

Learning with Grandmother: why we should cook by heart

Anna-Marie Julyan discovers how age has traditionally brought a culinary wisdom that youngsters may be in danger of losing

There's an anecdote at the start of Niki Segnit's new book, *Lateral Cooking*, where she describes her former obedience to written instructions.

'If a recipe called for one teaspoon of water, I would lean level with the tap and fill a teaspoon precisely to the brim, discarding it and starting again if the spoon overflowed and left me millimetrically shy of the measure,' she says. 'I conformed to the image of the Stepford cook: obedient to the point of OCD.'

This is in stark contrast to her maternal grandmother, who did not own a single recipe book. 'My grandmother cooked with an assessing eye, an experienced touch and absolutely no recourse to written instruction whatsoever,' she adds.

Not everyone is quite in Segnit's league when it comes to following recipes. But many of us, like her, possess shelves groaning with cookbooks, watch endless cookery programmes on television and dutifully follow directions to produce exciting dishes from all over the world.

But Segnit was unable to retain the information – the recipes were not 'loading onto my hard drive'.

'I was a recipe robot,' she says. 'I was carrying out the instructions, never thinking to trust myself. And this is someone who's cooked lots and lots.'

She realised that if you learn the basic techniques by heart, you can effectively cook with whatever is to hand, meaning less waste. In her new book, Segnit provides 'leeways' which show the practical tweaks you can make if, for example, you don't have enough eggs, as well as flavours to explore.

'It depends how much time you have to cook – the book has 12 chapters and you could take a year and learn to cook all these things,' she says. 'Do one thing a month until you completely learn it, then add the next.'

Segnit's first book, *The Flavour Thesaurus*, involved testing hundreds of flavour pairings to find out what goes together. Its creation spurred her to strip recipes back to their basic formulas, and from that came the idea for *Lateral Cooking*, which is published on 20 September.

The book took eight years to write and is divided into 12 culinary categories covering bread, batter, roux, stocks, stews and soups, cakes and biscuits, chocolate, sugar, custard sauce and pastry. For each, Segnit explains the links between different methods, showing how tweaking an ingredient or quantity leads to a new type of dish.

For example, in the chapter on bread, she starts with the basic recipe for flatbreads and crackers, then shows how,



SLOW FOOD Making pasta with Nonna can be a good entry point – and it's best to start early, says Del Conte

'My grandmother cooked with an assessing eye, an experienced touch and no written instruction at all'



TRICOLOUR TREAT Nigella Lawson with Italian nonna and food writer Anna Del Conte

with the addition of a leavener, you move into soda bread, scones and cobblers. Switching out the leavener for yeast she moves on to yeast-risen bread, then adds butter, sugar and egg with milk in place of water to make buns. The chapter ends with those most decadent of breads: brioche, babas and savarins. She explains the links in a series of lighthearted essays, organising all the recipes on a continuum – hence 'lateral cooking'.

But of course didn't our grandmothers know how to cook by heart precisely because they had more time? 'We've got a lot more on our minds, and in this country we do a bit of everything – Mediterranean, Korean, now vegan,' admits Segnit. 'And there are so many beautiful books. If you're working full time and dip into all these different cuisines, there's no way you'll be able to learn every single recipe off by heart.'

Like many of her generation, Segnit's grandmother's repertoire was smaller than what is typical today – at most a few dozen classic British dishes seasonally adapted. But for today's globetrotting cooks, her book helpfully demonstrates the culinary links between foods from all around the world.

Flatbread dough can be boiled to make noodles; and if you can make buns, you can make Jewish challah or British lardy cake. It's all interconnected.

The ultimate Italian grandmother or 'nonna', at least for us Brits, has to be Anna Del Conte, who is still going strong at the age of 93 with *Vegetables All'Italiana* out this October.

FAMOUS GRANS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The culinary wisdom of grandmothers was recognised this year at The Guild of Food Writers Awards, where blog *Grand Dishes* (granddishes.com) won Best Food Blog 2018. Founders Anastasia Miari and Iska Lupton set it up to record grandmothers' stories and recipes that would otherwise disappear. Miari's Greek grandmother, or 'yiyia', provided the initial inspiration and, sure enough, her repertoire doesn't include a Thai curry.

'These grandmas have learned over the course of 80 years to cook about 20 dishes expertly,' says Miari. 'If I

said "can you make a Thai green curry?" my yiyia wouldn't even know what I'm talking about. But, she can cook on an open flame in an outhouse and put a pot of stufado on a fire, go down to her allotment and know how much kindling to put on that fire so it's ready to be eaten when she comes back.'

They found all the grandmothers share a tendency to cook from instinct and memory, and none relies on books. Each woman – and they come from all over the world shared her signature recipe and each recipe says



something about them, explains Miari.

'A lot of the time it's their life story that's affected their food choices,' she says. 'It's really changing my life to be honest. It's amazing to hang out with women over the age of 60 who know what to worry about and what not to worry about. They are comfortable with themselves and have been through both amazing and hard times.'

There's 'grandmaman' Nicole, who married into the Cointreau family and makes a boozy orange tart, Chainsaw

Jenny, a self-reliant sort who knows how to butcher a pig, bakes queen of puddings with her own jam; and Zena, who can hold a plank for 300 counts and cooks peroshkis in honour of her own Russian mother. The *Grand Dishes* mantra is: 'It's not about what it's like to be old. It's about what it's like to have lived.' The next step is a cookery book, which they are crowdfunding, with a 10th of the profits going to the Campaign to End Loneliness.



BASIN INSTINCT The home cook who calls herself Chainsaw Jenny tests the stiffness of a meringue for her signature dish, queen of puddings

The cookery author – who is adored by one Nigella Lawson – published a book in 2011 about cooking with her granddaughter, called *Cooking With Coco, Family Recipes To Cook Together*.

Del Conte's advice is to get children in the kitchen early. 'Let them stir – carefully – and look into the saucepan as soon as they can,' she says. 'It's lovely to cook with a child. A grandmother is possibly even better than a parent. The relationship is easier and they don't feel there's any obligation – they're free to do more of what they want.' She advises trying things children can make with their hands, such as ravioli, but most importantly to get them cooking the things that they like to eat.

Jamie Oliver's latest cookery show on Channel 4, *Jamie Cooks Italy*, highlights recipes from Italian nonnas, and they're also the stars of a YouTube channel called *Pasta Grannies*, set up by British vlogger Vicky Bennison four years ago.

It went viral back in August after featuring on news websites, with 250,000 subscribers joining the original 45,000 in the space of about 10 days. Bennison travels to different Italian regions, filming Italian nonnas making pasta.

It's a simple formula, but their age-old skills are at risk of dying out, she explains. 'Italy is changing – it takes an outsider to notice it – but the young women of today are all in the workplace if they can be and they really don't have time to do this, plus they still have their grandmothers helping them along,' adds Bennison.

The nonnas have taught her about the 'art of simplicity' as well as to be good humoured about it all. Ingredients are measured in handfuls rather than grams. The videos show just how physical and intricate making pasta can be and the importance of practising, but it's also important to just feel you can give it a go, she says.

'A four-year-old can make picci – they're just like fat little spaghetti worms. If it doesn't turn out alright just call it another name – don't call it tagliatelle, say strozzapreti or something!'

Explaining why she set it up, Bennison says: 'I got fed up with older women being invisible – we never see them. People always say their grandmothers are their inspiration. We should see more of women with experience.'

Photography: Issy Coaker

IN MY OPINION *Fi Glover*



The Radio 4 journalist airs her views

Never has there been a month with such a churn in the big swivel seats of radio. Eddie Mair moved to LBC, Chris Evans announced he's off to Virgin, Jeremy Vine started at Channel 5. He's not left his Radio 2 show, though – he'll do the television thing in the morning and then his radio thing at lunchtime. I saw him cycling between jobs this week and I felt a pang of maternal concern. When will he have time to eat? Is it all a bit too much? Meanwhile, I don't know what to do myself. Should I watch his TV show and then listen to him too? Something in my DNA just won't let me watch TV during the day, which is very annoying during bouts of flu and will also be a hindrance in The Retirement Home For Old BBC Personnel, when I eventually check in. In my dotage I am very much hoping to end up in a comfortable chair next to JV in The Home – I like to think we'll be having a mild altercation with Winifred Robinson about whether to watch another episode of *Cash In The Attic* or *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*.

'Most people do at least an eight-hour day, so it's no big deal if you choose to do it in different locations'

Perhaps I worry unnecessarily. Vanessa Feltz also does two radio shows a day. She greets her early morning crew at Radio 2 and then four hours later greets her BBC Radio London listeners. Most people are doing at least an eight-hour day so it's actually no big deal if you just choose to do it in two different locations. Our attitude to work is quite stagnant, isn't it? It's something which former *Cosby* Show actor Geoffrey Owens found out to his cost. He did six years on that mega-hit and has appeared in lots of other things, and in between roles he has taken non-acting jobs, presumably to keep the wolf from the door and to keep busy. Until last week he was working quietly and diligently at a supermarket called *Trader Joe's* until someone snapped him and sent the photo to a newspaper which ran the story in a nasty 'oh look how far he has fallen' way.

Thankfully, thousands of people stood up for Geoffrey and he was invited on *Good Morning America* where he spoke with immense dignity about how his current job is worth as much as the one the next man is doing. And who wouldn't cheer him on? How dreadful if you felt that you couldn't go out to work for fear of being 'job shamed'. He's not the first actor to be bussing tables or packing bags, and key to the desire to be an actor in the first place is the need to connect with others. It's key to the human race, isn't it?

So in that spirit, I say, take all the jobs you can get while the going is good. I'll bring you a sandwich, Jeremy, if you need it.

@ffiglover

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