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Opening Extract from...

Do-Ahead Dinners

Written by James Ramsden

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James
Ramsden
creator of
The Secret Larder
supper club

Do-Ahead DINNERS

How to feed friends and family without the frenzy

Photography by Yuki Sugiura



PAVILION

FOR ROSIE

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NOTES

1 teaspoon = 5ml; 1 tablespoon = 15ml.
All spoon measurements are level.
Both metric and imperial measures are given for the recipes. Follow either set of measures, not a mixture of both, as they are not interchangeable. Medium eggs should be 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.



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INTRODUCTION

The Secret Larder supper club was born in the spring of 2010, perhaps a month after my sister and I had moved into the chemistry classroom in a converted schoolhouse, and a year after the London supper club movement had begun to take shape. These were informal restaurants crowbarred into people's living rooms and kitchens, helmed by chefs on sabbatical or, as in my case, enthusiastic cooks.

There was, I suppose, no great concept. I wanted an excuse to cook for lots of people on a regular basis and my sister Mary was happy to play front-of-house. We'd exhibit different artists and photographers, rope in friends to help in return for food and wine, and base menus on whim or weather.

Before we knew it, powered by social media and some vigorous emailing, we were booked up for the next few months, despite no one yet having actually eaten any of the food or assessed the ricketiness of the furniture. I soon realized that as far as the food was concerned, the only way to feed twenty people four courses, with one oven and four hobs, and in full view of everyone (it's an open kitchen, so no hiding from guests or putting dropped food back on plates), was to cook as much as possible in advance.

This wasn't the restriction it first seemed. It meant I could be organized hours before the first knock on the door, it meant I could talk to guests when they arrived instead of being wedged in the kitchen, and it meant that the experience of feeding a bunch of strangers was, far from being an ordeal, enormous fun.

It was a theory that was put most rigorously to the test when we moved the supper club to Printers and Stationers, a wine shop in East London with all the atmosphere we could have hoped for, but nothing that really resembled a kitchen. So now I cook everything at home, chuck it in the back of the car, and turn up just in time to stick on an apron and dish up.

I'm becoming increasingly convinced that this is the ideal way for anyone to cook for guests, as it eliminates one of the greatest stresses of feeding people – that of being in a deranged flap when it comes to dinner. This way, instead of being the stereotypical panicked and mucky-aproned host when your friends arrive clutching bottles and shaking umbrellas, you are in a state of complete control and composure. You can mix drinks, dish out something to nibble on, and actually have a conversation with your guests.



The cooking side of things becomes so much more enjoyable, too. You are not cooking against the clock or racing anyone, but rather taking things at your own pace and on your own terms. It is you who is in charge, not the recipe writer.

THE RECIPES

This is the food I like to cook, the food I want to eat. It is home cooking with perhaps only the slightest swagger – simple recipes with just enough of a twist to lift them above the quotidian.

Each recipe is divided into sections according to what you can do ahead, and what you need to do to complete the dish before serving. (This is not a book of lasagnes and cottage pies – there will, with many of these recipes, be a couple of things that need doing to finish each dish. My aim is to keep cooking for friends as stress-free as possible, eliminating the scope for last-minute cock-ups while maintaining a sense of freshness and, I suppose, modernity.) Of course, such a system is not exhaustive. There is nothing stopping you from sweating some onions and then buggering off for four hours before continuing with a dish. But it would be nigh on impossible for me – and impossibly dull for you – to cover every eventuality. I've tried to break recipes up into natural stages.

The most important thing is to read a recipe in full before you start cooking, in order to work out the best way forward for you.

As for the kit required, well, there's nothing out of the ordinary. I use an ice-cream machine but it's not essential; a food processor is handy but you can largely get by without one; a blender is useful for soups – a handheld stick blender works just as well and is much cheaper. I'm afraid it's really just the old clichés of a decent sharp knife and a couple of solid saucepans that I'd view as, if not quite essential, at least more efficient than a dull knife and flimsy pans. Oh, and bowls. You can never have too many bowls. Because you're preparing food in advance, you're going to need somewhere to store it, and a good set of mixing bowls that stack neatly in a cupboard will be your best friend.

I have cooked all of these recipes in one form or another for twenty people at the Secret Larder. None of them is outrageously complex or challenging. Some are relatively quick to throw together, and others take a little longer. In the age of the 15-minute meal, I'd say this is no bad thing.

PLANNING A MENU

First of all I would urge you not to feel as if you have to serve three or four courses. Many of these dishes happily stand alone – a soup for a midweek supper, a roast pork belly for Sunday lunch – and so there's no need for a banquet if you lack the time or energy. But should you decide to roast the whole hog, then there are one or two things to keep in mind.

You need a menu that is practical. As important as dishes that work together in terms of balance and flavour, are dishes for which you have the right kit and crockery. So if you only have one large saucepan, then make sure your menu doesn't require three. Create a menu with a balance of cold and hot dishes, so that you're not trying to keep ten things warm at once. If your starter requires the use of the grill, then make sure the oven isn't already spoken for. This sort of planning will help to make your dinner run seamlessly.

As for the food itself, I'm reluctant to prescribe full menus – you know what you like and what you feel you can cook – though there are a few suggestions on p.234 should you need some inspiration. Really you're just looking for a balance of lightness and colour, of texture and temperature. Go with your gut.

MULTIPLICATION

The majority of recipes serve between four and eight people. Halving recipes is generally a straightforward operation. But if you're multiplying, particularly several times, it's worth taking a second to consider which ingredients don't need direct multiplication. For example, if you are doing three times a risotto recipe, you will need three times the amount of rice, but you won't necessarily need to bulk the onion and celery up by so much, and you certainly won't need to double the amount of oil. It's rarely disastrous if you do in fact whack everything up several times (though careful with chillies), but you can save yourself time and money by being judicious.

IF YOU NEED HELP

If you have any questions or concerns, please do get in touch, either via email – james@jamesramsden.com – or Twitter @jteramsden, or using the hashtag #doaheaddinners.



Little sweet things

It's funny how even at the end of a dinner of Churchillian proportions you can almost always find a corner of your belly into which to tuck something sweet – the thinnest of chocolate mints, or the ambassador's favourite chocolate and hazelnut confection. I am never one to refuse a Malteser. But to think that a friend had bothered to spend an extra half hour putting together one more morsel with which to send me off into the night will only endear them to me further.

Some of these recipes don't have a 'tart' section. Please don't think me lazy, but in these cases it's because I feel they're quite tarty enough already.

In do-ahead terms, they can all be done several days in advance, and many freeze well too.

CHOCOLATE TRUFFLES

MAKES ABOUT 15 TRUFFLES

150ml/5fl oz/2/3 cup double (heavy) cream
100g/3½oz dark chocolate
50g/1¾oz milk chocolate
1 tbsp brandy (optional)
2 tbsp unsweetened cocoa powder

These are my standard sweet things for the supper club. Even the most ham-fisted, harassed cook couldn't mess them up, and they can easily be done while you've got three other things on the go. Most importantly, they are delicious, and if you can casually drop a plate of homemade truffles as rich, dense and chocolatey as these on the table then your friends will think you a quiet genius.

UP TO 5 DAYS AHEAD:

Put the cream in a small saucepan over a low heat and slowly bring to a boil. Meanwhile, smash up the chocolate. When the cream is just about to boil, take it off the heat and throw in the chocolate pieces. Leave to melt for 5–10 minutes, then stir the brandy through vigorously until smooth and glossy. Cover and chill.

Remove from the fridge and, when softened a little, use two teaspoons to shape the mixture into evenly sized balls. Roll between your hands for neatly shaped truffles – though I tend to squidge them into something more rustic – then toss in the cocoa powder. Store in the fridge in an airtight container.

TART: Add ½ tsp chilli powder along with the brandy for a good kick. A pinch of sea salt never hurts, either.
TWEAK: Play around with liqueurs instead of the brandy – Grand Marnier, Kahlúa or Frangelico all work well.



FLORENTINES

MAKES 12

vegetable oil for brushing
2 tsp plain (all-purpose) flour, plus some for dusting
15g/½oz/1 tbsp butter
3 tbsp caster (superfine) sugar
2 tbsp double (heavy) cream
75g/2¾oz/¾ cup flaked (slivered) almonds
2 tbsp chopped candied peel
2 tbsp chopped glacé cherries
a pinch of sea salt
50g/1¾oz dark chocolate

My first encounter with Florentines was at Bettys Tea Rooms in Harrogate with my American aunt Rita. It seemed to me then that she'd made the trip from the States purely in order to get her hands on a Florentine, such was her excitement about a pilgrimage to that anachronistic little tea room. At about that same time – I suppose I was four or five – I believed that Rita and I were able to communicate telepathically across the Atlantic. Assuming this is still the case, a written dedication to her would be unnecessary, but just in case the reception is poor, this one's for you Aunt Rita.

UP TO 3 DAYS AHEAD:

Preheat the oven to 160°C/325°F/Gas mark 3. Line a couple of baking sheets with baking parchment, brush with vegetable oil and dust with flour.

Melt the butter in a saucepan, add the sugar and flour and stir until smooth. Add the cream and stir to combine, then take off the heat and stir in the almonds, chopped fruit and salt. Spoon onto the baking sheets, a teaspoon at a time and leaving a decent gap between each. Flatten slightly with the back of the spoon, then bake for 15–20 minutes, until golden. You may need to do this in two batches.

Meanwhile, break up the chocolate and melt in a heatproof bowl over a pan of barely simmering water.

Put the baked Florentines, upside down, on a wire rack and brush the flat undersides with the melted chocolate. Leave until cool, and store in an airtight container.



BROWNIES

MAKES 20

200g/7oz/generous ¾ cup unsalted butter
200g/7oz dark chocolate, broken up
3 eggs
250g/9oz/1¼ cups caster (superfine) sugar
1 tsp vanilla extract
125g/4½oz/1 cup plain (all-purpose) flour
50g/1¾oz/½ cup chopped walnuts
a good pinch of salt

These are, I realize, just puddings in miniature. But there's something about little brownies that is somehow seductive. Perhaps it's because you don't think they 'count', being only really very small and innocent. They're quite handy, too, for a meal where you don't feel the need to serve pudding but still fancy something sweet at the end.

UP TO 3 DAYS AHEAD:

Preheat the oven to 180°C/350°F/Gas mark 4. Line a baking tin, approximately 27 x 20cm/11 x 8in, with greaseproof paper.

Melt the butter and chocolate in a heatproof bowl over a pan of barely simmering water. Meanwhile, beat together the eggs and sugar with the vanilla extract. When light and pale, beat in the melted chocolate. Fold in the flour, walnuts and salt, and tip into the baking tin. Bake for 30 minutes, or until firm on top. It should still be good and moist, so the clean skewer test is no use here. Leave to cool in the tin.

Cut into small pieces and store in an airtight container.

TART: The child in me can't resist the idea of adding white chocolate buttons to the mixture along with the walnuts.
TWEAK: Omit the walnuts if you prefer.

BAKLAVA

MAKES 20

400g/14oz/2 cups caster (superfine) sugar
250ml/9fl oz/generous 1 cup water
juice of ½ lemon
1 tbsp orange blossom water
20 sheets of filo pastry
200g/7oz/generous ¾ cup butter, melted
300g/10½oz/2½ cups shelled pistachios, roughly ground

This Middle Eastern confection comes in many guises, though the common theme is their finger-gluing stickiness and intense sweetness. They are best served, therefore, with something strong and bitter like coffee.

UP TO 3 DAYS AHEAD:

First make the syrup: put the sugar and water in a pan over a low heat and stir until the sugar has dissolved. Turn up the heat and bring to a boil. Simmer for 10 minutes until thick and syrupy. Take off the heat and add the lemon juice and orange blossom water. Leave to cool.

Preheat the oven to 150°C/300°F/Gas mark 2. You can use a small baking sheet or 20cm/8in diameter cake tin; trim the pastry sheets so they're about 1cm/½in wider than the baking sheet or cake tin. Lay 10 sheets of filo pastry in the tin, brushing each sheet thoroughly with melted butter. Spread over the ground pistachios, keeping back a small handful, and then top with the remaining sheets of filo, again brushing each with butter.

Using a sharp knife, cut the baklava into about 20 squares or diamonds. Bake for 1 hour. Remove from the oven and pour over the syrup. Sprinkle a little of the remaining pistachios in the centre of each piece. Leave to cool. Remove from the tin and store in an airtight container.

TWEAK: Pistachios are quite expensive, so you could replace half of them with ground walnuts.

ROSE MARSHMALLOWS

MAKES 50

4 tbsp icing (confectioners') sugar
4 tbsp cornflour (cornstarch)
vegetable oil for brushing
10 gelatine leaves
400ml/14fl oz/scant 1¾ cups water
500g/1lb 2oz/2½ cups caster (superfine) sugar
2 tbsp rosewater
2 large egg whites

Of all the petits fours I've served at the supper club, these have perhaps got the best reaction. For one thing, nobody can quite believe you've made marshmallows yourself, though in truth they're incredibly straightforward. This makes quite a lot, but they'll keep a good while – perfect for bonfire night.

UP TO 3 DAYS AHEAD:

Mix the icing sugar and cornflour. Oil a 20 x 30cm/8 x 12in baking sheet and thoroughly dust with some of the icing sugar and cornflour mixture.

Soak the gelatine in 150ml/5fl oz/⅔ cup of the water for 10 minutes. Meanwhile, put the remaining water, the caster sugar and rosewater in a saucepan and whisk over a low heat until the sugar has dissolved, then bring to a boil and simmer for 15 minutes: the temperature should reach 127°C/260°F on a sugar thermometer, or, when a drop of the liquid is added to cold water, it should form a soft ball. Add the gelatine and its water. Simmer for another 2 minutes, until the gelatine has dissolved, then strain into a jug.

Whisk the egg whites until stiff, then slowly pour in the gelatine mixture while continuing to whisk. Keep whisking for a good 10 minutes until the mixture is thick and glossy, then tip into the prepared baking sheet. Chill for a couple of hours until set.

Dust a chopping board with the remaining icing sugar and cornflour mixture. Run a knife around the edge of the marshmallow to loosen, then tip onto the chopping board. Cut into squares and roll in the sugar, then leave on a wire rack to dry for a few hours. Store in an airtight container.



SALTED CARAMEL CHOCOLATE

SERVES 6–8

vegetable oil for brushing
200g/7oz dark chocolate
100g/3½oz milk chocolate
75g/2¾oz/5 tbsp butter
125g/4½oz/generous ⅔ cup soft brown sugar
1 tsp sea salt
100ml/3½fl oz/7 tbsp double (heavy) cream

The credit for this naughty slab must go to my wife Rosie, who, along with two friends, took over the supper club for their own night, Pigs in Pinnies. I merely sat and gleefully ate. And ate and ate.

Serve fridge cold. Ideally with a hammer.

UP TO 2 DAYS AHEAD:

Lightly oil a small baking sheet or dish and put it in the freezer.

Smash up the chocolate and put it in a heatproof bowl. Place over a pan of barely simmering water and melt, stirring occasionally. When melted, tip onto the chilled baking sheet and refrigerate until set.

Melt the butter in a saucepan and add the sugar and salt. Stir until the sugar has dissolved, then add the cream. Simmer for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally, until thick and sticky. Pour all over the chocolate. Leave to cool, then return to the fridge until ready to serve.

To serve, smash up with whatever you have to hand and put the shards on a chilled plate.

TWEAK: Don't muck about with melting and resetting chocolate, and just pour your caramel over a big slab of dark chocolate.

MINI MERINGUES

MAKES 12–15

vegetable oil for brushing
2 egg whites
100g/3½oz/½ cup caster (superfine) sugar
100ml/3½fl oz/6 tbsp double (heavy) cream
1 tbsp icing (confectioners') sugar
¼ tsp vanilla extract
150g/5½oz blueberries

A very handy recipe for when you've got a few egg whites kicking about. It requires little effort, and the meringues freeze quite merrily.

UP TO 3 DAYS AHEAD:
Preheat the oven to 150°C/300°F/Gas mark 2. Line a baking sheet with baking parchment and brush lightly with oil.

Whisk the egg whites until stiff, then whisk in the caster sugar, a little at a time. Continue to whisk until stiff and glossy. Using a teaspoon, put 24–30 spoonfuls of meringue mix on the baking sheet. Put in the oven and cook for 5 minutes. Turn the oven off but leave the meringues in there until the oven is completely cool.

UP TO 4 HOURS AHEAD:
Whip the cream until thick, then add the icing sugar and vanilla. Keep whisking until thick.

1 HOUR AHEAD:
Take a meringue and put a good blob of cream on the underside. Stick a blueberry into the cream and then squidge together with the bottom of another meringue. Repeat for the remaining meringues. Store in the fridge in an airtight container.

TART: Fold a little raspberry or cherry cordial through the meringue mixture when stiff.
TWEAK: Instead of blueberries, use another small fruit – wild strawberries would be terrific.

CANTUCCINI

MAKES ABOUT 30 BISCUITS

250g/9oz/2 cups plain (all-purpose) flour
150g/5½oz/¾ cup granulated sugar
½ tsp baking powder
¼ tsp salt
zest and juice of ½ orange
zest and juice of ½ lemon
2 eggs, lightly beaten
¼ tsp vanilla extract
150g/5½oz/1 cup almonds (skin on)

These Tuscan treats are deceptively simple – there's no great art to their creation, instead more of a chuck it all together act. The dough, you should be warned, is very sticky. Don't fret. Pretend you're at playschool.

This recipe is based on the one in Susan McKenna Grant's beautiful *Piano Piano Pieno* (HarperCollins, 2006).

UP TO A WEEK AHEAD:
Preheat the oven to 200°C/400°F/Gas mark 6. Line a baking sheet with lightly floured greaseproof paper.

Mix the flour, sugar, baking powder and salt in a large bowl and make a well in the centre. Throw in the orange and lemon juice and zest, eggs and vanilla, and mix together thoroughly. Now briefly knead through the almonds.

With lightly floured hands, divide the dough into two pieces and roll into slightly flattened sausage shapes. Transfer to the baking sheet and bake for 20 minutes.

Remove from the oven and cool for 5 minutes, then slice at an angle. Lay the cantuccini flat on the sheet and bake for a further 10 minutes. Cool and store in airtight containers.

Tuscans serve these with cold vin santo. You could, too.

DATE BALLS

MAKES 20

125g/4½oz/generous ½ cup butter
175g/6oz/generous ¾ cup caster (superfine) sugar
200g/7oz/1½ cups stoned dates, finely chopped
1 egg, beaten
1 tbsp milk
1 tsp vanilla extract
½ tsp salt
a small handful of chopped nuts (optional)
50g/1¾oz/2 cups rice crispies
a handful of desiccated coconut

These are a particularly American treat, which my mum makes every Christmas.

UP TO A WEEK AHEAD:
Melt the butter in a saucepan and add the sugar and the dates. Stir and bring to a gentle boil. Simmer for a minute or two, then take off the heat. Stir through the egg, milk, vanilla and salt and mix until smooth, then add the nuts, if using, and the rice crispies. Set aside until cool.

Form into small balls and roll in desiccated coconut. Store in an airtight container.