

I taught them to cook – by Jenny Ridgwell

It's the summer of 1972 and I've bought myself a pink, nylon overall to start my new job, teaching cooking in a comprehensive school in east London. The overall just skims my mini dresses and stops the boys seeing my knickers when I bend over to check their cooking in the ovens, but it does cling and give off static sparks when I wear my nylon jumpers underneath. While my teacher friends have bussed off to the Costa Brava to return golden and refreshed for the new term, I'm spending the holidays squatting on the sticky floor of the cookery room in my new school, cleaning up. The cupboards are full of grimy baking trays and I've stacked the blackened saucepans to soak in hot caustic soda in the butler's sink. The only way my skin will turn brown this summer is if the scalding caustic soda splashes over my pink Marigold gloves.

Cooking has been my passion ever since the head teacher in my Northampton school told me I couldn't study Domestic Science. It was for the lower groups, people who weren't too clever, and I must take Latin and Science instead.

My parents were called to school and told

'She'll never go to university or get a job if she learns about cookery, so she must study Science.'

How I longed to join the classes that came out of the food room, their biscuit tins filled with sugary, crusted rock cakes and spicy gingerbread. They smelled of nurturing and not the fierce chemicals that we used in the school laboratories.

At home, things were no better and I was rarely allowed in the kitchen.

'Get on with your homework, Jenny. You're too messy and too slow to cook.'

My mother was busy with her teaching job and housework, and although she cooked everything from scratch, her meals were hurried and horrid.

I wanted to plead with her -

'Did I learn to swim by staying out of the swimming pool? No!

So how am I supposed to learn how to cook if you won't let me in the kitchen?'

I kept silent to avoid a shouting match and went to Bristol university to study Science. I rented a room with my own Baby Belling cooker, and my journey into magic recipes began. Graduation led to teacher training where I specialized in Domestic Science, and never let on how little I really knew about cooking.

And now my passion has become my work, teaching teenage boys and girls cookery and hoping to inspire them with my excitement for food. My science degree helps with the chemistry behind many cooking processes, and I can dissect fish and frogs to display their nervous systems, so I'll surely be able to gut and prepare any fish or chicken? If not, Marguerite Patten's Full Colour Cookery will see me through any difficult cooking moments.

How wrong that turns out to be.

This is my second teaching post and at twenty three I'm head of home economics in this bustling senior school, where students come to take their CSE, O and A level exams. I'll be judged by the success of their results. So no pressure then!

Public transport is tough to east London from Hampstead, where I live in a rented room in a run down flat which I found through an ad in the Evening Standard. I've recently split up from my long term boyfriend Mark, who has found someone else to share his bed, so I'm single and coping alone with my new challenges. For the journey to work I've bought an old, dark green Mini Traveller with plenty of space in the back for carrying shopping, marking and cooking equipment. The salesman calls it 'timber framed' as the chassis is decorated with strips of pine, but with forty five thousand miles on the clock, I sometimes call it Stuck or something ruder. The yellow and silver AA badge screwed to the front bumper gets a salute from the AA man if I drive past when he's outside his AA box on the Kettering to Northampton Road, and help from the AA proves to be very welcome on my regular drives home from London to Kettering up the M1. I always break my journey back to London at the Blue Boar Cafe at Watford Gap,

the first motorway service station in Britain where I drink thickly brewed tea and check under the Mini's bonnet to see if it's about to blow up.

Before the start of term, I drive home to make the final preparations for this important job and pack my Mini Traveller with new clothing and visual aids. Funny how I still think of the Midlands as home, yet I have no intention of returning.

Leicester market has Friday stalls filled with bargain rejects from the local factories and I stock up with the latest platform shoes, white plastic boots, and a suede mini skirt. From the fabric stalls I bargain over rolls of Crimplene, cotton, and PVC material with a fruit and vegetable design to decorate the interest corner in my classroom. At night time I hammer out clothes on my mother's Singer sewing machine. Short, easy care dresses and flared skirts for school. Halter necks and hotpants for my London night life, if I ever get time.

The combine harvester is reaping the fields near home, so my mother helps me pick and bundle together long stalks of ripened wheat, barley and oats, before it is cut for processing.

'Show them where our food comes from Jenny. They may not know.'

And I pack my treasured copy of Marguerite Patten's recipe book.

On my new drive to work, I leave behind exciting ingredients which are appearing in the north London shops. Avocado pears, which are served in special glass dishes, sprinkled with salt and pepper, bitter green and black olives in tins and shiny, purple, aubergines. New restaurants are opening too - a Pizza Palace in Campden, the Spaghetti House in Hampstead and in the wine bars, people sit at dark candlelit tables sipping glasses of Beaujolais or Cote de Rhone red wine. Cooking and eating in London are changing rapidly and I want to share these ideas with my students.

My new school is surrounded by comfortable streets, lined with terraced houses where working class families have lived for many generations. Many men are employed in the

docks and the printing works by the river Thames and the wives tend to stay home, looking after the family. The mothers, fathers, aunts and uncles of my students have attended this school, and not much has changed over the years. Their family tea of meat and two veg is served promptly at six o'clock, and jellied eels and tripe and onions are treasured dishes of this area.

And they'd like their kids to bring home something really nice from my lessons. If they're sending cookery ingredients into school, they want a well cooked cake or pie in return. Something all the family will eat. I must tread softly and not bring too many fancy modern ideas crashing into the classroom.

So what kind of cooking has been going on in this room before my arrival? In the store cupboard, the shelves are packed with bags of Tate and Lyle sugar, huge tins of bright red jam, and glass jars stuffed with shrivelled sultanas, sticky glacé cherries and vivid green stems of crystallised angelica. On busy days a handful of sultanas, some glacé cherries and a chunk of angelica might do for my lunch. The greying dust in the spice jars betrays faint smells of ginger, mixed spice and cinnamon, but their pungency is long lost. Industrial sized sacks of flour, which I later discover to be riddled with flour mites, are stacked on the wooden floor, which is littered with tiny, dried mouse droppings. The flour will need thorough sieving before we use it for cooking!

The dilapidated fridge hides three ingredients. 1. A plastic tub of fishy smelling fat, labelled 'Margarine from County Supplies' with no ingredient's list and no date stamp. It could be made from wartime whale oil for all I know. 2. A huge lump of lard wrapped in white greaseproof paper. 3. A pot of dried yellow glob which was probably egg glaze for pies and pastries.

From these meagre food stores I must magic up dishes. The school secretary has told me I have £50 a year for my food allowance to cover ingredients needed for my students who don't bring in their own from home and I'm expected to pay for food for my own demonstrations.

'You'll eat it Jenny, so that's fair.'

I wonder how I will afford to teach if I have to pay for all the things that I make each week. How will I get them to taste and try different foods if I don't have the funds for ingredients?

As the weeks pass I must conjure flour, fat and sugar into rock cakes, fruit scones, jam tarts, fairy cakes and gingerbread. But I must also teach them about healthy eating and how to cook nutritious family meals. This new job is going to be a challenge.

### **Term begins**

At the start of the Autumn term the school smells fresh and clean from its summer scrubbing. My teaching timetable shows I have two free lessons a week when I can plan and mark, sort out my equipment, order food, get cookery demonstrations ready, clean the room, empty the bins and do the washing. I'll lose this time if colleagues are off sick and I must spend several break times patrolling the school grounds, checking for mischief behind the bike sheds.

So how will I manage when cakes are still cooking, the bread is baking and the stews are bubbling on the stove? I can't lock up my room and let all these dishes fail. In Maths the students close their books and go, but cookery is different. Food doesn't behave like a book. You can't just pack it away when the bell goes.

There's another challenge I'll need to work on. I discover that Science, Art and Woodwork have technicians to help them with classroom preparation. But previous cookery teachers have managed without such support, so it seems I must too. We'll see about that when I've settled in, but for now 'Drudge and Dishwasher' needs added to my job title, Head of Home Economics.

My class lists are full and many boys have chosen to cook. I later learn that this is to avoid the 'harder' lessons. It seems that cooking is easy, so if you can't read and you misbehave, then the cookery room is for you. New to the school, I have no choice in who

comes to my lessons, but staffroom gossip tells me that my discipline skills will be challenged and there are some naughty names on my lists.

When I started teaching in the seventies, I didn't know that I was one of the first teachers to have boys and girls for cookery. Before then, girls did cookery and needlework and boys studied woodwork and metalwork. The old textbooks that I have to use assume that 'housewives' do everything so I'll have to retype the text and make new worksheets to appeal to boys.

### **The first lesson**

The class is waiting in the corridor in a pushing line. The boys eye me up and down as I unlock the door, and I wonder if my short mini skirt, ribbed nylon sweater and red suede shoes is the best fashion choice for this first session. Never mind. Soon I'll be enveloped in my nylon cooking overall and will morph into prim cookery teacher.

Today, appearances matter, and all sides are making judgements.

'Enter the room in silence and sit down please.'

The boys barge in and dump duffle bags and blazers on my Formica tables.

The girls in the group look as anxious as I feel.

And they are looking at my shoes.

And my skirt. And my bag.

I wait for calm then turn to write on the battered roller-board. Blackboard is too good a name for this obstacle in my cooking space. The chalk makes teeth-tingling squeaks as it marks the green shiny surface but only some faint white letters show clearly. I read aloud to the waiting faces.

'My name is Miss Whitney and you will be studying Home Economics.'

There are rumblings from the tables.

'I chose cooking Miss, not that home stuff.'

The lumpy boy at the front is annoyed.

'Your name?'

'Len, Miss. Where's the other teacher gone? Why are *you* here? Are you a proper teacher or just on supply like the rest?'

No one has said why my predecessor left, but from the filthy state of the cookery room, she was clearly in a hurry to get out and go to a quieter job in the country.

I call the names on the register, and learn the cheeky names first.

'Alan and Maureen. Can I have your attention please? Next week we're going to start cooking.'

The pair snuggle and look surprised that I know their identity. I'm told they need watching as they often bunk off school and sneak home together.

'You bring your own ingredients and I'll supply some from my stores, which you have to buy. You're doing exams so you'll need to work hard, learn new skills and do your homework.'

I ease into my pink nylon overall and button it up severely.

'Bring your stools and come round my demonstration table. I'll do a quick dem to show you how to prepare apple crumble, which you'll make next week.'

'Dem, dem! I came to cook, not for a dem.'

Len is cross and the rest of the class is grumbly. They came to cook and all they've got is a new teacher telling them about exams, work and skills and homework they don't want to do.

'We'll be using the new metric measurements for our cooking. Grams and litres are in. Pounds, ounces and pints are out.'

'Me mum's never cooked with those new things Miss. I'll use ounces or the cooking won't work. We do things the old ways – tried and tested.'

Liz turns to her friends perched on stools around her. She wants them to agree that this metric idea is nonsense, and this new teacher is not right, and their cooking will be ruined. I've clocked Liz as a name to be watched. Her school skirt is twisted high above her chubby knees, and the striped school tie hangs provocatively down her cleavage.

'Look, Liz. You're using decimal coins now instead of the old shillings and pence and that was easy. So now you can change ounces to grams. The government says I must teach you to weigh and measure in metric, and I've rewritten all the recipes you'll be using. And I've thrown away all the old scales and measuring jugs and got these new ones.'

So there. Stick that up your jumper if you wear one.

It's true. The government has said it has to be done, and 1971 was the start. There is no looking back. In my previous school we threw out all the old imperial stuff. Out went the sturdy metal jugs, which measured pints and fluid ounces and in came plastic jugs with metric millilitres. Out have gone the old, heavy weighing scales with their metal weights measuring pounds and ounces and in have come some plastic scales.

Sadly the new jugs are so badly made that many lose their measuring lines after a few washings. And the cheap, plastic scales which measure in grams and kilos have a plastic arm that swings round on a dial, and if a clumsy student pushes too hard on the weighing bowl, the arm snaps off, broken forever.

But the metric mission must move forward, and we must get on with it.

'Listen, I've put up a conversion table of ounces to grams on the wall so you can easily work it out and explain things when you get home.'

Metriation is not that simple. People can't decide how many grams there are in an ounce. Or how many millilitres there are in a pint. And the rest of the world, outside the school room doesn't listen to government directives and just carries on as before.

Milkmen deliver pints of milk in glass bottles, pubs sell beer in pint and half pint glasses, the greengrocer prices his fruit and vegetables by the pound, and supermarkets stock lard in half pound packs and sell flour in three pound bags. How are things ever going to change? And when?

But in the classroom we must press forward into the new metric future.

The government says so.

'OK, class. Next week you'll make apple crumble using the rubbing in method which is a very important skill to master so you can move onto pastries and rock cakes. Sieve the flour and sugar into your mixing bowl and rub in the margarine till it looks like breadcrumbs.'

I'm allowed one glass bowl to use for demonstrations so they can see through and discover how things should be done. I hope my limited cooking skills won't suffer from such critical scrutiny.

I lift the floury sugar into the air and squeeze in the margarine.

'What is this method called, class?'

'Rubbing in Miss.'

From the sniggers I guess some of them are not thinking of cooking.

Let's get this lesson nailed. I peel, core and slice a cooking apple into a small enamel pudding dish, sprinkle with sugar and cinnamon then top with the light, crumbly crumble which will bake to a golden crunchiness.

'Here's the recipe and your homework.'

I've been busy on the Banda machine rolling out recipe sheets for apple crumble with metric measures, and a miserable homework to learn Important Hygiene and Safety Cooking Rules ready for a test next week.

They stuff the papers into bags and shuffle out, their teenage liveliness suppressed, but I know and hope it won't last long.

### **Apple crumble**

Everyone who has ever cooked at school has made crumble. It's one of Britain's great puddings, sold in the finest restaurants and served for school dinners.

You can liven it up by putting sultanas and almonds with the apple, but this is the basic recipe made with a few simple ingredients.

Serves 4

500 g Bramley cooking apples

50 g sugar for the apples

150 g granulated sugar for the crumble

300 g plain flour

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

150 g butter or margarine

Method

1. Heat the oven to 180°C / Gas mark 4.
2. Cut the apples into quarters, take out the core and peel off the skin. Cut into smaller sections and place in an ovenproof dish with 50 g sugar.
3. Place the flour, sugar and cinnamon in a large bowl and cut in small chunks of butter or margarine.
4. Rub in the butter until the mixture looks like breadcrumbs, then spoon the crumble over the apples.
5. Bake in the oven for 30 – 40 minutes until the crumble is golden brown.
6. Serve with custard or cream.

### **Spaghetti bolognese**

'Throw the spaghetti at the wall – if it's cooked it will stick'.

On TV, the rather stern cook, Zena Skinner, has shown us how to make the latest fashionable dish, spaghetti bolognese. I've never cooked spaghetti but I want to modernise my cooking lessons and if it works for Zena, it will do for me.

My grandmother is the only person I know that cooks pasta. Her macaroni pudding is made by mixing full cream milk, dried macaroni and sugar in a glass Pyrex dish, sprinkling the top with grated nutmeg and then baking it in a slow oven for two hours. The soft, creamy macaroni lurks under a brown, chewy skin and this is my favourite pudding.

In the fifties I'd watched Richard Dimbleby on our grainy black and white TV screen showing us the annual Italian spaghetti harvest. We were amazed to see workers picking off the long, soft strands of spaghetti which hung from the branches of trees and then piling them into huge wicker baskets. It turned out to be an April Fool's joke but the BBC were kept busy for many weeks answering letters on where to buy these wonderful trees.

In the sixties Heinz added pasta to their 57 variety range. Tinned spaghetti appeared in a gluey, bright orange tomato sauce. The spaghetti is so soft you can mash it to a pulp with a spoon. Heinz moved on to Alphabetti spaghetti, tiny pasta letters in the same gloppy sauce, and children like to push the letters around the plate in the hope of spelling rude words.

The shops near my school don't sell pasta, so I visit a Hampstead delicatessen and buy several long packs of dried spaghetti wrapped in soft, dark blue tissue paper with a red and white label with Italian instructions which I can't translate. The spaghetti is over two feet long and I wonder how we are going to get it into the pot without snapping.

My bolognaise recipe is made from four ingredients - butcher's cheapest mince, lard, onions and tomato ketchup. Lard and fatty meat are everyday food. We don't worry about saturated fats - we don't even know about them.

Garlic, tomato purée and oregano are off the list. My students think these fancy foods just mess things up.

Barry has already warned me that I must cook plain food.

'Me dad won't eat it if you put that rubbish in - he'll give it to the dog, Miss.'

Barry is plump and likes his food. He will do anything for me if he is rewarded with something to eat. Scrub out ovens, clean dirty baking trays, finish my washing up and all for a morsel of food. I probably helped Barry to become unhealthily overweight in later life.

We fry the mince and onions in lard until brown, stir in some tomato ketchup, add enough water to make a sauce and then leave it to simmer.

Next we put large saucepans of boiling water on the stoves then twirl in the long, dried spaghetti, letting the stiff strands soften and cook. They wait and watch as the spaghetti swirls and softens.

'OK class. Now we test the spaghetti to see if it's done. See if it is soft.'

'Miss, the water's too hot – I can't get the spaghetti out.'

Barry sucks his hot fingers.

Oh lawd. I'd forgotten to tell them a basic rule of health and safety. Don't pull the cooked spaghetti out with your hands. Boiling water scalds.

They choose some poking tools and before I can shout al dente, long strands of soft spaghetti arc across the room, sticking to cookers, fridges, and any person or surface that gets in the way. They have returned to childhood and I have suggested the game. Any chance to mess about is seized with gleeful hilarity.

'Stop! That's enough! You're being silly and playing about! Calm down!'

Snakes of spaghetti are stuck to the walls and cookers. The uncooked stuff has probably dropped behind the worksurfaces and cupboards, to be retrieved by visiting mice, or swept up in the end of term room clean.

Zena's test will not get repeated. It may work for her in a quiet TV kitchen but in a cookery room full of teenagers it's a daft idea. A sensible cooked spaghetti test is needed for next time.

But now we'll present it like Zena, so we coil the cooked spaghetti into take home dishes, spoon over a mound of sauce and sprinkle with grated Cheddar cheese. Parmesan cheese is off the shopping list. It's another exotic ingredient that would send the meal dogwards, and anyway, we can't afford it.

They bring me their cooking for a mark out of ten to reflect effort, enthusiasm and most importantly, how much of their washing up has been done.

Then it's covered with foil. No cling film in the classroom yet, and packed into shopping baskets for collection at home time.

Except for the boys, that is.

East London boys don't carry shopping baskets.

Or put things in cake tins.

Or duffle bags.

They don't like bringing in cookery ingredients either.

'Can you buy the ingredients Miss and we'll pay you back?'

And for most of them, taking home their cooking stuff is a total embarrassment.

'Can we eat it now Miss? We'll clear up honest.'

Barry and Len spend lots of time in my room, looking through recipe books and generally helping out. There are times when their support has really saved me from the mayhem of washing and cleaning and checking the ovens, so I'm pleased to return the favour.

So while other teachers meet to gossip, snack and smoke in the staffroom, my cookery room transforms into an eatery.

The tables are set - blue checked seersucker tablecloths, spoons, forks and blue Beryl Ware plates. This is a proper sit down meal, and perhaps I'll teach them how to twirl the spaghetti around a fork and eat it neatly.

'This foreign food is nice Miss. I'm going to cook it for me dad.'

Barry and his friends clear away and charge out the room. The bell goes and it's time for my next lesson - lemon meringue pie and jam tarts and all before tea time.

### **Spaghetti bolognese from the 70s**

This recipe, made from minced beef, onion, lard and tomato ketchup is not exactly a gourmet dish. Change the ketchup to tomato paste, swap the lard for olive oil, and add some fresh oregano and grated Parmesan cheese for a modern touch.

Serves 4

400 g minced beef  
25 g lard  
1 onion, finely chopped  
3 tablespoons tomato ketchup  
Pinch mixed herbs  
100 g spaghetti  
salt  
50 g grated Cheddar cheese

#### Method

1. Fry the mince with the lard and chopped onion until the meat turns brown.
2. Stir in the tomato ketchup, mixed herbs and a little water to make a smooth sauce.
3. Cover the pan with a lid and cook gently for 10 minutes.
4. Half fill a large saucepan with boiling water and add the salt.
5. Dip one end of the spaghetti in the water, wait till it softens, then wind the spaghetti round in the water until it is completely covered by the water. Boil quickly for 10 minutes with the lid off, until the spaghetti is tender.
6. Throw it at the wall if you like! If it sticks it is done.
7. Drain off the water by pouring the contents through a colander which is held over a sink.
8. Place the spaghetti on a warm serving dish, pour the meat sauce over it and sprinkle grated cheese on top.

#### **What's in a name?**

The caretaker is taking down the Housecraft sign on my door, and wants to know the new title. Will I choose Cookery, Home Economics, Domestic Science or Food and Nutrition? What on earth is the name of the subject I teach? Can you think of another

subject that has five different names? If a magazine changed its title this frequently, it would have gone bust, out of print and defunct long ago. If a chocolate bar had five different name changes no one would buy it.

So what are we teachers, passionate about helping kids learn about cooking and nutrition supposed to call ourselves?

I've realised that people think that while most school subjects require a few brain cells to master techniques and learn the facts, anyone, anywhere can learn cooking. But I teach things that matter to students, their families and future generations, and I'm going to prove this to my new school, teachers and all.

I've decided that all my students will take an exam. If I let one person off the challenge, they'll disrupt the rest of the group. So it's one goal for all. They'll do a two and a half hour practical cooking exam followed by a written paper. And if they fail, I fail, as the results are posted on the school walls for all to see.

For the practical exam they must prepare two course meals, bake cakes, bread, biscuits and pastry and show as many skills as they can cook up in the time. I reckon this is the most challenging exam that a sixteen year old can take. Not only must they produce an edible, attractive display of food on time, but they are marked throughout their cooking on technique, safety and hygiene.

My exam training camp starts immediately the autumn term begins. There is homework after each lesson, and anyone that forgets has a detention.

Well this is my goal.

Excuses come in.

'I left me homework – cooking ingredients – list of things to buy - on the bus, in the street, round Molly's house',

'Me pen ran out I didn't have a pen I didn't have any paper',

'Me dog ate it It's down with the pigeons I had to go up London',

'Jimmy took it and won't give it back Jimmy thumped me so I thumped him back.'

Detention means I stay late at school supervising miscreants, but as the autumn term progresses, the detention group dwindles.

This means two things. A few learn that I mean business. Most of don't care and bunk off. No amount of threats produces any work.

But back to the door name. In the end it's simple – I am teaching them how to cook! I'll get the caretaker to order one which says 'Cooking done here!'

Head of Home Economics has to do instead.

### **Getting ready to cook**

All my student cooks must be properly dressed so I start my lessons with the chant – 'Hair, hearings and hands.'

'Tie your hair back, and remove all jewellery except wedding rings. Since none of us is married, bring me your precious things to lock up!'

There's a collective 'ah' from my classes when I mention my unmarried state. Prying into the private life of young teachers is a popular diversion in most lessons.

'Have you got a boyfriend, Miss?'

Maureen loves gossip. I imagine her in middle age leaning on her gate looking down her street, keeping up with news, while Alan digs their allotment.

'That's personal Maureen and none of your business - aprons on please and wash your hands.'

My single state is making me miserable. Most of my friends have found their partner or husband, and at twenty three I'm an old spinster, left on the shelf, living in a rented room in a shared flat with a load of unattractive men. I've checked out my new staffroom for likely male talent, but there's no-one there that takes my fancy.

My sister helps with my search for men, and once a week we visit the Loose Box wine bar, a trendy pick up place in Knightsbridge. My sister is blond, beautiful and looks like the film star Farrah Fawcett from Charlie's Angels and males swarm around her. If I'm lucky, some may glance over and notice me. We talk to men from our special A-Z list, and next week we are on D, having gone through architects, A, bankers, B, and car

dealers, C. I'm tired after cooking all day and I hope they'll never ask what I do, as it sounds so old fashioned. Perhaps I'll tell them I'm an air hostess working for Freddie Laker and flying round the world.

But Maureen is back on my case.

'Will you make your own wedding cake, Miss?'

Fat chance, Maureen, I want to tell her. This job has turned me into a weary, worn out old bat. My only hope is that someone will love my food and one day the students will stop calling me Miss, and I'll be renamed Mrs.

'Class, and that includes you, Maureen, let's see your hands.'

They hold them out for inspection.

'Liz- please take off that pink nail varnish - the nail varnish remover is in my cupboard.'

Liz tuts with disgust. She'll pay me back for making this fuss. Liz wants to cook and I'm stopping her with my stupid rules.

The TV cooks never obey my hygiene suggestions. Fanny Cradock wears an evening dress, sparkles in diamond necklaces and dangly ear-rings. She pokes long red fingernails into pastries and pies and I cringe at the thought of spitting out slivers of red varnish if I ever have to taste her cooking.

Once they know I mean business, they speed through the Hair, Hearnings and Hands! eager to get on with cooking something to eat.

### **Cornish pasties**

Teaching pastry is like taking a dance class. I arrange the tables in an oblong and dance around in the middle giving instructions and doing 'spot dems'. In my teacher training I learnt to use the students' ingredients to demonstrate techniques, and save money so I don't have to pay for the food myself.

Pastry is made from flour and fat, which is usually lard and margarine. Lard comes from pig fat and is great for making light, crumbly pastry. It's the seventies and we're not bothered about its health status or origin. Margarine is heavily promoted by the big food companies and my book shelves are filled with recipe leaflets from the Blue Band and the Stork Cookery Service, which encourage me to put their margarine in everything.

The TV blazes with the advert 'Can you tell Stork from butter?' My answer is 'Yes, you can!' Because it tastes like waxy margarine and not like creamy butter, but the public seem witless under the TV lights and dumbly agree that Stork is the best. Margarine as a butter substitute is cheaper and enriched with vitamins and it whips and cooks into wonderment. What they don't tell us is that margarine is made by hydrogenating oil and contains trans fats which are harmful to health. That bit of science is far in the future.

'With your fingertips, rub in the knobs of margarine and lard. Lift the mixture to keep it light.'

'Len. Don't squeeze!'

Len is laughing too much to listen.

'Knobs Miss, rubbing in knobs.'

I've done it again, talking dirty when I try to use proper cooking terms.

Today Barry, my food dustbin, is cross. Spot dems mean there is no spare food for him to eat when he's completed his clearing up tasks. So he's fed up with not being fed up.

Flour dust floats in the air from the huge number of mixing bowls.

'We need to Twist and Shake like Chubby Checker to get those lumps to the top'

I shake a bowl from side to side, twisting my hips in the sixties dance.

They wait for my inspection as I dance around the tables. Boys often squeeze the flour and fat into a warm, greasy inedible lump of dough. Girls like Alice are dainty with cool hands which are good for making crumble and pastry.

'Perfect Alice.'

Alice is a model student. Her homework arrives neatly done and always on time. Never splattered with unidentifiable food stains or crumpled as if rescued from the rubbish bin. Her school uniform is neat too, and her skirt hangs modestly just above her knees, not hoisted up like most of the girls. I always recognize her cooking basket when it is stored in the corner of my room for the lesson. The elasticated cotton cover is patterned with pink roses, and stretches tightly over the basket is and I know that underneath her Pyrex cooking dishes will be carefully wrapped in a white linen tea towel, then hidden from view. But she doesn't make me laugh out loud like Len and Barry. Alice wants to do well and gives me stern looks if things look like they are getting out of hand. She reminds me of my teaching practice tutors.

'Don't be too friendly with the class Jenny. You are here to teach, not make friends with them.'

My Twist and Shake routine is used for a myriad of fat and flour dishes. Pastries and cakes are 'progressive skills' that students must learn as their cooking improves. But I wonder if they are just a way to use cheap ingredients to bake and fill us up with high fat, sugary, floury food, and to get us through cookery lessons without spending too much money.

I promise them that we'll open our cooking repertoire to apple pie, jam and treacle tarts, then move onto the heights of quiche Lorraine and lemon meringue pie. Len pings a question as I wander round the mixing bowls.

'When is a tart a pie, Miss?'

I'm wary as the boys as always are ready to dart quips with double meanings.

'I don't know Len, but I'll find out and let you know.'

Len doesn't care about my answer, but he'd like to know more about tarts.

Maybe a tart has a pastry top on it? But Bakewell tart has a topping of sponge. The goddess Marguerite Patten may have the answer.

Today it's my favourite pastry dish, Cornish pasties, filled with minced beef, potato, turnip and onion but I leave out the turnip to avoid the grumbles.

'Yuk, I've never heard of that, I don't like it, so I won't eat it, Miss'.

I tell stories of Cornish miners working deep underground extracting tin who had no time to come up for lunch so took a calorie packed pasty with a savoury, meaty part and a jammy end. Miners got grubby, so the pasty has a thick edge to hold in their dirty hands as they eat, which is thrown away when they are done.

'Are there tin mines where you come from, Miss?'

'No Barry, just shoe factories and wheat fields.'

My Midland accent confuses Barry. He's not sure where I come from or why I've moved here. But he really wants me to give him something to eat later on.

Pastry is easy now that we have conquered apple crumble but I have to teach them to be deft and quick, if we are to end up with something delicious for lunch.

'Roll it out quickly on a floured surface and then cut into circles using a saucer.'

We mix the meaty filling ingredients and plop some into the centre of each circle of pastry. They seal and twist the edges, brush them with beaten egg to bake them golden brown.

Except for Liz, who as usual has not brought her ingredients.

'Couldn't afford them Miss. I'll make you some jam tarts.'

It keeps her occupied and stops her skulking round the room, but I wonder if when Liz gets cross with me she might spit in one of them just for spite.

'The rest of you. Don't throw away pastry scraps. That's wasteful. Roll out it out again and make some jam tarts.'

Len smirks. Now I'm talking. Tarts. He likes tarts.

They bring round baking trays of golden pasties for marking and I take off marks for burnt edges and washing up left in the sink. But they're happy as the tables are pushed together and laid for lunch again.

## **Cornish pasties**

You can make these with the twist on the top or on the side and do try using turnips which we never did. And plenty of black pepper which we couldn't afford.

Makes 4

Pastry

250 g plain flour

60 g margarine

65 g lard

2 tbs water

Filling

250 g minced beef

1 medium onion finely chopped

100 g diced raw potato

½ tsp salt

½ tsp pepper

Method

1. Preheat the oven to 220 °C/ Gas 7.
2. Divide the pastry into four pieces and roll out into circles.
3. Put a quarter of the filling in each circle, damp the edges and fold over and seal.
4. Squeeze the edges together with thumbprints.
5. Brush with beaten egg to glaze and bake 30-40 minutes until golden brown.

### **The governor's tea**

The school secretary pops her head round my room door.

'Jenny, will you be able to make the governor's tea next week?'

This kind woman has nurtured me since I arrived and this is no time for me to be stropky.

'Normally about fifteen to twenty people turn up. Nothing fancy. We just need a few sandwiches and some scones, biscuits and homemade cakes.

Your predecessor used to get the girls to do it. We'll pay you back for the ingredients you use.'

Well that's alright then. The girls will do it. On top of all the other things they are learning and cooking in my lessons, somehow me and the girls will find time to prepare a not-too-fancy homemade tea for twenty.

I curb my fury and wonder if anyone who visits my room has any idea of the planning and preparation it takes to manage my large classes of noisy teenagers who want to cook.

School starts when students bring in cooking baskets with ingredients for the day. I register my form group, then progress through several classes when students cook, clear up, pack up, eat, catch up on homework, find out what to bring next week and come in for help with revision. I prepare demonstrations, sweep and clean the room before the cleaners turn up – they won't do it if it's too messy. I manage my food storeroom, checking the eight sinks, twelve cookers, cupboards full of baking tins, saucepans, frying pans, drawers full of cooking tools, and my tiny cupboard holding the latest precious electrical whisks and Kenwood chef.

On rare visits to the staffroom, I must remember to remove my pink nylon overall and matching pink rubber gloves before I collapse exhausted into one of the beaten up staffroom armchairs, and light a cigarette. Otherwise I will be mistaken for the school cleaner and be asked to wash up the cups.

When the bell rings at the end of school, I wash dishcloths and tea-towels in the ancient twin tub and hang them in the gas driers ready for the morning when they must be folded and packed away.

I check that aprons are clean, the ovens and gas rings are off, and that the rubbish is ready for collection.

And long after everyone has gone home or to the pub, I collect my marking which must be completed that night then think about what food I must buy for my teaching the next day.

And all with no help.

In my first week, a lad brings over a pile of muddy football shirts and shorts.

'Sir says, can you wash these and send them back folded up when they are dry? The last teacher did it, and he said you wouldn't mind.'

Somehow, things must change, but for now I put on a sweet little woman act, and comply with their needs. I'm new and want to get on with people.

Of course I will find time to prepare the governor's tea and wash the football shirts.

But I have dark thoughts ready for a fight.

In this school, does the art department paint the school walls?

Do English students write the school brochures?

Will Maths present the school accounts?

And does Science manage the school grounds and dig the gardens as part of their biology studies?

Get the boys to do it, I say – the girls are busy cooking governor's tea while their teacher washes the school football outfits.

Enough of grumbling. My grandmother has told me that one good turn deserves another. And it is my turn to begin.

Carol and Vicky are a natural choice for the tea task.

This pair of school ragbags refuse to bring ingredients to my lessons, and spend their time dithering over worksheets, comparing their latest boyfriends, chipping off flecks of pearl nail varnish and picking the split ends in their backcombed hair. They've cooked their way through the cheap ingredients in my storeroom and are bored with making jam tarts and scones.

Any reprimand from me gets a tornado reply.

'Miss, we're leaving at Easter, you can't make us do anything.'

I've failed to persuade other teachers to take them into their lessons, so the ragbag pair is mine, once a week, for a whole afternoon, and we need to get on.

'Carol and Vicky – you're going to make the Governor's tea. Write a shopping list so that you can go out and buy the food next week. We're going to impress them with your cooking. This is the menu.'

They glower as I give them my written list. There is a risk that the pair could sabotage and poison the food for everyone on the committee.

### **Governor's tea menu**

Egg and salad cream sandwiches

Asparagus rolls made from tinned asparagus and brown bread and butter

Fruit scones with butter swirls

Brandy snaps with whipped cream

Flapjacks

Butterfly cakes with piped butter icing

Tea with milk and sugar.

This tea menu is fit for The Ritz tea rooms, but I've borrowed it from my days as a waitress in Wicksteed Park Tea Pavilion in Kettering. The Park was famous for its brandy snaps, and sold them wrapped in crackly cellophane for teatime treats. On brandy snap baking days the chef offered me one piped with a swirl of fresh cream, topped with a squelchy red Maraschino cherry fished out from a jar in the cocktail bar. Brandy snaps are gingery and crunchy, and the cream oozes as you bite. They are a cake maker's triumph, and a test for Carol and Vicky.

Carol and Vicky grumble in with shopping baskets laden with porage oats, tins of golden syrup, a glass jar of Heinz salad cream, boxes of eggs, punnets of mustard and cress and the very extravagant show off tins of asparagus. My elaborate governor's tea

menu is also a cunning plan to stock up my storeroom. After this first baking session, I hope we will have plenty of spare ingredients and I can save some fresh cream and use real butter instead of that fishy County Supplies margarine.

The rest of the class is busy making Swedish tea rings as I check the shopping list. But first Carol and Vicky must dress to impress. Someone might check the tea progress, and they don't want to see this scruffy pair messing with their food.

'Girls, hang up your duffle coats, take out your chewing gum, tie back your hair, and wash your hands. Then put on a clean overall before you start.'

Ha ha. I've got a couple of white cook's overalls ready for smart occasions.

As they change and button up, Carol and Vicky transform. Gone are the short skirts with rolled up waistbands, and the half undone ties.

A pair of smart cooks emerges.

We prepare the hostess trolley. We need tea pots, milk jugs, sugar bowls, teacups and saucers, small plates and serving platters.

We need napkins and knives, cake forks and teaspoons, tablecloths and d'oyleys. And we mustn't forget the tea strainer. We're serving proper tea and need to make sure that all the china and cutlery is sparkling.

'Carol and Vicky can you check that all the Beryl Ware and cutlery is clean?'

They glower at me.

'Why can't someone else do this, Miss?'

'Because, girls, they all want to get a CSE exam and you two don't.'

This tea will test their stamina, and give them no time to gossip or sulk. As they start their baking marathon I keep a watchful eye knowing that at any time they could erupt, slam down their tools and leave the room with cries of

'We ain't doing no more! We ain't school slaves!'

Into the oven go the scones, then a swift clear up ready for the sponges which they will transform into butterfly cakes. Then the flapjacks and finally our biggest cooking challenge of all - brandy snaps.

Dollops of gingery, sugary, syrupy dough go into the oven and out come golden brown crackers which must be worked with speed. A snap is lifted, wrapped round a wooden spoon handle and held in place till it forms a roll. Your hands feel warm and greasy, but there is no time to enjoy this pleasure. There are trayfuls of snaps to roll and hold and more baking in the oven.

And on and on they come until the cooling rack is piled high.

I join team Carol and Vicky to finish off the horns with piped cream, glacé cherries and tiny angelica leaves. Wicksteed Park would be proud.

Then it's on with the sandwiches.

Peeled hard boiled eggs, mashed smooth with salad cream, mixed with mustard and cress, spread onto soft Mother's Pride white bread, with the crusts removed and then cut into quarters.

We lift precious mushy spears of asparagus from the tins and place them on crustless, buttered brown bread, then roll them up tightly and cut into small portions. Tinned asparagus is our most expensive ingredient, and portions cannot be too generous.

The sandwiches go on a plate with a plain d'oyley. D'oyleys matter in my cookery world. Plain for savoury, frilly for sweet, and these rules must not be broken.

The hostess trolley is piled with sandwiches, buttered fruit scones, crunchy flapjacks, brandy snaps, and butterfly cakes.

The rest of the class gathers to coo and ah over Carol and Vicky's work, amazed that these two can produce anything edible.

The feast is finished with hot brewed tea and they wheel the trolley into the headmaster's study. The governors smile sweetly, but I'm thrilled at the surprised looks from the teachers on the school panel who know this unruly, disruptive pair from their wanderings around the school corridors.

Carol and Vicky return with me to my cookery room. It is a messy tip, with sinks piled with dirty dishes, but I'm too tired to fight with them over clearing up. Instead I give them a bag of spare sandwiches and cakes.

'Thanks girls – you've been great. Impressive cooking.'

They throw down their overalls, and resume their usual scruffiness as they wander off into the dark night, cackling through mouthfuls of sandwich.

Next morning I arrive early as usual, to start a busy day. In despair I see the hostess trolley, parked in my room, piled with dirty tea cups, empty plates, crumpled napkins and tea pots full of cold tea leaves. As my form group catches up on their gossip, I pull on my overall and rubber gloves and clear up the mess, before my cooking classes arrive.

The following week I prepare my case to present to the headmaster. I need help. This cannot go on. I cannot teach and clean up and be a drudge on my own.

I need a daily ancillary help and more funds to buy essential ingredients.

A few days later, I get a note telling me to come after school and interview candidates for the ancillary position. Help is coming.

In about a month's time, my chosen angel, the marvellous Sylvia, will arrive to be my right hand woman and saviour.

Later the school secretary pops her head round the door and leaves me a note.

'The head will increase the capitation for your ingredients from £50.

Please provide evidence to show how much money you would like for the year.'

As my grandmother said, one turn deserves another.

To my surprise the cooks in the school kitchen agree to take over making the governor's teas, for a small fee and the PE department buys an automatic washing machine and

tumbler drier. I'll soon be free to soar ahead and teach my subject with no distractions. Well, maybe.

### Pickles and chutneys

How am I going to manage to get everyone cooking! My food budget is so small, and the promise of increased funding is bogged down with paperwork, so I must come up with a plan to find free food ingredients. The boys hate bringing in things for these lessons, and I suspect that several of my students just can't afford to take my classes as there are problems at home and money shortages. If I taught maths, I could just hand out books, but I want them to cook, so the quest for free food for my lessons is urgent. I've sent out a request asking for donations of spare fruits and vegetables from gardens and allotments, so that I can teach a lesson on Preservation. It's early autumn and there's plenty of fruit on the trees. Anything will do, and they can go off foraging in the woods to help. Just in case there's no response, at the weekend I pop up the M1 in my Mini Traveller back to Kettering and fill a box with my grandmother's cooking apples, an unknown variety which grow from an ancient tree in her garden. These battered apples cook to a golden, puffy froth and have a faint taste of lemons. My grandmother has made me the best apple charlotte from these fruit, which is topped with buttery, white crusty bread and served with double cream. As always she's really pleased to see me, but always looks alarmed at the length of my skirts.

Back at school, to my amazement, an autumn harvest festival has arrived outside my classroom. Boxes of windfall cooking apples and Conference pears are left in the corridor along with small sacks containing muddy beetroot and brown skinned onions. Alice has taken her parents on a weekend foray round Epping Forest brought me a paper bag full of tiny red crab apples and a feast of blackberries, sealed in a Tupperware box.

As the class shambles in, they look surprised as they pass trays of apples in various states of decay and bowls piled high with tiny unpeeled onions. These fruit and

vegetables may be free, but they'll need a lot of cleaning and preparing to make them ready to use.

They settle on their stools, ready to start. The happy chattering suddenly stops. Kevin lurches through the doorway and thumps his bag down on one of the tables. Kevin is large, and his size demands attention. No part of Kevin's outfit matches the official school uniform for boys of a shirt, tie, trousers and school blazer. He's wearing jeans and a very jazzy patterned shirt. I'm astonished that Kevin hasn't been sent home for this act of defiance, but I suspect that no-one wants to challenge him. Kevin is trouble and I've been dreading the day that he might show up in my lessons. As we are several weeks into the autumn term, I'd hoped to be spared this confrontation even though Kevin is listed on my class register. I'd innocently thought that maybe Kevin had found somewhere else to get his education. Or chosen to study a different subject in a different classroom far, far away from my room. But for now, I'm on my own, and need to cope.

'Kevin. Welcome. Grab a stool and come and sit round my table.'

Kevin lumbers towards the group. They ease their stools out of his way. No-one looks up. We are all being cautious around Kevin.

'How do you know my name?' growls Kevin.

He towers over me and his voice is deeper than the other boys in the class. I suspect that Kevin has already started shaving and a hairy chest probably lurks underneath the shirt.

I'd like to stand and look him in the eye and give him a stern reply like this -

'I know your name Kevin because I have been warned you are likely to be the most difficult boy I have to deal with and I've heard you have psychopathic tendencies and can be violent and aggressive, especially to new, young women teachers.'

Instead I back away to the roller board, and my answer sounds meek and simpering.

'Well Kevin, you see you are the only one on my class list who I have not met yet. I hope you'll enjoy my lessons and get to do lots of cooking. Now would you like to sit down near my table so we can begin?'

As I write with squeaky chalk marks on the roller board, I wonder if it is wise to turn my back on Kevin.

'Lesson topic - Preservation of fruit and vegetables.

Recipes - apple chutney and pickled onions.'

I turn around quickly. There must be no doubt who is in charge.

'Now class, this lesson is about preserving things so that they will last longer. How are we going to preserve these apples and onions so that they last over winter?'

They stare blankly. They don't care.

'Come on, what shall we do with them?'

I point to the trays of apples which are already attracting the wasps.

'Put them on the compost heap, miss - some of them apples look really rotten.'

Terry, smirks and looks over to Kevin for approval. Terry volunteers to work in the school garden so he should know about compost heaps. But Terry is very foolish if he tries to suck up to Kevin.

But Carol and Vicky are twitching on their stools, powering up for a confrontation.

'Miss, why don't you take them to the donkeys in the forest - might give them bellyache though. We shouldn't have 'em things in the room.'

Carol gives Vicky a nudge. The pair have been praised by staff for their improved record of attendance but it doesn't make them any easier for me to teach.

But they are right - we need to remove the battered and bruised bits of the fruit but I feel a missionary zeal to show them how to be thrifty in their throwaway world. And this food is free.

'Look, we're going to make the best of these food gifts and use the apples to make apple chutney and pickle those onions in spicy vinegar.'

It is clear from the grumbles and shuffling that they'd rather make scones or cakes.

'Hurry up - you have to make a choice! What's it to be? Apple chutney or pickled onions?'

Put your aprons on and make your choice.'

I turn as a large fist thumps on the table. It's Kevin. He's obviously decided that he's had enough of school today as he slams his stool aside, slings his bag over his shoulder and

storms dramatically out of the room. Good! No, I should go after him. Students aren't supposed to leave my classroom without permission. But I'm not chasing after him. We need to cook, and I'm very relieved he's gone. One less hazard to look out for.

The noisy exit has calmed the rest of the group, and they've divided the Preserving task by sex. The girls choose apple chutney, and the boys pick pickling. This separation often happens. They are not choosing what they really want to cook. The boys and girls just don't want to work with each other. In my limited teaching experience, boys and girls cook in different ways. Most girls prepare their food in clean, organised workplaces whereas boys create a messy nest of ingredients and cooking equipment which soon spill onto the floor and ends up being kicked under the tables.

On a school training day we were told to mix up boys and girls and make them sit next to each other and queue up outside our rooms in mixed sex pairs. It was supposed to reinforce equal opportunities and increase awareness of other people. That night I'd gone past the deer in the park. The female deer huddled together, nudging and nestling. The giant male stags patrolled the boundaries. No one made them mix up. And when they chose to, it was only for a few seconds on special occasions.

Watching these big boys preparing the tiny onions makes me laugh. Terry peels away the withered, brown skins, then tops and tails the onions, ready for the pickling.

Gradually the tears begin to flow.

'What's up Terry – does this lesson make you sad?'

Terry rubs his fists into his eyes. His whole face is turning pink and blubbery.

'Class – don't wipe your eyes with oniony hands – the juice gets in and makes the crying worse.' They blink at me, their eyes reddened and bleary. I should have warned them earlier but they never listen to instructions. And crying is such a cissie thing which should never happen to these tough guys.

'Me nan peels her onions under water so she don't cry – we should do that.'

Terry dumps his onion pile in the sink of water and carries on with his messy task. A stream of dribble runs from his nose, over his chin and plops in the water. Pickled onions and snot – now how are we going to make that safe to eat?

Suddenly squeals come from a group of girls who are peeling and chopping the pile of windfall apples. Carol has cut through a slug and its innards ooze onto the table.

'Err – look at this green slime – I ain't using them apples – they'll poison me.'

They gather in disgust to watch the slug shrivel in its death writhe. Carol pokes the slime with her knife and holds it up for Vicky and the rest of the class to share their revulsion with me at using this less than perfect fruit.

'OK girls. Throw those apples away and clean down the work surface to remove the mess. We're still going to use the rest – just peel away the bad bits. And anyway – did you know that slugs contain protein?'

My grandmother believed that pests on plants were harmless food. The delicious raspberries from her garden were served with sugar and thick cream and came with a garnish of greenfly and assorted maggots. I wrinkled my nose at the prospect of eating them.

'They won't harm you – they've only been eating raspberries' she'd say kindly.

I picked them out and squished them under my seat.

'Miss, we ain't eating food that has slugs in it. Why do we have to do this lesson anyway?'

The pair is on their usual tack. I'll get the chorus of 'We're leaving school anyway' next. Carol takes off her apron and beckons Vicky to follow and the pair leaves the room. No doubt their boyfriends are waiting at the school gates. Carol and Vicky want to make babies and get their own flats, and they think school, and my lessons in particular, are rubbish. I hope the boyfriends are put off by the whiff of vinegar, onions and rotten apples which will linger on their school uniform.

So that's Kevin, Carol and Vicky that have left the room. I'll have to report them missing when the lesson ends. But for now we must get on with the cooking. I can't leave the classroom and give chase. The remaining girls are busy stirring huge pans of apples, onions, brown sugar and vinegar which gently simmer on top of the stoves, and the boys are using sharp knives to top and tail the onions. The most important rule of my teacher training was never to leave the room if there is cooking going on - it's just too dangerous for students to be left alone.

The room fills with pungent spiciness. We are cooking good things from foods that might have been wasted, and my lesson feels nourishing and wholesome. The fragrance of cooking wafts into the school corridors and often attracts wandering staff and students who sniff the air and go Ah!, like the Bisto gravy advert.

Biff is a frequent visitor to my room. He gets sent out of most lessons to drift around the school in search of mischief or sources of entertainment. He pops his head round my open door.

'Miss - this room always smells lovely - when can I do cooking lessons with you? Please let me in.'

Biff is charming, but time consuming. There must be a reason why no-one else wants to teach him.

'One day - maybe Biff- now get on your way. I expect the headmaster is waiting to see you.'

Biff wanders out, in the opposite direction to the headmaster's office.

Meantime we must speed up to finish before the end of school. The boys gather to pack their hot Kilner jars with shiny onions and pour in scalding, spicy vinegar. The girls pile steaming apple chutney into hot jam jars and lay waxed paper discs on top. The jars must cool before sealing with a crackling cellophane circle and elastic band, so this will be my job after school.

'Write a label and stick it on then bring your jars round for marking, please. Collect them tomorrow when they are cool.'

The labels are designed to impress me for the highest marks.

Alice's Amazing Apple Chutney 1973.

Terry's Perfect Pickled Onions.

Maybe some are still maturing in a secret cupboard somewhere, waiting for discovery.

And maybe, like Lea and Perrin's Worcestershire sauce, they will become a mass produced delicacy found on future supermarket shelves.

The bell rings for the end of the day. I'm left with a room full of putrefying bits of apple, and onion skins which I must sweep up and take over to the school gardener for composting. But first to report my three walkouts. Rather a poor start to my new job if I have to report to the deputy head that my students are leaving my room in droves.

Len and Barry pop their heads round.

'Want any help miss with clearing up? Make you a cuppa?'

'Later boys, when I get back.'

That's kind of them, and it will mean I can get home earlier, for tonight I'm off with my sister to the Loose Box wine bar in search for Mr Right. And the man-meeting letter is D – will we find a doctor, dustman, director or doorman? My spinster clock is ticking, and in seven years I'll be thirty, so tonight needs a real effort. It's off with the pink nylon overall and Marigold gloves on with my short tan suede skirt, new striped tank top, tight white polo neck, and matching thigh high brown suede boots. A bit tarty but necessary. But first I must soak in the bath, blow dry my hair and spray on plenty of Rive Gauche to cover the whiff of vinegar which has penetrated my pores. Otherwise Mr D will think I work in a pickle factory.

Apple chutney

500 g cooking apples, peeled and cored

250 g onions, peeled

250 g sultanas

250 g brown sugar

1 tsp salt

6 cloves

600 ml pickling vinegar

Method

Mince the apples and onions or chop very finely.

Put all the ingredients in a large saucepan and cover with a lid and cook for 20 minutes until soft.

Stir and cover and cook a further 30 minutes.

Heat some jam jars in the oven.

When the chutney is ready, spoon into the hot jars and cover with parchment paper and a lid. Label and date the jar.

Pickled onions

1 kilo small pickling onions

1 litre of pickling vinegar

Method

Skin the onions and pack into glass bottles.

Boil the vinegar and pour over the onions to cover them.

Label and cover the jars.

Grandma in the 1970s

My grandmother is the only person that has showed me how to cook, but her recipes are trapped in a time warp, taken from the Bero Home Recipe book with its battered cover and sticky pages, which hangs by a piece of string from a hook in her kitchen. Born in 1883, she lives very frugally on her small state pension in the terraced house in Kingsley Avenue, Kettering which her husband bought in 1920 after coming back from the war. Before her marriage she worked as a laundry maid in a large house in Wimbledon, and once went on a day trip to France with the family, where she learnt her only French word, *fromage*. This was the only time in her life that she travelled abroad and she is proud that she can still remember that one foreign word.

The great joy of my grandmother's life is her large garden, and as a child I spent many hours with her when she looked after me while my mother cycled off to her busy job as the needlework teacher in the local secondary modern school. Together we'd gather, prepare and cook the fruit and vegetables that she grows. Grandma has no fridge and no freezer, and stores perishable things like milk and butter in the cool of a lead cabinet on the marble shelf in her larder. Her spare fruit and vegetables must be made into jams, chutneys and pickles if they are to last more than a few days. In the autumn we peel her hard, green Conference pears, stack the long slices tidily in large glass Kilner jars then top up with hot sugar syrup spiced with dark brown cloves. They

stood proudly in her larder next to the jars of bottled pink Victoria plums, waiting to be made into puddings when the garden is quiet. Her cooking apples are made into crumbles, charlottes and pies and sometimes apple chutney joins the glowing pots of crab apple jelly, raspberry jam and pickled onions. A feast ready for the winter to tide us over until the garden comes to life in the spring.

In early March we pick the first leafy shoots of the mint, chop them finely with sugar, then mix them with pungent Sarson's vinegar. Grandma only uses cooking ingredients with the best trade names. Be-ro flour, Saxa salt, Lion brand white pepper, Colman's mustard, Tate and Lyle sugar, Bisto gravy powder, Borwick baking powder and Bird's custard. She never trusts anything else, especially not the new own label products sold in our supermarkets. Perhaps it's her wartime memories when the quality of ingredients such as National flour plummeted.

Minutes before her soft, succulent, slow roasted shoulder of lamb is lifted from the oven, we make the fresh mint sauce.

'The mint loses its colour if you put it in vinegar too early.'

The banquet is complete with crispy roast potatoes and Bisto gravy and boiled cabbage, followed by her preserved pears and rice pudding with its thick brown skin.

March also brings delicate pink rhubarb, forced under large flower pots and old buckets, so that it grows sweet and tender. We pick, chop and stew it with sugar and eat it with bowls of thick, yellow Bird's custard.

Spears of asparagus poke through the ground in early May and grandma cuts the stems with her sharp knife and pops them in a pot of boiling water. We hold them rudely in our fingers and dip the stalks in melted butter. For several days my wee smells of asparagus but I never ask grandma if she suffers too. I wonder if grandma really likes asparagus as most of it remains uncut and bolts into ferny fronds that she uses for flower arrangements.

By mid-summer her garden fills with ripening gooseberries, red and blackcurrants. We sit together in the sunshine on her wooden kitchen chairs 'topping and tailing' the spiky

ends into an aluminium bowl. A task which takes many hours. But time never counts when I'm with my grandma. The fruit is stewed for pies and crumbles or made into dark purple blackcurrant jam ready for winter toast and butter around her fire.

In high summer there's strawberries, which grow through layers of dry, yellow straw, and are covered with black cotton net.

'Tread carefully and don't squash them, Jenny. Pick only the red ones and put that bird net back and peg it down. We don't want that blackbird pecking our fruit.'

Birds and cats get shouted and clapped out of her garden. Persistent cats are targeted by hurling the small stones that she keeps for this purpose piled by her back door.

Strawberries are a summer treat and only grow for a few weeks and we hull, slice, and sprinkle them with fine sugar, spoon over thick Jersey cream, then eat them in the sunshine.

Next to arrive are the raspberries, grown in a cage covered in a fine green net, which still traps the birds inside, who feast on the fruit, making Grandma jump around clapping her hands in fury. Grandma's raspberries are full of tiny white maggots but she believes that all pests on any of her plants are harmless food, and I should be grateful for extra nourishment.

In early autumn, before school starts, grandma's trees hang with pink, wasp infested Victoria plums, and her ancient variety of mottled cooking apple which cooks to its creamy pulp.

October 1965 is a date for Grandma to remember. I bring my friend Tony, the only black man in Kettering, to help me gather her fruit. He climbs up the ladder propped against her giant Conference pear tree as she gazes up after him.

'I've never had such a big black man pick my pears before' she confides as we help fill baskets with hard, dark green pears which we will bottle later.

I discover later that grandma has never ever met a black man, but then she hasn't travelled far out of Kettering for many years.

When I leave to go to university and then onto London to train as a teacher, grandma is sad. She rarely leaves the house now, but is always happy to see me when I visit. 'I had three London children to stay here during the war as evacuees. We had to manage on food rations then, so my garden was really useful. I know they can be cheeky but you'll get the better of them soon and they love to cook! My evacuees came up from London once to visit me and brought their own children here. I hadn't realized how many years had passed.'

On my regular trips home as I fill my Mini Traveller with her apples, pears and rhubarb for my lessons it seems funny that after so many years we Londoners are still sharing the fruits from her garden.

Apple charlotte

You can use old bread for this recipe.

Serves 4

Ingredients

1kg cooking apples, peeled, cored and sliced

1 lemon, zest and juice

2 tbsp light brown soft sugar

½ teaspoon ground cinnamon

2 tablespoons water

8-10 slices white bread with crusts removed

50g butter or margarine

Method

Preheat the oven to 190 C/ Gas 5.

Put the apples, lemon juice and rind, cinnamon and sugar into a pan with the water.

Cover with a lid and cook gently until the apple becomes soft. Stir occasionally.

Mix the apples to make a fluffy mixture.

Melt the butter or margarine and brush over the slices of bread. You can melt the butter in the microwave.

Place some bread in the bottom of an overproof dish then spoon in the apple. Put the remaining slices of bread on top of the apple, arranging them to overlap neatly.

Bake in the oven for 30 minutes until the top is golden brown.

### **Teaching bread**

My first full time teaching job in 1970 was in a large north London comprehensive school, just east of Finsbury Park. Schools in inner London were under the control of ILEA – the Inner London Education Authority, and I'd been interviewed for the role at their vast headquarters at County Hall on the river Thames, opposite the Houses of Parliament.

The walk down the endless, gloomy corridors to the interview room was long and daunting but my interview was quick and the result instant.

'Do you want a job teaching home economics in London?' said the people behind the desk.

'Yes' I replied.

'Can you start in this school in September?' said the people.

'Yes' This interview was quick and easy.

'Then we will find you a school and send you the letter of appointment with the details.'

No more questions, no interrogation, no 'come back next week for your second, or third interview', and certainly no 'will you teach a sample lesson for us.'

I was ushered back down the corridors, past benches filled with other interviewees sitting in the dim light and waiting for a teaching job in our great city. Out into the summer sunshine, I walk beside the sparkling river, ready to start my new career.

No-one in authority had asked me if I knew how to cook, nor if I was good at keeping discipline in the classroom. My new students in my north London school challenged my ability to keep order, and my classes were known for being noisy, which I felt was just teenage excitement and my enthusiasm when we produced something edible. In time we got the measure of each other, and my lessons jostled along with humour and busyness.

The families in the north London catchment area for my school came from many parts of the world, especially Trinidad and Jamaica, and I wished someone had educated me more about the culture and recipes of the Caribbean. Students told me of their famous dishes of ackee and salt fish, rice and beans, jerk pork, curried goat and cassava dumplings, and I longed to try these out in the classroom. But I had to stick to the recipes from our class sets of Good Housekeeping Cooking is Fun with its endless cakes, biscuits and scones.

The bread lesson is the one of the first tests of my limited culinary skills. I've never cooked bread before but as the new teacher in the department, I don't want to show my ignorance in front of the team of very experienced cookery teachers. They already find my miniskirts and noisy classes bothersome.

On my way to school I pop in for advice from the Jewish baker who works at the Manor House Bakery. He's swaddled in large white overalls, and wrapped with a floury apron.

'Help! Please help me with this class – how do I make bread, how do I use fresh yeast and have you got any for sale?'

The baker knows many of the students I am teaching as they surge into his bakery before school, hungry for bread and cheese rolls and doughnuts for their breakfast.

He opens the huge fridge and takes out a beige yeast block carefully wrapped in soft white paper.

'Just crumble a piece of this it into the bowl of flour and salt and mix it to a dough with warm water. And keep all the windows closed. You need a really warm room for the bread to rise.

Good luck Jenny– let me know how you get on.'

Fresh yeast has a strange smell like the whiff of a damp basement. I break off beige crumbly lumps and line them up on a tray. In ILEA schools we provide all the ingredients and students pay ten pence a lesson. Everything must look the same in size and shape otherwise there is a squabble.

'You chose the boys first, last time. The girls should be first this lesson.'

Grace lives up to her name, but she sometimes has a fierce side.

'His is bigger than mine, Ma'am, it's not fair.'

Tex is bigger than anyone, but he's not going to bully me into a larger lump.

For some reason female teachers in inner London have to be addressed as Ma'am. If the entire class is calling for me, it sounds like a sheep field.

Ma'am, ma'am, Mum....'

I chuckle when they call me Mum by mistake, and sometimes glower and tease

'Ainsley, I'm not your mum, I'm much too young!'

The class gathers around my demonstration table, waiting for instructions. There is the usual well meaning pushing, but they are eager to get on.

'Weigh out your ingredients and take a piece of fresh yeast. Make sure your hands are really clean – any muck will get into the dough.'

They crumble the yeast into the flour, and add warm, sugary water which is carefully measured.

'It smells like me dad's beer kit'.

Dan sometimes helps me clear up after school.

'The yeast is fermenting with the flour, Dan, to make carbon dioxide and alcohol, so it's like beer making.'

'So can we get drunk on bread Ma'am?'

Dan and friends chuckle at the prospect of an alcoholic snack.

'No – as it cooks the alcohol evaporates.'

'Shame that.'

'Now class, work this dough with your hands. The more you squeeze and knead, the better it will be.'

For boys this squelchy stage is magic. Girls would rather stir elegantly with a wooden spoon. Sticky, doughy hands are distasteful.

'Tip it out onto a floury table and knead it.'

I demonstrate how to pull and push the dough. The room warms as they punch and stretch the mixture.

'Ma'am, help it's slimy.'

Tex as always has not followed the recipe, and has taken more than his share of flour, and then guessed at the amount of water he needs to make the dough. His great sloppy mixture oozes over the table. I shake on more flour as a rescue remedy, but this means that Tex gets more cooking for his money, something his classmates have come to resent.

'Now divide the dough into six and roll into balls to make your bread rolls.'

I'd forgotten to say divide equally. Balls come in all sizes. We end up with bread rolls the size of ping pong and tennis balls but it's too late.

'Onto the baking trays and cover with a wet teatowel. Then into the drying cabinet to let the bread rise.'

These are the days before tumble dryers. Schools have large gas fired drying cabinets where I hang washed teatowels and dishcloths each night to dry. One weekend I was sure I'd left the gas cabinet on and couldn't get back into school to check. I was right and on Monday morning my teatowels were crisp and dry – but also burnt to a brown crisp. I was lucky the school buildings didn't join them.

My recipe bible, *Cooking is Fun*, says that when the rolls double in size, they are ready to bake. Someone has scratched out the word *Fun* and written *Cooking is Horrible* on one of the book covers. By the end of this lesson I might agree.

Under the teatowels, nothing is happening, but we must get baking.

'Put your rolls in the oven and sit round my table.'

In this stonking hot room inside a London school surrounded by busy roads, roaring traffic and concrete buildings, I bring out my bundles of wheat, barley and oats picked from the quiet Northamptonshire summer fields far away up the M1.

'Class, where does the flour come from that we use for our bread?'

They gaze back silently. We can smell the bread baking.

I hold up the stems of wheat.

'See the grains in the top?'

I squeeze them out and pass a handful of seed around the group.

'We crush them to make wheat.'

More silence.

'Have any of you ever seen barley? It's used in beer and whisky making.'

There is a mild rustle of interest.

Barley is golden and spiky and the spikes make good darts which stick to your clothes, but I'm not telling them that.

'Do you know what this last cereal is called?'

This stem is tall and dangly, with the seeds hanging on tiny threads.

Not a glimmer.

'Oats. You know about oats?'

They do, but they're not letting on what kind.

'Made into porridge which you might have for breakfast.'

Breakfast? What's that?

Enough! The rolls must be ready. They take solid, crisp lumps from the oven and put them on wire racks to cool.

'This bread ain't much good Ma'am. It's too hard.'

Dan is fed up. He is proud to take his cooking home and this time it's awful. The whole class has baked awful, hard lumps of dough. And it's my fault.

They bag up the hard balls, pack them in their satchels and shuffle out the room. I hear the boys scuffling in the corridor and see a lump of dough arching into the air.

On my way home, I pop into the bakers.

'It went well! Mazel tov!' he asks expectantly.

Sadly, I show him the lumps from my demonstration which I plan to throw out when I'm far away from school.

'Jenny, you didn't leave them to prove them properly.'

I can feel his sadness at this hopeless cook. I explain about the hot drying cabinet and the rush to get things cooked before school ends. But he is still disappointed.

'Turn the cabinet temperature down next time and don't be in such a hurry.

Letting bread rise is like life. Take it nice and easy and you'll get a good result.

Rush at it and it just gets hard.

Come to my bakery early one morning before school, and I'll show you how to make proper bread and bagels.'

Back at my flat, I toss my bread rolls into the garden. Even the hungry pigeons peck and go.