

WHEN I WAS 17, I HAD A FRENCH boyfriend. He was a pale Byronic figure, with fine hands and strong forearms, who translated French surrealist poetry and didn't eat meat. I was madly in love with him, which meant I was soon in love with vegetarianism and the collected works of Paul Valéry.

He called his girlfriends – there were three of us early on – “bébé”, wore a black leather jacket and lived at home with his parents where, thanks to his mother's devoted service, he was able to pursue a life of the mind interrupted only by the rigours of maintaining multiple relationships.

His father was a thin, disappointed man who made fleeting appearances from time to time in the crepuscular gloom of the hall, padding across

the axminster in backless leather slippers on his way to and from meals. It was the wife, a terrifying French matriarch Balzac might have created, who ran the place.

Mrs P, as I shall call her, was a faded beauty with a sleek sweep of silvery hair and a plump, waxy complexion. She rarely smiled, at me anyway, and was capable of a *froideur* as cool as an ice swan. On the other hand, she was an inspired vegetarian cook.

When she wasn't taking care of her property portfolio or doing something French to her skin, she was generally to be found in the kitchen. It was a broad room set with long benches, a rectangular table at its centre, and its walls gleamed with white tiles of the old-fashioned sort, very flat, rectangular, almost translucent. It faced

It's the place where artistry and drudgery cohabit, where families, relationships and the soul are nourished. **Fenella Souter** takes a cook's tour of the heart of the home.

south, so the light was always pale, and the room felt as cool and quiet as a larder. It seemed the perfect place for pastry or slow-cooking.

There was something deeply European about it: partly the look, but also the smell of olive oil, a rare scent in those days, and good things. It was serious, somehow, in a way Australian kitchens weren't. Food seemed to have an integrity there that it lacked elsewhere. It wasn't the sort of place where anyone snacked on a Sao with Vegemite, ate tablespoons of dry Milo or considered tinned peaches with two scoops of Streets neapolitan a colourful dessert.

Whatever the time of day, there was always something good to eat. A cruet of olive oil and vinegar lived on the table. A simple lentil salad, with Puy lentils (heaven knows how Mrs P got hold of them back then – she must have had a relative send them over) might appear, tangy with lemon juice, beside a plate of pillowy sautéed leeks. There was always a green salad, but made with leaves I'd never seen, frozen as we were in Australia's iceberg years. There would be cheese, of course. Another day might bring a vegetable tian, fragrant with marjoram. Or a terrine, or a pear and almond tart.

There was always enough, but never too much. The canny Mrs P was never “out of” anything. She grew herbs and salad greens in her garden. She always had ingredients on hand that worked with each other.

She wasn't the most approachable of women, but I admired the way she ran the kitchen with such cool efficiency and refined taste. Eating well remained paramount, regardless of whatever else wasn't going well.

For it was clear that Mr and Mrs P were locked

A VOYAGE ROUND MY KITCHEN

Photography **Helen White**



in an unhappy union. It seemed a terrible mismatch. She was an immensely forceful woman, energetic and intelligent; he a dour cipher by comparison. Yet whatever her feelings, however little physical affection she could, or would, provide, she always cooked for him and the family.

No doubt it sprang from her Frenchness and some sense of wifely duty, or served as a way of compensating for other sensual things withheld, but it's also possible cooking was a source of solace for her in this rather melancholy household.

As anyone who likes to cook knows, the kitchen is full of therapeutic pleasures. The familiar swift and competent movements of hand and knife; the invigorating beauty of a group of plump aubergines or elegant artichokes or voluptuous yellow quinces; the reassuring smell of frying onions or the yearning fragrance of poached peaches; the zen-like calm that descends as the cook oversees some delicate operation, for nothing focuses the mind like watching a custard thicken or caramel brown; the feeling of accomplishment, indeed of love, when all is done and the meal is laid on the table for the pleasure of others, or oneself.

I realise I'm painting a rather rosy picture here – relieved of such kitchen staples as boredom and resentment, griping children, grated fingers and burnt potatoes – but you get the drift. While cooking is not principally a cure for misery, it can cheer you up wonderfully. *The Joy of Sex* was a bestseller, but so was *The Joy of Cooking*. Ideally, one experiences both, but we may have underestimated the second as a helpful tool in life and marriage, even if the first is lacking. It's surprising the subject doesn't come up more in marriage counselling. As the 18th-century French

epicure Brillat-Savarin observed in his famous work *The Physiology of Taste*, hearty eating, and presumably good cooking, can make for happy couples.

"Two married gourmands," he wrote, "have a pleasant opportunity to meet at least once a day; for even those who sleep apart (and there are many such) eat at the same table; they have a subject of conversation which never grows stale, for they talk not only about what they are eating, but also of what they have eaten, what they are about to eat, what they have observed at other houses, fashionable dishes, new culinary inventions, etc, etc; and such chit-chat is full of charm..."

"A common need calls man and wife to table, and a common inclination keeps them there; they naturally show each other those little courtesies which reveal a desire to please; and the manner in which meals are conducted is an important ingredient in the happiness of life."

IT'S ODD, REALLY, THAT I REMEMBER MORE ABOUT the food Mrs P made than anything she said or did. Why do we have such potent memories of the food we ate as children? Why do I recall so clearly the little pastry boats filled with creamed asparagus that friends of my parents used to serve at their annual Christmas party? They weren't very nice but they held an odd fascination. How did Proust get seven volumes out of a dreary little madeleine? (The gluttonous journalist A.J. Liebling once joked that if only Marcel had had a heartier appetite, who knows, he might have written a masterpiece.)

As Proust so amply demonstrated, food is inextricably linked with feelings and memory. And if you like to cook, so is the path of your cooking.

Cooking over a lifetime is marked by a series of enthusiasms. You remember where you were, and to some extent who you were, when you experienced them.

And there are distinct periods – in my case, they include the curry era, the stir-fry years, the French provincial or Italian love affair, the Middle Eastern intrigue – and seminal influences: the aspiring French cook's holy trinity, Bertholle, Beck and Child; Elizabeth David, Marcella Hazan, Anna Thomas, Claudia Roden, Stephanie Alexander, Charmaine Solomon et al.

They're like trusted old friends. Even when you've taken up with a fast new crowd – Jamie, Neil, Nigella – you still seek their company. It's a peculiar kind of bliss to spend a winter's afternoon immersed in Elizabeth David's *An Omelette and a Glass of Wine* or *French Provincial Cooking*, even if you're never going to make Cold Stuffed Duck, requiring, as it does, that you have a quantity of calf's foot jelly and a few truffles to hand.

The other great influence is other, real-life domestic cooks. In my late 20s, I shared a house for a couple of years with a friend. Our first marriages had broken up – hers temporarily, mine permanently, both amicably – and we had two young children between us. The house had a pretty kitchen with a tessellated-tile floor and a window that swayed with the curvy green shadows of an old fig tree, the unsprayed, un-netted fruits of which we ate eagerly until one day we noticed the "seeds" were moving.

Sue was, and still is, an excellent cook. I wasn't too bad myself, but I learnt a great deal from her. She introduced me to books like *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, although I've given up trying to master it; she owned Le Creuset pots



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before they were commonplace, and she was thrifty, which I was not.

But the central difference was living with someone else who also liked to cook, and to talk about cooking. Up until then, from the age of 16 when my mother died, I had more or less been the source of all meals, made for grateful but mostly non-contributory males. I had never lived with anyone eager to discuss the provenance of *ragu* as well as the life of Rosa Luxemburg.

We both worked, but we also cooked a great deal. We didn't have "dinner parties": people just arrived – including our ex-husbands, both appreciative trenchermen whatever their other shortcomings – or were invited for lunch or dinner. These were robust rather than refined affairs where we made everything from chicken pies and spanakopita, to curries, pot au feu, enchiladas, pâté, vegetable terrines, crème caramel, nectarine tarts, berries with crème anglaise, etc, etc. We didn't have much money but there was always a sense of plenty.

We made whatever took our fancy because that's what it was like back then. Nobody talked about real estate or high cholesterol, and I don't recall anyone having a gluten allergy or being lactose-intolerant. Everyone drank too much and had coffee at five. We were profligate with dairy.

Sue came back into the kitchen one night after she'd made a mango mousse to find a man we barely knew, a friend of a friend, with the mixing bowl in both hands and his face buried deep inside.

but, as Maurice des Ombiaux says, 'Let us not make any mistake, the taste which one has for good living, however lively it may be, cannot take the place of the technical knowledge, the long habit, the constant practice of the difficult and complicated profession of cookery.'

On the question of recipes, domestic cooks seem to fall into two camps. The first sticks scrupulously to every direction: "It says a pinch of wild fennel seeds and we've only got ordinary!" my partner will shriek before running off for two hours to find some.

The second follows an anarchic, "what-would-they-know?" path that can result in genius, blandness or simple inedibility. It's like the man I heard of who has a GPS device in his car, mainly so he can take an alternative route and prove it wrong. He is often lost and frequently late.

IT ALWAYS SURPRISES GOOD COOKS THAT there are bad cooks. How can someone care so little about food? How hard can it be to follow a recipe? Well, quite hard for some people, especially if they think julienne and blanch are French girls' names. It may be, however, a case of choosing the wrong recipe in the first place.

A good cook I know once described the worst meal she ever had. Her hostess, for reasons

Yet some people don't consider it a form of drudgery. One person I know, anyway: my friend Jamie. Jamie is in fact a believer in the *benefits* of drudgery as a sort of homeopathic cure for ailing modern lifestyles.

Like the ultimate catch on some homemaker version of *The Bachelor*, he not only likes cooking regularly; he also likes weeding, washing up and, in the days when fridges needed defrosting, used to enjoy hacking his way through the Kelvinator's frozen vasts.

Having hands and mind occupied in these simple tasks has a calming effect, he maintains, and he much prefers that sort of mind-clearing and mindfulness to doing yoga or a meditation class. But then he's never been a joiner.

There are a few things I should mention here. One, Jamie is a self-confessed greedy-guts who loves to eat, so his motivation is high. Two, he and his wife both work from home. Three, they don't have children. Four, he and his wife actually share the cooking. One or the other doesn't just "help" from time to time after intensive nagging.

In many couples, particularly those with children, it's still the women who do the bulk of the day-to-day cooking. The partner might do the odd star turn at the Weber or make a dish for a dinner party, all the more infuriating when one of the treacherous female guests trills at some point, "Aren't you lucky? Isn't he marvellous?"

It's the relentless planning and burden of responsibility that wears most women down... Majority cook, you, to occasional cook, partner, at 5pm: "Have you thought about what we might have for dinner?"

"Oh sorry, darling, not really. I've been busy on the net. Did you have anything in mind? [Screams are heard] ... Right. No, really, point taken. Absolutely not fair and all that ... Yes, I know you do ... No, I do think you should be able to sit and read *The New Yorker* without interruption occasionally ... How about takeaway then?"

All of this is greatly alleviated, of course, when, (a) you don't work full-time; (b) your children leave home; (c) you eat out a lot; (d) you're married to Jamie; (e) you remember that cooking can be a pleasure.

Last year, I made quince jelly for the first time. I loved the way the kitchen filled with sweetness as it boiled. For weeks afterwards, looking at the gleaming jars of clearest ruby-red jelly filled me with strange and simple delight.

On a family holiday recently, my partner's brother baked bread every morning and presented it, warm and fragrant, at breakfast. Fruit bread, plain, brioche. It was heavenly.

It's sad that many of us now find the idea of making such things ludicrous. "Who's got the time?" Well, everyone really, if they had the inclination.

Perhaps it's not just a matter of priorities, but also of status, suggests my friend Sue. Unfortunately, having the time – making the time – for such earthy, honest, resourceful pastimes now tends to mark you as a "loser". "Real people" are out looking for a plasma TV, assuaging parental guilt by sitting through the whole of *Little Athletics*, or consuming a vibrant cafe "experience", eating food they have had no connection with – and often don't enjoy.

Shame, really, because there's something very grounding and contemplative about pottering in the kitchen, whether you're chatting over the stockpot, teaching your children how to cook or crying into the soup (and not because of the onions). It's not a "lifestyle", but it's an important slice of life, from slow simmer to rolling boil. **GW**

Indeed, making a pig of yourself was regarded as something of a compliment. Sue came back into the kitchen one night after she'd made a mango mousse to find a man we barely knew, the friend of a friend, with the mixing bowl in both hands and his face buried deep inside.

(On the other hand, my relationship with my current partner almost foundered at the starting gates after I gave him a plate of richly flavoured osso buco, accompanied by a piquant gremolata and a glossy risotto milanese, and heard him say, "Any tomato sauce?")

Sue had, and still has, the happy knack of being able to open the fridge, register the disparate and sometimes sad contents, and imagine a meal. Like Reinhold Messner scaling Everest without bottled oxygen, she likes to work without a recipe, although she has read and absorbed plenty in her time.

As Elizabeth David observes rather sternly in *French Provincial Cooking*: "There are people who hold that cookery books are unnecessary. These people are usually those who innocently believe cookery to be a matter of a little imagination, common sense, and taste for food, qualities which are, of course, of enormous importance to a cook;

known only to herself, chose to make something called Ham Surprise. It consisted of a tinned ham turned out on a plate, scattered with raw peanuts and bathed in a sea of tepid pineapple juice. My friend threw up later that night, not because the ham was off, she says, but because the aesthetic assault was so great.

Perhaps it reminded her of her childhood. Her mother's idea of a stew was a pound of mince boiled up with a tin of mixed diced vegetables and a tablespoon of mixed herbs. Someone else I know has trouble with liquid foods because of the "brain soup" he swears his mother used to serve up. It was a simple dish: several lamb's brains bobbing about in a thin gruel. Perhaps there were carrots.

These nightmare dishes (in my household it was tripe with parsley sauce) are mostly the stuff of everyday cooking.

There's a distinction, of course, between routine cooking and entertaining, or cooking for pleasure. For many, everyday cooking is like being trapped on the laboratory rat wheel: plan, shop, chop, cook, clean up, and then go through it all again night after night, year after year. The rats are mostly female.

