds
1 tsp coriander seeds
½ tsp ground turmeric
1 tsp Kashmiri chilli powder
½ tsp salt
2 tbsp ghee
3 brown onions, thinly sliced
4 cloves garlic, minced
A thumb-sized piece of ginger, minced
1.5kg tomatoes, ideally little cherry ones, roughly chopped if larger
1 x 400ml tin coconut milk

To serve

Naan or paratha
Samosas
Lime pickle





Tomato jam

The climate in Queensland is good for tomatoes. So good that I'd sneak them straight off the vine when watering them before school, sweet and firm and filled with tiny seeds. We grew bags of them every year; for months, everything we ate was tomato adjacent. And then, towards the end of the season, the challenge was to decide how to keep the last of them around. My grandma – my dad's mum – made tomato jam. I have memories of her spreading it onto homemade pumpkin scones, still warm from the oven. This started as her recipe, and with my addition of cider vinegar it's sweet and sharp and unlike any other jam you have in your cupboard.

Though I'm saying jam here, it strictly sits somewhere between a jam and a chutney, as comfortable on a cheeseboard as it is on the breakfast table. A jar of it came away with us on holiday a couple of years ago – between the evening cheese and the morning bacon sandwiches, it didn't even last 24 hours.

Fills 3 x 350ml jars*

1kg tomatoes
500g granulated sugar
Finely grated zest and juice of 2 lemons
5 tbsp cider vinegar
A thumb-sized piece of ginger, grated

* Sterilize the jars by washing them thoroughly in hot, soapy water, then drying upside down in a low oven.

Make a cross in the base of each tomato. Put them in a large saucepan and cover with boiling water, letting them sit for a couple of minutes until you can see their skins start to lift. Transfer the tomatoes to a bowl of cold water, then peel off their skins. Roughly chop the tomatoes and transfer them back to the (now empty) saucepan.

Add the sugar, lemon zest and juice, cider vinegar, and grated ginger. Place over a moderate heat, and stir while the sugar dissolves. Once the contents of the pan are boiling, reduce the heat to a very gentle simmer, cover, and cook very slowly for an hour, until the tomatoes are completely soft and collapsed. Take the lid off, keep the heat low, and simmer until much of the liquid has evaporated and the jam has visibly thickened. Stir every time you walk past the saucepan – don't let it stick and burn on the base. It should take about 30 minutes; it's done when a spoon dragged through the jam leaves a record of its journey – you should be able to count to ten before the line completely fills again.

Fill three sterilized jars* right to the top, while the jam is hot, and screw the lids on immediately. The jam will keep for a year, unopened; once you crack into a jar, it should be consumed within a couple of weeks.



Dinner ideas

- Spread thickly in a sandwich with a couple of types of cheese: Stilton + mozzarella + tomato jam is my personal favourite. Slather the outside in mayonnaise (as though you're employing Factor 50 on the hottest day of the year), and cook in a frying pan until a rich golden brown on both sides, and melted through the middle.
- Heap into a buttery, cheesy baked potato.
- Leave a spoonful to melt gently in a foil parcel in the oven underneath a fillet of firm white fish.
- Drop a big dollop into a bowl of well-spiced daal.
- Spread over a sheet of puff pastry, top with tenderstem broccoli and some soft goat's cheese or ricotta, and bake at 200°C/400°F/gas 6 for 25 minutes, until puffed and golden.
- Spoon into a sausage or bacon sandwich.



Gazpacho

I say 'high summer' all the time, a reference not just to temperature but to something less tangible. When I say 'it's a dish for high summer', I mean those weeks of the year when the heat is all-consuming, when the weather is the start and end of every conversation, when I arrive into rooms with sweat having already ruined my make-up, when it's so hot I feel brain-fogged and, I guess, a little high. Outside my own head.

Anyway. This is a dish for high summer. Put the oven on first thing in the morning, before the world is too unbearably hot. Once you've done the roasting, it really is just a case of blitzing everything together and cooling it down. Then keep it cool in a thermos, or in a cool-box (this is the only place where I'm going to advocate for eating fridge-cold tomatoes). It's lovely to take outside into the early evening sun. Collect your best pals and some fancy little glasses to drink this out of – in high summer that's all I want.

Serves 4

1kg tomatoes
1 red pepper
5 cloves garlic, unpeeled
5 spring onions
150ml olive oil, plus extra for drizzling
Sea salt
½ cucumber, roughly chopped
1 tbsp red wine vinegar

Slice half of the tomatoes in half and arrange them in a single layer in a roasting tin, along with the red pepper. Add the garlic cloves and spring onions (still with their raggedy outer layers) to the tin, drizzle with a little oil, and season with salt. Place in the oven and set to 210°C/350°F/gas 4. Roast for 50 minutes, until the pepper is blackened and the tomatoes are collapsing and caramelized at the edges.

Remove from oven and put the pepper in a plastic bag, or in a bowl covered with cling film, so it can sweat. Allow everything to cool, then pull the skin off the pepper, and strip the spring onions of their outer layer and the garlic cloves of their skins.

Blitz the roasted tomatoes and pepper, garlic, spring onions, remaining fresh tomatoes and cucumber in a blender or with an immersion blender until smooth. Add the red wine vinegar, taste, and season.

While the blender is running, slowly pour in the olive oil. The soup should be smooth, creamy, and emulsified.

Press the soup through a fine sieve into a bowl, then refrigerate for at least 4 hours. Keep it over ice while you transport it, and serve with a drizzle of olive oil and bread alongside.