

**An Article for *Good Beginnings* in the Kitchen  
commissioned by Mrs Rosemary Sinclair**

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My earliest memories of food centre on our family's kitchen, and of course on my mother and her cooking. When the second world war ended we were living in a small country town that happened to be the national capital, Canberra, a city to which I have returned to live three times.

My Dad was a schoolteacher, and we rented a house in the suburb of Reid from the Department of the Interior, Lord and Master of Canberra in those days. Our backyard had a small strip of lawn near the back door, and even smaller triangle of lawn near the garage. The rest of it was given over to the cultivation of vegetables and fruit. Mum and Dad were dedicated gardeners, and remained so until the end of their lives, though by the 1960s their emphasis had shifted from the production of food to the cultivation of beauty.

In the mid 1940s our backyard offered a large apricot tree, two peach trees, a grape vine, a quince, a Jonathan apple, two plum trees, raspberries and black currants, gooseberries, and loganberries. Loganberry vines ran along two fences, carefully pruned each year to provide the maximum amount of berries.

In the centre of the backyard was a vegetable garden, which from time to time grew peas, beans, tomatoes, silver beet and spinach, broccoli, cauliflower and beetroot. A pumpkin vine was planted each year near the compost heap. Kitchen scraps were saved for this heap, and from time to time Dad would take us for a walk to the nearby stables (they must have been roughly in the middle of what is now the elegant Glebe Park), and we would return with horse manure, which would later be dug in to the vegetable garden.

That was outside. Inside was a small kitchen containing small versions of a wood stove, an electric stove, a refrigerator, and a pine cupboard, which I still have. The right hand side of that cupboard (three small shelves) contained *all* our packaged and tinned goods—which meant hardly any. For many years, my sense of food was that, apart from milk and bread, Mum made whatever we ate. And we ate well.

When sugar was removed from the rationing system a garbage tin full of it appeared in our kitchen. In late summer Mum would start bottling and jamming, and by the time winter came the pantry cupboard was full of glass jars. I was fascinated by the Vacola system she used to preserve fruit, and by the molten paraffin wax that was poured on to the top of the jams, chutneys and relishes. These were big production days, usually at weekends, and everyone had a task, even if it was finding a glass jar and washing it.

The reward for all this labour was the store of goodies in the pantry. My favourite was the loganberries in syrup poured over Mum's own icecream. These were special treats, and there were never enough, either in the plate or

in the cupboard. But we regularly had something almost as good, which was thick chunky loganberry jam, for breakfast toast and butter, or in magic little tarts, or in sponge cakes, or loganberry crumble. (We did have a lot of loganberries — probably twenty metres of them.)

And savoury products became part of my life too. Tomato relish was used to flavour the gravy for roasts, and chutneys of various kinds, which Dad loved, lay under grilled cheese on toast, or spiced up a rarebit, or boosted a Sunday hot mixture (bacon, tomatoes, onions) which was usually served on toast. She made many kinds of savoury things, especially with cheese.

So in my own family I'm famous for being the one who can't leave a Sunday market without a jar or two of someone's homemade relish or chutney. I'm always trying to recapture the tastes and smells of my first kitchen, and delighted to see that these old recipes are still being used. They are one of the important elements of our continuity as a society.

Back to the forties: Mum and Dad and three boys, always hungry. We ate well, we ate simply, and we ate within the bounds of what was seasonal or easily available. By today's standards it was plain. It was not until my parents went overseas in the 1950s that Mum added garlic, mushrooms and wine to her ingredients, and shortly afterwards the more exotic herbs, though we had always had mint and, except in winter, parsley.

Our meals followed what I've since discovered to be a fairly typical pattern among Australian families at the time. Sunday was a roast dinner in the middle of the day. Monday night produced variations on what you can do with the remains of a joint (a curry, a hot-pot, a fricassee). Tuesday might be baked chops, or braised neck chops, Wednesday braised steak (Mum was big on braises and down on frying things), Thursday baked sausages. Friday was fish day, which might mean smoked cod with a parsley sauce, or something built around a can of salmon (or later, tuna), like a mornay.

I never thought of the cycle as boring, for there was sensible variation: rolled roast or corned beef on Sunday would be the beef for the week; roast lamb of lamb on Sunday would not be followed by chops. Chicken was very special and reserved for Christmas or other celebrations. I don't think I saw roast turkey until I was a grown up, and fresh fish in Canberra was equally rare. Sweets were mandatory, and were based around preserved fruits, custards, ice-cream and jelly. Her cakes were terrific, and her peanut cookies famous through the land (or, at least, famous in our extended family).

So meals were magic! I can't remember any of us being fussy eaters, and we thought our Mum was the best cook there was. Yet she, like Dad, was a school-teacher, following the occupation called 'home duties' because the Department of Education would not employ married women as teachers. Her meals were made with that combination of love and skill which all cooks should strive for, and our evening meals were those of a happy family blessed with good things to eat which had come, many of them, from their own labour and devotion. That's hard to beat, especially as a memory.

Mum's recipe books (one of which I still have) were exercise books into which she had pasted recipes from magazines, or written out those of friends which

she particularly liked. No doubt a lot of her best dishes were in her head, and represented adaptations of earlier recipes. But here are two which are typical, the first in her own handwriting. Predictably, they are a bit short on detail!

### **Crisp Cheese Biscuits**

1 x packet square lavash bread  
 parmesan cheese  
 juice of 1 lemon  
 1 teaspoon of sweet paprika  
 1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper

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Mix ingredients to a paste, spread on to bread, and bake.

### **Moist Chocolate Cake**

1/2 cup rolled oats  
 1 cup of water  
 1/2 cup butter (125 gm)  
 3 x tablespoons cocoa  
 2 x eggs well beaten  
 1 1/2 cups brown sugar  
 1 cup plain flour  
 1 teaspoon baking powder  
 1 x teaspoon bicarbonate of soda  
 1 x teaspoon vanilla

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Boil oats and water for two minutes

Add butter, mix well. Transfer to a basin and add sugar, eggs and combined dry ingredients, then vanilla.

Bake in a 8" round pan for 30-40 minutes at 180C.