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Opening Extract from...

Nourish

Written by Jane Clarke

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NOURISH

DELICIOUS GOODNESS FOR EVERY STAGE OF LIFE

JANE CLARKE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HOWARD SOOLEY

To Maya
& Martin

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Introduction

For me one of the driving forces (if not the major one) in setting up my practice over 15 years ago – where today I treat people ranging from young to old, through every stage of their lives – was realising that if we are to be able to nourish our bodies throughout our lifetime, the food has to be delicious. While one can stomach the odd mouthful of healthy gruel, or indeed get a bizarre buzz out of sticking to an abstemious, punishingly boring diet for a week or two, when it comes down to enjoying life, we need to find foods that are easy, inspiring and scrumptious.

This is the job I love: turning life around for people who have lost their way with eating or who have found themselves in a situation where their body is struggling. It's not about being a holier-than-thou puritan food faddist who is everyone's worst nightmare, or being overwhelmed with the intricate details of the number of micrograms of a specific nutrient within each meal – what I hope this book will give you is knowledge of the key foods to focus on throughout every stage of your life. Whether you're feeling great already and just want to do a little fine-tuning to ensure you're eating the right foods, or need help getting over health problems and want to know how you can enjoy eating the most nourishing foods in a practical and easy way, I hope *Nourish* inspires you.

Keeping it simple

While searching for the words to introduce this, my eighth book, I came across two quotes which for me sum up why I've decided to write it – the first being the words of Voltaire.

'Nothing would be more tiresome than eating and drinking if God had not made them a pleasure as well as a necessity.'

Addressing the nutritional needs and appetites of every member of the family, each chapter follows a typical life stage – the prime years of adulthood, pregnancy and new life, feeding growing children, middle age, cooking for teenagers, and the over 60s. As such it will appeal to every woman with responsibilities, whether you are a mother, wife, lover, sister, daughter or friend. I've chosen not to focus on babies and toddlers as this is a specialised area that has been widely covered in much detail, not least in my own books *Yummy!* and *Yummy Baby!* Here I wanted to equip the woman typically at the heart of the family, whose stamina and dedication supports the wellbeing of a raft of others, right through midlife and beyond.

In the past I used to find a lot of enjoyment in spending a significant chunk of my time cooking, and I still do when I can manage to set aside a few hours at a weekend while my daughter Maya is out playing. But it's now more often the case that like most people, I'm juggling different aspects of my life: being a mum to the most gorgeous and smiley but minxy and chatty seven-year-old daughter, being alongside both my darling and my parents, and doing the work I love. My job involves a lot of travelling between the rural idyll where I write and my practices in London and Leicester and I find that balancing the different roles in the different locations requires me to simplify things far more than ever before.

Keeping things simple doesn't worry me; as you can see from books and films such as *Food Inc* and *Fast Food Nation*, there are worrying consequences in moving away from food that's as simply produced and locally sourced as we can get. I'm not a food-mile fanatic – we have to see far beyond food-mile labels and look at the overall environmental effect of both transportation and production in order to try and make an informed decision over whether a particular food is worth eating. I find all the equations so mind-boggling, that it's hard to decipher whether one food is more environmentally friendly to eat than another ◆. So I have decided to pare down my decision-making process and my shopping habits, and working with the amazing Slow Food Movement (www.slowfood.org.uk), I do what I can to support good local food producers. It's easy to use the Internet to buy from passionate suppliers that I read and hear about from friends.

Read more on:
◆ *Pages 108–109 & 146*

However, I'm not ashamed, and nor do I think anyone else should be, to buy produce from abroad – be this buffalo mozzarella from Puglia, *prosciutto San Daniele*, a slice of Brie or a German pumpernickel bread – for these should and can be part of our lives. I passionately believe we have great ingredients, food producers and chefs in our own countries, but we shouldn't think that we ought not to enjoy being part of a food world.

I also don't shy away from wanting to keep things simple when I'm cooking. People seem obsessed these days with trying to make a complicated meal every evening, especially for children, yet if we look back at the classic teas we grew up with – a lightly fried egg (or flat egg, as Maya calls it) on wholemeal toast or a bowl of pasta with a simple tomato sauce stirred through it – they are completely delicious and provide nourishment for a growing body (and an adult body who doesn't have the energy to make anything more complicated at the end of a long day).

As well as having basic cooking skills, we need to be able to work out the difference between true nutritional fact and the rubbish splashed across the newspaper headlines or in TV programmes. Pseudo-nutritionists' self-made nonsense has left a lot of people confused and feeling as if there's no way they can eat well and healthily in today's society. But nothing could be further from the truth – yes, it's hard with modern pressures to find the time to shop or know what's the best and most nourishing food to buy (not least when food companies are working hard to make their food look super-healthy with labels that aren't easy to decipher), but I hope you will find that you can actually glean all the nourishment you need from simple and delicious foods. For me, online delivery companies, which need not be expensive, are providing an incredibly important link between our farmers and small producers, and us, the consumers. Once you've sourced them and got into the routine of ordering, your goal of eating healthy and scrumptious food can be achieved; so let's keep my second quote, the words of Leonardo da Vinci, in the back of our minds.

'Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.'

My favourite staples

I think we've lost our way a bit, being scared nowadays at seeing ingredients such as custard, cream, crème fraîche and butter in recipes, but it's perfectly possible to eat well and include these ingredients. In the recipe section (see pages 210–251) you'll find a selection of dishes that frequently appear on our table, and can be varied according to what's in season or what you fancy. All these recipes are good for the whole family, but in certain circumstances particular ones can be especially helpful, so I've given suggestions throughout the book to point you in the right direction.

If you're wondering about the calories, I hope this won't be a constant concern for you – it's not so much about how many calories foods have in them, it's whether these calories exist alongside anything nourishing in other ways. For example, a fig-stuffed Bramley apple with a dollop of Greek-style yoghurt will have more calories than the apple on its own, but as a breakfast, one of these will keep you satisfied until lunchtime. So really it's a question of how useful these calories are; if we look at the choice between, say, cooking with ingredients such as a nut butter as opposed to a low-fat spread, one will taste delicious and the other won't. And there is no difference between a large amount of a low-calorie food and a small delectable slice of something higher in calories – it's about controlling your appetite, savouring your food, cooking with good-quality ingredients and serving the food in a way that makes you feel satisfied in every sense.



I also feel with children that to ban sweet foods from the house is counterproductive and unnecessary; you build up the idea of a forbidden food being far more attractive, so they're likely to binge on it when you're not looking. If you cook some chocolate brownies using a good high-cocoa-bean chocolate, for example, the intensity of the chocolate is such that even the most chocolate-loving child will manage only a small piece. If you get them to enjoy it after a meal rather than on an empty stomach, the absorption of the sugar will be slower, which means it's less likely to send a sugar-sensitive child off in a tizzy. If you're trying to tempt the appetite of someone in their later years, a sliver of chocolate brownie with a drizzle of single cream will be sure to get them off the starting block.

Keeping a food diary

There are many occasions when it's helpful to keep a food diary. Often we don't realise what we're eating or how much of it, until it's written down in front of us. A carefully detailed record can be quite an eye-opener and may point to an obvious and simple solution.

It's also an extremely helpful record to take along if you need to seek medical advice. Try to include as much detail as possible and write down any changes and irregularities along with what you consider to be normal patterns.

DATE & TIME	FOOD & DRINK CONSUMED	QUANTITY	SYMPTOMS
	Give as much detail as you can about ingredients too. If your child is involved, they could collect and stick on the labels of anything they buy, such as confectionery, to make them feel part of the process and help you monitor their snacking away from home.	Use household measures, e.g. teaspoon, slice, small bowl etc.	Are you tired, constipated, nauseous? Do you have tummy aches or headaches? Has a rash appeared? Note down any changes to symptoms, which occur both before and after you've eaten.

Cooking and eating is serious business

I found it especially hard to keep within my allotted word count, particularly in the chapter on looking after teenagers, as there are some big issues to discuss. I think we're heading for huge problems with our next adult generation if we don't get food, cooking and eating in the home back on an even keel. The reason why so many young people struggle with obesity, eating disorders, anxiety over body image and mood swings – be this the usual typical teenage grumpiness and volatility or more serious depression – is that so many homes have become ready-meal reheating places rather than those where we sit together to eat and communicate. Often young girls start playing around with mad depleting diets and develop problems because there hasn't been enough good nourishing food in the house and no one has been able to take the time to teach them how to cook and eat properly. If you can keep some simple foods in the fridge and cupboard so that your teenagers can throw together something quick and nourishing, they'll be far less likely to want to go out for fast food. Yours will be the home their friends will want to come to eat at, and although this can be overwhelming at times, it gives you the opportunity watch what they're eating – you can pick up on eating-related problems, protect their bodies from being overwhelmed by too much fast food junk, and, above all, show love and affection through food and eating together.

When it comes to our later years, nourishing food becomes even more important, not least to meet the specific demands that an ageing body places on us but also to ensure that we are still fuelling our bodies with energy. This could be a body that's very fit and healthy, or one which has aged or is struggling with a health problem such as heart disease, dementia or cancer. As relatives and friends of older people, knowing which foods they can best nourish themselves with, and how to help them do this, provides an essential ingredient in living our lives alongside and caring for each other. So often hospitals and care homes get it wrong, as they seem to put the provision of delicious, nutritious food at the bottom of their list of priorities, so that even if you're healthy in old age, getting the right nourishment is difficult. For some older people, health problems arise for no other reason than the fact that they're not being catered for and looked after properly, which is scandalous and inexcusable. I just wait for the time when someone will sue their hospital or care home for the consequences of malnutrition; I can see the dangers of becoming litigious, but when it comes to a basic human right to be well fed and nourished, it's a cause worth fighting for.

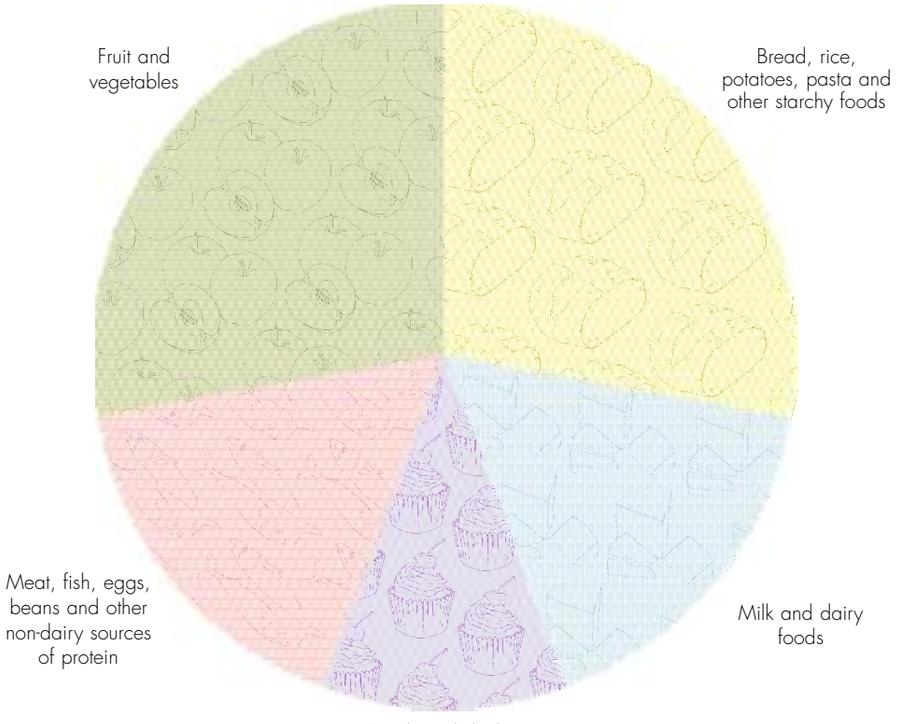
Taking the time to enjoy a nutritious meal should be one of the most rewarding aspects of our later years. One of my favourite restaurants in Paris is *Le Train Bleu*, which is the most beautiful, ornate train restaurant at La Gare de Lyon. Elegant, mature Parisian women sit there in their finery, eating a small herb omelette accompanied by a green salad and a glass of wine. To me, this epitomises how elegant life and eating can be if we know what our bodies need, treasure the ingredients and know how to find and prepare them. Every stage of life can embrace this philosophy, and I look forward to moving on to the next phase knowing that I will still be able to enjoy food, and therefore, life.

Getting to grips with the boring science

I'm generally not a lover of charts and tables as I think we have become far too figure- and measure-focused. I prefer to think of meals like an Italian would – simple, delicious dishes, made up of handfuls of this and a dash of that – rather than obsessively looking at labels like a neurotic shopper. It's far easier as an adult to judge when you need more or less, but when feeding our children or elderly parents, it can sometimes be helpful to have a simple visual place to start. The eat well plate on the next page helps us see what food groups our bodies need. Actually, this is a model that applies to everyone over the age of five and can be gradually introduced for younger children, too as they begin to eat with the rest of the family.

You will see that the two biggest segments are carbohydrates and fibre and fruit and vegetables. Roughly one third of our intake should be from the first carbohydrate group of starches and one third from fruit and vegetables. Of the remaining third, most of it should be from the protein groups of milk and dairy, meat and fish, and non-dairy sources of protein such as tofu. Less than one sixth of our diet should be made up from the fat and sugar group, and of course it is best to eat good fats found in oily fish, nuts and seeds and more natural sugars, be this from fresh or puréed fruit or honey for sweetness. That said, cakes and puddings shouldn't be seen as an evil so long as they're eaten in the right proportions and ideally have some nourishing ingredients in them such as fruit, oats, wholemeal flour, spelt ◆, nuts, nut butters etc. Bear in mind that it isn't necessary to follow the model at every meal, but rather over a day or two.

Read more on:
◆ *Page 182*



Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates that are grain-based, as opposed to fruits and vegetables, are broken down into complex and simple varieties. These should form a large part of our diet because they are the best source of the energy you need in order to get around and to feel well and energetic. Complex carbs are incredibly rich in nutrients and give you consistent energy throughout the day, reducing the likelihood of you becoming tired and grumpy, which can be the case with simple refined carbohydrate/sugary foods.

The great complex carbs, which have had the least processing, are unsweetened mueslis, porridge oats, wholemeal and wholegrain breads, wholemeal muffins, pitta breads, cornbread, brown rice, millet, spelt, barley and buckwheat noodles. Simple carbohydrates are those that have had most of their fibre removed and may well have been bleached and refined – these are found in the white breads and pastas (and of course the biscuits and cakes) we see in the supermarket. We can usually, and indeed should try to, include some of these simple carbohydrates in our diet, unless as an adult you find that they just don't suit you. We should try not to make them our only source of carbohydrate because most of the goodness has been removed along with the husk of the grain, so we don't find as much of some of the minerals and vitamins that occur naturally in the complex carbohydrates. Most white flour used for bread is fortified with calcium ◆, iron, niacin and other B vitamins, and this can be good especially for children and adults who aren't able to tolerate dairy products or simply don't like them. However, it's much better if you can include some wholemeal and wholewheat carbohydrates in your diet as well.

Just as too much simple carbohydrate means we don't feel satisfied enough after eating (it's the fibre within the husk in complex carbs that makes you feel full), it's not good, especially for children and older people, to eat too many complex high-fibre carbs either. Too much wholegrain can be bulky and upset the gut, which means that you don't get enough energy from your food. As a result, young children (below 13 months) may not grow as well as they should, some people may feel tired all the time, and in extreme situations (though I've only seen this a few times) wholegrain can reduce the absorption of essential minerals such as iron and calcium. A lack of these minerals means children could develop weak bones and iron deficiency anaemia ▲, which though common in older people is thankfully rare in little ones.

Read more on:
◆ *Page 20*
▲ *Pages 70–71*

Fibre

Fibre is needed to help keep our digestive system working efficiently and our hearts healthy; it also helps to balance our blood sugar, which affects our energy levels, our ability to concentrate and learn and reduces the chances of us developing conditions such as diabetes and certain cancers. Fibre is found in two main forms in our diets – soluble and insoluble – and we need both.

Soluble fibre is found mainly in fruits, vegetables, pulses and grains such as oats. Insoluble fibre is found in the husks of grains such as wheat and rye, so rye bread and the wholemeal varieties of bagels, muffins, cakes, etc. are rich sources. Insoluble fibre tends to keep the gut moving well and while soluble fibres can help the gut, they're more efficient in maintaining blood sugar levels and the heart through their positive effects on cholesterol and other fats in the blood. To maximise the amount of fibre in your diet, it's best to keep the peel on fruits such as apples and pears and to include some wholegrain products, such as porridge for breakfast or wholemeal bread in sandwiches.

Fruit and vegetables

Fruit and vegetables are also classified as complex carbohydrates and they're great for both children and adults. From the age of five you should be having five portions of fruit and veg a day, so that you get plenty of vitamins, minerals and fibre. Although we recommend five portions of fruit and vegetables a day, I think we'll soon be increasing this to seven, as there are so many benefits to eating a plentiful 'crop' of fruit and vegetables. Every cell in the body will benefit from the nutrients contained in fruits and vegetables.

It's good to vary the fruits and vegetables as much as possible because some are particularly rich in certain minerals and vitamins (spinach in iron and carrots in beta-carotene (vitamin A), for example). Tinned, frozen, cooked and dried fruits and vegetables can be as nutritious as fresh ones; if you bear in mind how practical they are, they can be great ingredients to turn to. If they've been heat-treated, tinned fruits and vegetables contain a little less vitamin C, but most manufacturers compensate for this by adding vitamin C to their products in supplement form. Opt for tinned fruits in natural fruit juice, not sugary syrup. Although wrongly seen as inferior, frozen fruits and vegetables are frozen soon after they have been picked, which means they are just as healthy as fresh (unless you're lucky enough to grow your own or have a generous neighbour, allotment or local market). I find frozen berries a particularly useful standby, and defrost them as and when I need them to use in smoothies, cereals, crumbles and compôtes. Fresh, raw fruits and vegetables usually contain more vitamins and minerals than cooked ones, but they can sometimes play havoc with your digestive system, in which case you may find that cooked fruits suit you better, for example: poached peaches or pears (in a juice such as orange juice, not in wine); baked apples; apricots, plums, greengages; or roasted and puréed vegetables such as roasted butternut squash with shavings of Pecorino cheese or pieces of buffalo mozzarella.

Proteins

Smoked haddock salad, page 225

Proteins are essential for growth, brain development, healthy bones and the production of happy hormones called endorphins. Amino acids are the building blocks of proteins and there are a total of 22 – eight of which (ten for children) are called essential because we can't make them in our body and must therefore get them from our food.

Proteins are divided into two groups: animal and plant. Animal proteins include chicken, seafood, fish, red or white meat from pork, beef, game and lamb, eggs, milk, butter, yoghurt and cheese. They are sometimes referred to as primary proteins, as they contain all eight essential amino acids and are considered to be the most important ones for growth. Plant foods rich in proteins are pulses, legumes, lentils, tofu and other soya products, and you can get some protein from cereal grains such as quinoa and from buckwheat and seaweed. As delicious as these foods are, they are referred to as incomplete proteins because they don't contain all of the essential amino acids, so you'll need to eat a combination of nuts, seeds and grains in order to receive all you need ◆. Children should have some protein along with carbohydrate every day, but adults don't always need the starch found in bread etc.

Read more on:
◆ *Page 98*

Roast mackerel with potatoes & thyme, page 223

Fats

We all, especially children and older people, need fats in our diet. Fats are necessary for brain function, particularly to help children learn, behave and concentrate; they provide some insulation under our skin so we don't lose too much body heat (this is particularly the case with older people); they produce essential hormones to ensure healthy growth and development, especially in children, teenagers and those wanting to become pregnant. Some fat is also needed to ensure good absorption of fat-soluble vitamins such as vitamin D.

The majority of normal-weight people should be eating enough good fat and not just tucking into low-fat foods, which can sometimes be high in sugar, taste inferior and leave you feeling deprived. It's all about knowing which are the better fats for us to eat. The long chain omega-rich fatty foods (see below) are most effective and good for virtually every part of the body. Other fats from dairy produce such as butter, cheese, cream, yoghurt and milk are fine to include in your diet, as in the right amount, they also contribute calcium, magnesium, vitamin A and a little vitamin D.

Omega-3 fatty acids

The most effective omega-3 fats occur naturally in oily fish as eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). They also occur naturally in seeds as alpha-linolenic acid (ALA). Good sources include linseed (flaxseed) oil, linseeds, soya bean oil, pumpkin seeds, walnut oil, rapeseed oil and soya beans. They are good for healthy brain function, the heart, joints, and general wellbeing.

The body can convert ALA into EPA and DHA, but not very efficiently. This is why oily fish plays such an important role in a non-vegetarian diet. Oily fish contain EPA and DHA in a ready-made form, which enables the body to use it easily. The main sources of oily fish include salmon, trout, mackerel, herring, sardines, pilchards

and kippers, either fresh, frozen, canned or smoked. Unfortunately the exception is tinned tuna, as it doesn't contain the high levels of omega oils found in fresh and frozen tuna but is still a good source of protein.

Vitamins and minerals

The reason I haven't included a specific nutrients chart, with quantities of this and that, is that I want you to feel completely free to find out what works for your own body. Everyone is different and our needs change constantly – one day we may need to stock up on a plentiful supply of energy, while other days we rely on these stores to keep us going. Both of these scenarios are fine, but it's important to know the sort of nutritious food pillars you should try to include each day, bearing in mind that on days when you're not able to nourish your body as well as you'd like, your body will have enough in reserve. There are plenty of websites and books that will give you more detail in milligrams and micrograms, charts and diagrams, but I want *Nourish* to be the place you turn to for inspiration, just as much as knowledge.

Fat-soluble vitamins

Vitamins are classified as fat- or water-soluble. Fat-soluble vitamins are absorbed with fat through the intestine into the circulation and then stored in the liver.

Vitamin A (beta-carotene) is needed for healthy growth, skin, teeth and vision. It protects against infections and is a powerful antioxidant, so helps prevent diseases such as heart disease and cancer. The best sources are cantaloupe melon, pumpkin, squash, carrots, peaches, apricots, red and orange peppers, tomatoes, liver, egg yolk, dairy produce, mackerel and herrings.

Vitamin D is important for the absorption of calcium, building and maintaining strong, healthy bones and teeth. It also helps muscle function and works with vitamins A and C to boost your immune system. Vitamin D is mainly manufactured by the skin when it's exposed to sunlight, but the following foods are also good sources: sardines, herrings, salmon, tuna, dairy produce and eggs.

Vitamin E is an antioxidant needed for healthy skin, a good strong immune system, a healthy heart, and in creams helps reduce scarring. It's found in all vegetable oils, avocados, broccoli, almonds, sunflower seeds, eggs, soya and wholegrains, which include oatmeal, rye and brown rice.

Vitamin K is great for building and maintaining healthy, strong bones and essential for helping blood to clot properly – you may recall that babies are given an injection of vitamin K straight after birth. Vitamin K can be found in bio yoghurt, egg yolks, fish oils, dairy produce and green leafy vegetables.

Read more on:
◆ *Pages 70–71*

Water-soluble vitamins

With the exception of vitamin B12, which is stored in the liver, water-soluble vitamins remain in the body for a short time before being excreted by the kidneys – so you need to keep up your intake.

Vitamin B1 is needed for energy production, carbohydrate digestion, heart function and helps children concentrate and their brains generally to function well. It is found in wholegrain foods, such as good cereals and bread, oats, rye, millet, quinoa, legumes, pork and liver.

Vitamin B2 is needed for digestion of carbohydrates, but also fats and proteins, and generally helps our bodies derive enough energy from food. It's also needed for hair, nails and the development of sex organs. The best sources are bio yoghurt, fish, liver, milk, cottage cheese and green leafy vegetables such as spinach.

Vitamin B3 (also known as niacin) is good for the sex hormones and other hormones connected to the digestive system, such as insulin, the hormone that regulates blood sugar levels in the body, and also for thyroxine, serotonin and other mood and brain hormones. Vitamin B3 is generally found in the same foods as vitamins B1 and B2.

Vitamin B5 is needed for conversion of fats and carbohydrates into energy and also for supporting the adrenal glands, which regulate the stress response in the body. It also ensures a strong immune system. We find it in wholegrains, rye, barley, millet, nuts, chicken, egg yolks, liver and green leafy vegetables.

Vitamin B6 is needed for a strong nervous system, for an equally robust immune system and to help repair the body when it gets injured. The main sources include poultry such as chicken and turkey, lean red meat, egg yolks, oily fish, dairy produce, cabbage, leeks and wheat germ.

Folic acid or folate, if from the natural source (vitamin B9) is perhaps most famous for its role in preventing neural defects during pregnancy, but it's also good for the immune system, energy production and preventing anaemia ◆. It's found in good old dark green leafy vegetables such as kale, spinach, asparagus, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, egg yolks, carrots, apricots, oranges and orange juice, pumpkins and squashes, melons (particularly the cantaloupe variety), wholewheat and rye. You can also get cereals and bread fortified with synthetic folic acid.

Vitamin B12 is needed for growth, digestion and nerves, as well as the production of energy and healthy blood cells. It's found in red

meats such as beef, liver and pork, shellfish and other fish, eggs and dairy produce; for vegetarians, you can also find it in seaweed and spirulina.

Vitamin C is needed for a strong immune system, a healthy heart, good skin, preventing diseases like heart disease and cancer in later life, and helping bumps, scratches and cuts to heal properly. The best sources are kiwi fruits, blueberries (in fact, all berries), pomegranates, citrus fruits, potatoes, pumpkins and squashes, sweet peppers, green leafy vegetables, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower and spinach.

Biotin is needed for hair and nails, skin and energy production. It's found in brewer's yeast, brown rice, nuts, egg yolks and fruit.

Minerals

Calcium is essential for bones, teeth and the heart, and is needed to help our muscles work properly. It's found in dairy produce, small-boned fish such as sardines and anchovies, green leafy vegetables (except spinach, which contains oxalic acid, hindering our ability to absorb calcium), soya products such as soya milk, soya mince and tofu, almonds, sesame seeds (so tahini and hummus are great), sunflower seeds (which I roast and give Maya as a snack with sultanas and raisins) and dried fruits such as apricots. You can also buy calcium-fortified breads, even orange juice, although it's much better to get most of your calcium requirement from natural sources.

As dairy products are such a rich source of calcium, three portions each day should be sufficient to meet an adult's daily need of 700mg of calcium. Try to choose low or reduced fat versions to avoid too much unhealthy saturated fat. A portion includes a glass (200ml) of full-fat, semi-skimmed, 1 per cent or skimmed milk; 250ml calcium-fortified soya milk; 40g hard cheese, such as Cheddar, Brie, feta, mozzarella or Stilton; 125g soft cheese, such as cottage cheese or fromage frais; a small pot (150g) of low-fat plain or fruit yoghurt; fruit smoothie made with 200ml milk or 150g yoghurt.

Iron is important for growth and development and crucial in the production of healthy red blood cells, which carry oxygen around the body. It can be found in liver, lean red meat and egg yolks, as well as foods suitable for vegetarians such as lentils, fortified breakfast cereals, dried apricots and figs, nuts, spinach, kale, seaweed (if you can get your children to eat it!), watercress, broccoli, baked beans, oatmeal, avocados, asparagus, sunflower and sesame seeds and fresh herbs, particularly parsley.

Magnesium helps the body deal with stress, generate enough energy and build strong healthy bones. It also helps the muscle and nervous systems. It's found in citrus fruits, green vegetables such as broccoli, cabbage, nuts and seeds, bread, fish, meat, dairy produce, dried fruits (especially figs and raisins), tomatoes, garlic, carrots, potatoes, aubergines, onions and sweetcorn.

Selenium, which works alongside other antioxidants such as vitamin E, is essential for the immune system and to protect us from skin cancer. It's found in brazil nuts, which can be ground into a delicious mix with seeds to sprinkle on cereals or in porridge, all fresh fruits and vegetables, shellfish, sesame seeds, wheat germ and bran (so healthy cereals are a good source), tomatoes and broccoli.

Zinc is best known for being involved in the immune system, but it's also good for sexual development, regulating moods, the nervous system and brain function. Sources include fish and shellfish, lean red meats, wholegrains, poultry, nuts and seeds, eggs, cauliflower, berries, dairy produce such as yoghurt, oats, rye, wheat germ, brown rice and buckwheat.

Potassium is found abundantly in many foods, and is especially easy to obtain in fruits and vegetables such as chard, mushrooms, and spinach. It can help your muscles and nerves to function properly, lower your risk of high blood pressure and heart problems, ease fatigue, irritability and confusion, and reduce chronic diarrhoea. Older people are more at risk of too much potassium in the body as their kidneys are less able to eliminate any excess.

Sodium is a component of salt, which is naturally present in the majority of foods. Most people eat more salt than is good for their health. It's recommended that adults eat no more than 6g of salt (equivalent to 2.5g of sodium per day). The daily recommendations for children are 2g (1–3 years old), 3g (4–6 years old), 5g (7–10 years old) and 6g (11+ years old). Three-quarters of our salt consumption comes from packaged foods, such as breakfast cereals, soups, sauces and ready meals, so it's easy to inadvertently have too much. Don't mistake sodium levels on labels for the salt content – you need to multiply this by 2.5 to get the salt value ◆.

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Food storage

Something I've found that makes an enormous difference to how fresh and tasty food stays is to look closely at how we wrap and store it. For example, transferring opened tinned foods into sealed plastic containers stops the food being spoilt by contact with the air and metal – once you lose the protective heat-treated seal of the unopened tin, food can spoil very quickly. Often re-sealing technology doesn't live up to expectations, and you're better off taking the food out of the packet and putting it into a plastic container or a good-quality resealable bag. With good wrapping, we not only reduce our risk of food poisoning, but also reduce our

food wastage and the contribution that makes to carbon emissions from landfill sites.

If you haven't already found them, try the specially designed food-preserving bags that can make a bag of salad leaves last for days after opening instead of collapsing and drying up. Banana bags, indulgent as they sound, keep bananas fresh as you can store them in the fridge for a couple of weeks (without these special bags bananas go black in the fridge).

Making the most of your fridge

Try not to put too much food into your fridge, as you want the air to circulate properly – this keeps the temperatures at the required levels to keep the food fresh and not spoil. As with cupboards, stock them in rotation so that you use the older yoghurts, etc. before new ones.

Most butchers don't recommend leaving uncooked meat or poultry wrapped in clingfilm or plastic for long, as it goes slimy and can't breathe. Ideally, remove all packaging and wrap it in greaseproof paper, then put it on a plate so that it doesn't drip anywhere. Cold cuts and salamis dry out easily, so wrap them well. Fresh and smoked fish can stay in its sealed bag and is best well wrapped.

Cheese tends to sweat and spoil more easily wrapped in clingfilm – it keeps better in waxed paper, which prevents it from drying out. Oils and butters can go rancid with heat and time (oxidised fats are unstable and aren't good for the heart), so buy enough butter for the week or freeze it in small portions. I'm careful to keep bottles of oil in a cool place away from the cooker, and I keep special extra virgin oils in the fridge (they turn cloudy as they cool, so you need to get them out about an hour before you want to use them). Eggs are often debated over – I don't keep mine in the fridge, but many recommend you do, as this maximises freshness. However, cold eggs tend to crack more easily when you boil them, and if you want to make meringues or mayonnaise you need to get them out of the fridge for a few hours beforehand.

Fruit and vegetables are best left unwashed before they're popped into the fridge, but I tend to wash everything apart from salad and soft berry fruits (best left in their punnets) beforehand, as it means I can just grab something as I fly out of the door. Do check out the stay-fresh-longer bags as they've made a real difference to my food spend and to how much enjoyment Maya gets out of a crisp, fresh-tasting carrot as opposed to a slightly off-peak one. It's always a good idea to wash salad in fresh, cold water and eat it within a day of purchasing. Pure fruit and no-added-sugar jams need to be stored in the fridge, as they don't have the usual high sugar content to act as a preservative.

Be aware of food poisoning

Don't panic if your child picks up a bit of food off your kitchen floor and pops it into their mouth – it's not ideal, but it won't kill them and there are real advantages for their immune systems if you don't keep them in a sterile environment. Children (and adults) need to get into the habit of washing their hands after going to the toilet and before meals, but at the same time, the old saying 'Dirt is good' is true. However, when cooking for young children and older people, you need to be vigilant with food hygiene because they are more at risk of poisoning from wrongly stored or badly cooked food. Food poisoning is more common when budgets are stretched, as it can be tempting to think that best-before dates can be extended a little to help eke out the shop for a few more days. Although with correct storage some extra time can be safe, as with food hygiene, you need to be careful when it comes to children, older people or anyone with a compromised or vulnerable immune system. Best-before dates are there for a reason – to protect us from food poisoning bacteria – so take notice of them even if it means wasting food.

The freezer – my life saver

Bolognese sauce, page 218

Now I'm a mum, I'd be lost without my freezer. Not only does it mean that I can cook meals in advance, but also, from a very practical point of view, it has simplified my shopping routine. I tend to freeze portions of sausages and bread, and also freeze milk (which has to be pasteurised). I also freeze small bags of freshly grated Parmesan, as the taste is far superior to the ready-grated kind. Eggs can be frozen if they're beaten lightly (don't freeze whole), either yolk and white together or separated into yolks and whites for use in sauces or to make meringues. You can freeze egg whites without doing anything to them, but with yolks you need to beat them a little and add a pinch of salt or sugar (remember to label which you've added!). Boiled eggs, mayonnaise, custard, yoghurt (unless it's made into a frozen yoghurt pudding) and single cream don't freeze well, although double cream can be frozen when whipped.

Don't use frozen food for dishes that require re-freezing, as not only can this affect the texture of the dish, but more importantly it may increase the risk of food spoilage or poisoning bugs growing. Freezing doesn't kill all bacteria, which is why you must make sure all food is well wrapped in special freezer bags, plastic containers

or extra strong foil, and that it is reheated and defrosted thoroughly. Remember that young children and older people are more likely to get ill with food poisoning, so you need to be extra careful that you reheat to the correct temperatures to completely cook the food. It's fine to then let it cool down a little, but make sure you don't just heat it to a lukewarm temperature you think is right for your little one to eat, as if you do this not all the bugs will have been killed.

Freezing is also a good way to take advantage of good buys in supermarkets, as you can buy more for less money and most importantly not waste any. Picking your own fruit and popping it into the freezer is best of all, as you're getting the most nutritious fruit fresh from the plant. For a family a freezer is a life and sanity saver, and the frozen produce can be great nutritionally as well as in cost value.

Freezing bread

Bread freezes well but goes stale more easily in the fridge, so to make best use of a loaf, divide it as soon as you've brought it and freeze it in manageable quantities – if you're making a packed lunch it works well to freeze a couple of slices in a small bag and take it out of the freezer last thing at night. It also means you can have different breads on different days and not have to waste any. If bread is more than a few days old turn it into croutons or use it for bread and butter pudding or as the base of a soup. It can also be whizzed up to make breadcrumbs (which can also be frozen) to use as a coating for fish fingers or chicken drumsticks, or to go in burgers, falafels, home-made sausages or stuffing.

Freezing fruit

Most fruits freeze well, and this can also be a good way to preserve some vitamin C. Freezing puts a time freeze on the natural reduction in vitamin C, meaning you end up with fruits higher in vitamin C once they come out of the freezer.

Berry fruits are best frozen separately on trays, then packed together in plastic containers. Stone fruits such as plums, damsons and peaches can be frozen with stones in, but I tend to take the stones out and then, like berries, freeze them separately on trays and pack them together once frozen. They're all great for future jam, fruit sauce, chutney and compôte making. With cooked fruits I've got into the habit of filling small freezer bags that I can take out and throw into the microwave for a few minutes if I want a late afternoon snack or in the mornings for Maya to have with porridge (it takes only about five minutes to go from frozen to hot).

Citrus fruits freeze surprisingly well – simply peel and segment oranges (ideally seedless) and freeze as above to make delicious little popsicles for children. This is also a good base for making marmalade if you have a glut of oranges, lemons, limes, grapefruits or other citrus fruit. Finely grated lemon, lime and orange rinds freeze well in ice-cube trays and are great for adding to fruit crumbles, cakes, curries, etc.

Freezing herbs and spices

Herbs and spices can be made economical and practical to grow by freezing them, chopped, in ice-cube trays, to be popped out ready to season sauces, tagines, curries, casseroles, soups, etc. I don't think frozen herbs work as well in raw dishes, as they're slightly mushy when thawed. Alternatively make up a batch of herb-based sauces, such as basil pesto. I find that grated fresh ginger also freezes well and is a great addition to soups, stir-fries and curries.

The natural oiliness of spices means that they can turn rancid easily in a hot light kitchen, leaving the final dish somewhat fusty and unpleasant. So only buy small amounts at a time and ideally store them in small dark jars and in a cool place. Whole spices tend to last longer and give a fresher taste. You can freeze most spices as long as they are well wrapped.

Tandoori chicken, page 221

Check out your cupboards

Like the fridge and freezer, if you look at the way you store dry and tinned foods, the family shop will stretch further and the food will stay fresh, taste good and reduce the likelihood of any little creatures making a nest! The ideal is a cool, dark larder with slate or tiled shelves and racks for vegetables, etc., but this isn't usually the norm. The best choice of cupboard in which to store your food should be as cool as possible, not near an oven, and well ventilated. Even tinned and packet foods will deteriorate and spoil in hot rooms.

Dried goods such as flour can grow moulds – especially the wholewheat versions, which contain more fat because the grains have natural oils in them. Storage jars are ideal for opened dry goods, but remember not to just top them up but use the oldest rice, pasta, etc. first. Tear off the use-by date from the packet and pop it into the jar so that you can keep on top of using food at its best. Cereals can go off and lose their freshness quicker than you think, so keep the waxed inside packets tightly sealed or transfer into storage jars if little hands have loosened their packaging. The same applies to porridge oats – there is a natural oiliness in the whole flakes of oats, so keep them well wrapped. As tempting as BOGOF (buy one get one free) deals are, they often make us buy too much food, so that you end up eating it past its best or throwing it away – unless you're a dab hand with the freezer, in which case making a big batch of pasta sauce with tomatoes bought on offer is ideal.