

Raiding the Pantry

The store cupboard is vital to my very existence. Don't you find there are times when you can't be bothered to go to the shops; that's when you fall back on to a treasure trove of tins, packets, spices and, dare I say it, stock cubes. No matter how organised you are, there will come a time when you have to fall back on imagination and whatever you have in the pantry to rustle up a filling and tasty meal. My mother and grandmother swore by their store cupboards, and I have carried on the tradition. With just a few basic items, you can eat well when the need arises, and the variety of meals you can produce from a basic store cupboard can then be supplemented with home grown vegetables, and some more expensive items for variety.

Here's some ideas to have in your store cupboard to tide you over, so you could prepare a feast at the drop of a hat for unexpected visitors: Flour, Pasta, Sugar, Dried Fruit, Cooking Oil, Canned Tomatoes, Tuna, Sardines, and Octopus in olive oil, Spices and Herbs, Rice, Tinned and dried Beans, Dark Chocolate, Jars of marinated artichokes and peppers, olives and assuming that most households have essentials such as garlic, onions, eggs and bacon...

ROASTED SOYA BEANS

Serves 8

200g frozen soya beans
1 tsp dried rosemary
1 teaspoon fennel seeds
1 teaspoon cumin seeds
freshly ground black pepper

1. Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6. Line two baking trays with sheets of baking paper. Divide the beans in half and pour onto the trays. Add the rosemary to one tray and the seeds to the other. Season both generously with pepper then mix well. Ensure the beans are in a single layer.
2. Roast for about 45–60 minutes, stirring occasionally, until crisp and golden. Switch off the oven and leave the beans to cool in the residual heat.
3. Store each tray of beans in a separate airtight container.

Hint: You can experiment with other seeds and herbs as you choose.

SPAGHETTINI WITH TURBOT, BREADCRUMBS AND PARSLEY

Serves 2

10 oz (275 g) dried spaghetti
2 tbsp olive oil
1 clove garlic, finely chopped
pinch dried chilli flakes
pinch dashi soup powder (optional)
4 anchovy fillets, tinned
2 oz (50 g) fresh breadcrumbs (*can we use dried*)
10 oz (275 g) turbot fillet, cut into 1 in (2.5 cm) cubes (any other white fish can be substituted)
salt and ground black pepper
2 tbsp chopped flat parsley leaves
1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
1 dsp lemon juice

1. Cook the pasta in plenty of boiling water until al dente, about 8-10 minutes.
2. Heat the olive oil in a frying pan, add the garlic, chilli, dashi powder and anchovy fillets and cook, stirring regularly, until the anchovies have disintegrated. Add the breadcrumbs and fry until golden. Add the fish and stir-fry over a high heat for about 5 minutes or until the fish is just cooked.
3. Drain the pasta and mix with the fish mix. Season to taste.
4. Mix in the parsley, drizzle with extra virgin olive oil and lemon juice, and serve immediately.

Hint: rubbing vegetable oil around the top of the sauce pan will prevent boilovers

TINNED SALMON BALLS

Serves 4

1 x 213 g tin Alaskan salmon
6 oz (175 g) leftover mashed potato
1 oz (25 g) softened unsalted butter
1 hard-boiled egg, chopped
1 tsp chopped dried dill
2 tsp chopped dried parsley
1 tsp salt
½ tsp ground white pepper
2 eggs, beaten
fresh breadcrumbs
vegetable oil for frying

1. Mash the salmon, crushing the bones with a fork (canned bones are delicious).
2. Mix the salmon well with the potato, softened butter, egg, dill, parsley, salt, pepper and half the egg.
3. Flour your hands and shape the mix into balls. Dip them in the remaining egg and coat them in breadcrumbs. Deep-fry in hot oil for 3 minutes.
4. Serve with a shop bought tomato and basil sauce, tartare sauce or hot parsley sauce.

Hint: remember dried herbs are twice as powerful as fresh, so if you do grow your own and have fresh herbs available to use, half the amount required in the recipe

the perfect...

SPAGHETTI WITH HERBY GREEN SAUCE

Serves 4

1 lb (450 g) spaghetti
½ bunch flat parsley, leaves only
2 tbsp chopped gherkins, rinsed
2 tbsp capers, rinsed
2 cloves garlic, chopped
2 tbsp red wine vinegar
¼ pt extra virgin olive oil
salt and ground black pepper
grated Parmesan cheese

1. Cook the spaghetti in plenty of boiling salted water until al dente then drain, then drizzle with 1 tbsp Extra Virgin Olive Oil.
2. While the spaghetti is cooking combine the parsley, gherkins, capers, garlic and red wine vinegar in a food processor until minced; with the machine still running, add the remaining oil in a thin stream. Season to taste.
3. Toss the spaghetti with the sauce and sprinkle with Parmesan. Serve immediately.

Hint: pasta cools quickly so always heat the serving plates or bowls before you dish it up

DRIED FRUIT COMPOTE WITH GREEK YOGHURT

Something to make in advance and store in a kilner jar in the fridge...a healthy start to the day.

Serves: 4-6

115g (4 oz) dried apricots
55g (2 oz) dried cherries
55g (2 oz) dried blueberries
55g (2 oz) dried figs
55g (2 oz) dried pears
55g (2 oz) dried mango
½ cinnamon stick
2 tablespoons liquid honey
2 cloves
½ vanilla pod, split
zest from ½ lemon
pinch saffron stamens, soaked in 2 tablespoons of hot water
15g (½ oz) flaked almonds, toasted
15g (½ oz) pinenuts
a few drops orange or rose water (optional)

1. Place all the ingredients down to and including the saffron water in a non-reactive saucepan and just cover with cold water. Bring to the boil, reduce the heat and simmer for 25 minutes. Top up with water if necessary.
2. Allow to cool then add the remaining ingredients. Serve with cereal, wheat germ and a dollop of Greek yogurt.

Hint: The combination of dried fruits must be down to you but I feel my choice gets us away from the hospital combo of prunes, dried apples and apricots. Once you add muesli to the mix you get a lovely crunch added to the perfume of the dried fruits.

SAUSAGES WITH WHITE BEANS AND ROASTED PEPPERS

A great way of getting more from a few sausages. Be sure to choose good-quality sausages with a high meat content.

serves 2

4 extra lean pork sausages, cut in 2–3cm chunks
1 tbsp olive oil
4 garlic cloves, finely chopped
1 onion, roughly chopped
1 x 320g jar whole sweet red peppers in oil, drained, and roughly chopped
1 x 410g tin cannellini beans in water, drained and rinsed
150g baby spinach leaves
4 tablespoons chopped flat-leaf parsley
finely grated zest and juice of 1/2 unwaxed lemon
freshly ground black pepper

1. Preheat the grill to high and cook the sausage pieces until brown all over, remove and set aside.
2. Heat a large non-stick pan over a medium heat and add the oil. Add half the garlic and all the onion to the pan and cook gently, adding a splash of water as necessary, until the onion is translucent, about 8 minutes.
3. Add the peppers, beans and 4 tablespoons water and cook for 5 minutes.
4. Add the sausages and spinach and cook for a further 5 minutes.
5. Meanwhile, in a mini food-processor or pestle and mortar, blend together the remaining garlic, the parsley and lemon zest and juice. Add this to the stew and stir well.
6. Season with pepper to taste and serve immediately.

Hint: an easy way to turn all your sausages over in one go is to place several of them on a skewer then you can flip them all at once!

TOMATO AND FLAGEOLET BEAN SOUP

Serves 4

1 onion, finely diced
2 cloves garlic, finely diced
pinch dried chilli flakes
2 tbsp Olive Oil
1 x 13oz (375 g) tin chopped tomatoes with basil
2 vegetable stock cubes
1 sachet bouquet garni
1 x 13oz (375 g) tin flageolet beans, drained
salt and ground black pepper
1 tbsp pesto
1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
2oz butter for frying

1. In a saucepan pan-fry the onion, garlic and chilli flakes in the butter until soft but without colour.
2. Add the tomatoes, 1¾ pints (1 litre) boiling water, the stock cubes and bouquet garni, and simmer for 15 minutes. Fold in the beans, bring back to simmering temperature, and season to taste.
3. Serve in four warm soup bowls, topped with a little pesto and a drizzle of olive oil, accompanied by hot crusty bread.

Hint: drain and rinse canned beans to remove excess salt

AFGHAN MILK JELLIES

A delicate and refreshing pudding for hot weather. Agar is a setting agent that does not require cold to set it – however these desserts should be kept in the fridge covered until you need them. Agar is suitable for vegetarians.

Serves 4

500ml full fat milk

8 green cardamom pods, bruised

2 tablespoons golden caster sugar

1 tablespoon agar flakes

1. Pour the milk into a small saucepan and add the cardamom pods. Heat gently just until bubbles form on the surface of the milk where it touches the pan. Cover and leave for 1 hour until cooled.
2. Stir in the sugar then sprinkle the surface of the milk with the agar flakes. Warm gently without stirring then once warm, stir and simmer very gently for 3–5 minutes until the agar dissolves.
3. Strain to remove the cardamom then divide between four small glasses.
4. Leave until set then cover and chill until required.

Hint: before heating the milk, rinse the pan with cold water to keep it from scorching and sticking.

WARM NATURAL POPCORN

It's best to cook this fresh as you want it.

Serves 1

30g popping corn

cinnamon or pepper for sprinkling, if liked

1. Put the popping corn in a medium-sized saucepan over a medium-high heat. Cover with the lid and shake over the heat until you hear the corn start to 'pop'.
2. Reduce the heat to medium-low and leave the pan over the heat until all the popping stops. Don't be tempted to lift the lid before then! Sprinkle with cinnamon or pepper if liked, and serve at once.

Hint: There's no need to add any oil to the pan. For 2 or 4 servings use a bigger pan and more popping corn.

HOT CHOCOLATE NIGHTCAP

This is a real treat for you to enjoy – warm, rich and perfect to send you to sleep. It is also much healthier than shop-bought products.

Serves 1

1 tablespoon cocoa powder

1 teaspoon golden caster sugar

50g / 2oz 70% cocoa solid dark chocolate, finely chopped

200ml milk

1. In a small saucepan, mix the cocoa powder and sugar with 6 tablespoons cold water. Place over a medium heat and stir until it comes to a simmer. Add the chocolate and heat until melted.
2. Whisk in the milk until heated through. If preferred, heat the milk separately and whisk until frothy then stir in the chocolate mixture. Serve at once.

Hint: keep a skin from forming on heated milk by covering the pan or by beating it so a froth forms on the surface

FRITTERS WITH RAISINS AND MARSALA

Serves

2 oz (50 g) raisins
¼ pint (150 ml) Marsala or sweet sherry
8 oz (225 g) plain flour
pinch salt
2 egg yolks
¼ pint (150 ml) milk
vegetable oil for frying
caster sugar for dusting

1. Soak the raisins in the Marsala for 15 minutes. Drain, reserving the wine.
2. Place the flour and salt in a large mixing bowl, make a well in the centre and gradually add the Marsala, stirring constantly. Stir in the egg yolks and enough milk to make a batter the consistency of thick cream, then stir in the soaked raisins.
3. In a large frying pan heat 1 in (2.5 cm) of vegetable oil. Using a small ladle or 3 tbsp for each fritter, spoon the batter into the hot oil. Cook three or four at a time for 5 minutes, turning once, then drain on kitchen paper. Repeat until all the batter is used up. Dust with caster sugar and serve hot.

Hint: drop a tiny bit of batter into the oil to see if it is hot enough – if it bobs up to the surface, the fat is hot enough

CHOCOLATE BANANA CUSTARD

Using your nose to come up with a quick pud!

Serves 4

115g/4 oz plain (semisweet) chocolate, chopped

300ml tinned ambrosia custard

2 banana

1. Put the chocolate in a heatproof bowl and melt in the microwave on high power for 1-2 minutes. Stir, then set aside to cool. (Alternatively, put the chocolate in a heatproof bowl and place it over a pan of gently simmering water and leave until melted, stirring when melted.)
2. Pour the custard into a bowl and gently fold in the melted chocolate to make a rippled effect.
3. Peel and slice the bananas and spoon into four glasses, pour over the custard ripple and chill for 30 minutes-1 hour before serving

Hint: use any red fruit instead of banana if preferred