

GOOD
COOK
~~BAD
COOK~~

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DEDICATION

For my son, Jerome,
may he learn to cook well,
and in memory of
my father, Stewart Heywood
(1925-2004), who did.

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GOOD COOK * BAD COOK

INTRODUCTION

This is a book of fundamentals—the dishes that we all love and eat regularly. Cooking isn't rocket science. It's about fine ingredients, treated with respect and an understanding as to what works and why.

The dry risotto. The gluggy pasta. The leaden scones that no amount of cream can save. The roast chicken that's promisingly golden on the outside and running with blood within. The execrable takeaway re-warmed in the microwave. The veggie stir-fry that's cooked to mush.

There's no doubt that the average kitchen today sees more crimes against humanity than the International Court of Justice handles in a year.

And yes, good food may be a first-world problem, but it's an important one. Good food is soul food—bad food leads to crankiness, constipation and spots, and is doubtless the driving force behind today's obesity epidemic. Eat good food, and you'll be sitting around the table grinning contentedly; eat bad food and you'll be looking for some extra carby comfort before you know it.

We live in a privileged society, with great ingredients at our fingertips, running water at the end of a tap, and gas or electricity at the flick of a switch. So why do we accept less than the best? Why do we eat tepid take out while watching gastroporn cooking shows? Why spend a fortune at the butcher's only to butcher the end

result? Hell, if a 15th-century Italian peasant could throw together a perfectly good meal from a bunch of basil, some garlic, parmesan and pasta after a long day toiling in the fields, then surely we can do the same after a day at the office? We need to man up in the kitchen—men and women alike.

Cooking isn't rocket science. It's about fine ingredients, treated with respect and a smidgeon of understanding as to what works and why.

So this book is written for all those who want to cook good food rather than the alternative. It's for those who are starting out in the kitchen, who don't want to poison or embarrass themselves or others. It's for those otherwise competent folk who remain flummoxed by certain dishes while being perfectly capable of acing others. Trust me, it's possible for anyone to cook feather-light scones or deliver up beautifully cooked fish with a sauce that sings.

This book is also for those who want to perfect some classics, and understand how the hell we got here in the first place.

This is a book of fundamentals—the dishes that we all love and eat regularly. You'll find no foams here, or tricky restaurant fare, just good food that will give you a lifetime of happy eating.

This book should be in the backpack of every person leaving their mother's apron strings—and in the Christmas stocking of every kid still living at home and old enough to rustle up their own dinners once in a while.

But first, let's get one thing straight: good food comes from good cooks, and good cooks aren't born—they're made. Even super-chefs like Heston Blumenthal and Nigel Slater and Stephanie Alexander didn't come kicking and screaming from the womb, shouting: "I've a great idea for bacon and egg ice cream!" or "I know how to cook the perfect leg of lamb. With anchovies!" First you need to master the basics, and only then should you be free to experiment.

Far from many cooks spoiling the broth, all it takes is one over-confident kitchen klutz who cooks with good intentions, but no clue. The kind of cook who thinks that sushi is nice, burritos are nice—hey, how about a sushi burrito?! The same thought process is likely responsible for similar monsters such as curried pizza, coriander pesto, banana guacamole, marshmallow coleslaw and other travesties.

And don't even get me started on the perils of meals in cardboard boxes or 'just add water' powdered mixes. Forget fusion food—our world is being taken over by Frankenfood, packed with chemicals, genetically modified ingredients and all sorts of other nasties.

It's time we got back to basics, starting with great ingredients in season, not flown thousands of miles and yanked from the cool room of the supermarket. And the basics of technique, too.

Think about the classics, like bangers and mash, lasagne, roast chicken, chocolate cake, apple pie... In the hands of a cook who knows what they're doing, these trusty dishes always

seem to turn out just right. And the reason why? The cook has made them so often that every little wrinkle in the process has been ironed out.

Sure, occasionally the cook tinkers around the edges a bit—perhaps to suit the needs of an unfamiliar oven, or to account for a sudden change in available ingredients, but essentially the recipe, the process and the whole look and feel of the dish as it's coming together are imprinted into the good cook's DNA. Think of how your grandmother could pull off a perfect Sunday roast. She could probably manage it after half a bottle of sherry. (And probably did, if my family is any indication.)

I grew up in the 70s, so the kinds of dishes my father could turn out without fail included Sunday night curried eggs (béchamel sauce flavoured with curry powder, with the cunning addition of mashed boiled eggs, served on hot buttered toast) and a lethal cocktail called 'Norwegian tiger's milk', which saw many dinner party guests staggering home to bed before dinner was even served. A shame, really, as it often included another of Dad's trusted favourites—Tasmanian scallops lightly pan-fried in lemon, butter, garlic and parsley.

All of these recipes had something in common. They celebrated simple ingredients cooked well, and were designed for a very specific purpose, respectively: 1) comfort food for family, and 2) the joy of entertaining friends. Once Dad was onto a good thing, he stuck to it. He cooked and cooked and cooked and cooked, until he could cook the damn dish in his sleep. I suggest you do the same with the recipes here. Make them part of your DNA, too.

For me, these days, curried eggs don't really cut the mustard. But I have to say that the lemon scallops are still on the menu.

Unlike many recipe books, in this one I've tried to distil all the knowledge you need to make the dish turn out perfectly. You know, the kind of tips and tricks your grandmother picked up at the knee of her grandmother. To broaden my understanding of what works and why, I also immersed myself in some hefty reference tomes: Harold McGee's *On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen*; Michael Ruhlman's *The Elements of Cooking*, and of course, *Larousse Gastronomique*, aptly subtitled 'the world's greatest cookery encyclopaedia'. Mashed together with information from all sorts of other sources, all tested in my kitchen at home, I like to think that this book doesn't just give you recipes for 80 classic dishes, but also clear guidance on how not to stuff them up. In one day alone, I made eight, yes EIGHT, different pavlovas, testing to see what happened when I changed the balance of the ingredients and ignored long-standing kitchen lore. Answer: disaster. There's a reason why you should stick to a good recipe when you find it.

This book is organised into the usual suspects—breakfast, baking, meats, vegetables, and so on—but within this, you'll find lots of useful links. For example, once you've mastered the art of a good béchamel sauce, a squillion other dishes are now at your fingertips—cauliflower cheese, macaroni and cheese and fish pie, to name but a few. The same for basics such as a buttery shortcrust pastry, which can be transformed into the base for pies, both savoury and sweet. Also a speedy hollandaise, which can be lavished over fish, asparagus, eggs, smoked salmon, ham or whatever else takes your fancy. There are also links between techniques—once you've got the hang of whipping egg whites

for a meringue, suddenly pavlova, soufflé, and more are all within your reach. And that perfect custard of yours? Enjoy it as is, or turn it into a trifle or an ice cream.

So with endless permutations and combinations—just some of which I've noted here—this book is the basis for literally hundreds of meals, snacks and other tasty treats. Enjoy.

One final word of warning: yes, it's great to be able to cook good food at home, but there is one side effect you should be aware of: restaurant rage. Next thing you know, you'll be down the pub or at your local Italian ordering a veal parma and you'll find yourself looking at the sauce-slathered slab on your plate thinking: "It's just a frozen, pre-shaped schnitzel, tossed straight from the freezer into the deep-fryer, and covered in commercial sauce. Hell, I can do better than that."

Congratulations. You now know the difference between good food and bad.

Victoria Heywood, October 2012

20 RULES FOR KITCHEN NOVICES

1. Good food starts with good ingredients.

Find a decent butcher, fishmonger and greengrocer—you never know when you'll need them to pin bone a side of salmon, or save you some offaly good bits that aren't generally available. And hunt down a good supply of quality fresh and dried pasta, as well as rice, oils, cheese and spices.

Supermarkets are good for loo paper, but not always great for world-class produce, lovingly selected and prepared by experts who, like some mothers at playgroup, will bend your ear about their offspring's home environment, developmental progress and all-round superiority.

2. Never drive past a farmers' market.

Stallholders actively encourage you to eat as you shop, which is generally frowned upon in supermarkets, plus you never know what you might find in season.

3. Eat seasonally and locally.

That's why farmers' markets are so good. You're unlikely to find some Chinese garlic grower has flown halfway around the world to set up shop, but he may well have sent his bulbs as unaccompanied baggage to a shop near you.

It's not just about the air miles—although you should care about those, too—it's also about the amount of time those bulbs might have spent in detention in a warehouse somewhere. Food grown locally is likely to be fresher, less tired and certainly less homesick.

4. Keep your pantry well stocked

and you'll always be able to throw together a quick meal. A full-to-bursting cupboard saves time and provides the basis for many good meals.

SCRAMBLED EGGS

You can just imagine the delight of the first hungry person who smashed his eggs on the way back to the cave, decided to cook them anyway, and ended up inventing scrambled eggs. Written references to this dish date back to Roman times, only popping up in English cuisine in the 16th century, where they were also known as buttered or jumbled eggs.

Although today they're considered a 'basic' dish, making scrambled eggs takes practice. And it requires constant attention—you can't walk away and leave them to their own devices.

Make sure the pan is heated and the butter foamy (but not browned) before you add the eggs. Think low and slow—too much heat will cook the eggs too quickly, leaving pockets of goo inside the layers of cooked egg. Likewise, too much vigorous stirring will dry the eggs out and make them powdery. And on no account should you ever cook them so much that they start to brown! What you're looking to create are light, fluffy, golden curds that are soft and creamy—not rubbery or dry.

SERVES 1

Ingredients

2 free-range eggs

1 tablespoon water,
full-cream milk or cream

salt and black pepper

20g butter

buttered toast, to serve

Optional additions include
a handful of chopped fresh herbs,
grated cheese or slivers of ham

Method

1. Crack the eggs into a medium-sized bowl and remove any blood spots or bits of shell. Add the milk or cream (or water for a fluffier result) and use a fork to lightly whisk until just combined. Don't overbeat the eggs. Season to taste.
2. Melt the butter in a saucepan over medium heat. Swirl the pan around so the butter coats the base.
3. When the butter is just starting to foam, pour in the egg mix. Let it cook for 30 seconds, then use a wooden spoon to stir gently and continuously until the egg mixture starts forming creamy curds. Push the formed curds towards the centre and tilt the pan so the runny bits flow to the edge. Break apart any large pieces as they form with your spoon—you want fluffy little pillows, not great big beanbags.
4. When the eggs have reached the point where they show just a tiny bit of moisture on the surface (around 2-3 minutes), add any additional ingredients, such as cheese or herbs, and remove from the heat. Stir once more and serve on slices of buttered toast.

5. When eaten for breakfast, scrambled eggs are often dished up alongside hash browns, bacon or sausages. You can also spice them up with any number of sauces—tomato, HP, chilli or Worcestershire.

TIPS FOR PERFECTION

- * Use a spatula or wooden spoon. A whisk will break up the eggs too much and powdery little yellow crumbs will be created.
- * The lower the heat and the more constant the movement, the creamier the end product. Stir the mix just like you would a soup, making sure to keep all the curds moving so they don't stick to the bottom or sides of the pan and brown.

- * The eggs should be slightly undercooked when you remove them from the heat. The residual heat will continue to cook them even as you slide them onto the buttered toast.



BAD SCRAMBLED EGGS

It's a truth universally acknowledged that on any long-haul flight, you'll be served scrambled eggs during at least one leg of the trip. And no matter what airline you fly, the eggy offering is always the same—rubbery but powdery at the same time, and somehow tasting of stale farts. You can achieve much the same result at home by using powdered eggs, adding water and nuking them in the microwave, but I seriously wouldn't advise it. Even if you use real eggs—the kind that come in a shell and not from a packet—and make sure to stop the machine and stir every few seconds, you'll still end up with rubber.

Going to the other foodie extreme, I also wouldn't bother with the classical technique for scrambled eggs, which involves slow cooking in a double boiler and an aching amount of slow whisking. Who has the time? A well-buttered saucepan and some steady wrist action will deliver much the same results.

RISOTTO

Good risotto starts with good starchy rice—Arborio for example, Vialone Nano or perhaps Carnaroli. Then it's all in the cooking. First is the step known as *tostatura*, where the rice and onions are toasted in oil or butter so that the grains are completely coated.

It's important that neither are allowed to brown—the onions, because they'll ruin the flavour of the finished dish, and the rice, because this locks in the starch that you need for the creamy texture. Ensure the wine is absorbed. Only then do you start adding ladlefuls of stock. You need to stir all the while. This helps to release the starch from the grains.

At its most basic, risotto can be a simple mix of rice and cheese, and perhaps a few freshly snipped herbs, but it's also the perfect vehicle for carrying other flavours, too—the meat from a slow-cooked ox tail, a handful of podded peas, sugar peas or green beans, roasted capsicums, olives and cheese, or even puréed pumpkin and smoked bacon. At what stage you add the

ingredients will depend on what you're adding—cooked meat can be stirred in at the last minute, just so that it heats through, or vegetables can be cooked in the stock along with the rice.

If using bacon or pancetta, I'd fry this at the same time as the onions and rice.

After 15 minutes or so, your risotto will be approaching perfection—smooth, rich, creamy and just *al dente* to the bite. Grab a spoon and have a taste. It's much better to test it too often than to find out you have a soggy, overcooked mess, or an undercooked bunch of crunchy grains.

Now it's time for the *mantecato* stage, where more butter and grated cheese is beaten into the risotto, and it's allowed to rest for several minutes. It's worth making time for this, no matter how hungry you are, as it gives the rice time to relax into a glossy mess, not quite liquid, but not quite solid either—*all'onda*, as the Italians would describe it.



SERVES 2

Ingredients

1 tablespoon butter or olive oil

 $\frac{1}{2}$ onion, finely chopped

1 clove garlic, finely chopped

200g Carnaroli rice

1 small glass white wine

 $\frac{1}{4}$ litres good stock, chicken or vegetable, almost boiling

50g unsalted butter, diced, for finishing

50g parmesan, grated

Method

1. In a heavy-based pan, melt the butter or heat the oil and soften the onion and garlic. Toss in the rice and stir it around on low heat for a couple of minutes, so that the grains are coated in the butter or oil.
2. When the rice is hot, slosh in the wine, and keep stirring until this has evaporated. Then you're ready to start adding the stock, a ladleful at a time. Stir until it has nearly all been absorbed—the rice should always be sloppy, rather than dry—and then add another ladleful, and so on.
3. Add any extra ingredients at some point during this time, depending on how robust they are, usually about 10 minutes in.
4. When the rice begins to soften (after about 13 minutes, but the only way to know is to keep checking), add the stock in smaller amounts, and test it regularly, until it is cooked to your liking. Then add 50g of diced butter and 50g of grated cheese, and beat like mad, until the risotto is rich and creamy. Check seasoning and serve.

EASY ARANCINI

This is a great way of using up any leftover risotto. Simply mix 3 cups of risotto with 1 egg, lightly beaten, and add some extra flavourings if you wish (a sprinkling of chilli flakes, crushed garlic, zest of 1 lemon, mixed herbs, and so on). Form the mixture into small balls, roll in flour

and set aside. Then simply heat some oil in a wok or deep-fryer, and cook in batches until golden brown.

Remove from the oil with a slotted spoon, drain on kitchen towel and keep warm in a hot oven while you finishing cooking the rest.

BAD RISOTTO

Risotto is one of those dishes that should be quick, simple and delicious, but is actually very easy to get very wrong. It's important to use the best stock you can make or get your hands on—a watery stock will lead to a distinct lack of flavour in the finished dish. The stock needs to be piping hot too, or you'll waste precious time waiting for it to heat up, and all the while your rice is overcooking.

A final word of warning: if you don't want to end up with food poisoning, make sure that any pre-cooked meats you add to your risotto are heated through very well first.

QUICHE

Larousse Gastronomique, the bible of all things French and foody, describes quiche Lorraine as: “an open tart filled with a mixture of beaten eggs, fresh cream and pieces of bacon, served hot as a first course or *hors d’oeuvre*.” It gets its name from the region it came from (Lorraine, duh), but locally it’s known as *fêouse*.

To keep the base crisp, it’s a good idea to brush the pastry with a little egg white, before adding the filling. Blind baking (explained in the method) the base will help you avoid the most common of issues—overcooked filling and

undercooked pastry. By doing this, you get the pastry well under way before the filling goes in.

You should also plan on using a deep tin rather than a shallow flan tin, if possible. This will help you achieve the lovely just-set wobble you’re after—aim for about 3cm of filling.

Whisking the filling is critical—this suspends the ingredients in the custard; alternatively, you can try dropping in about half of them just before you slide the quiche into the oven. That way, some will still be hanging about in the middle of the custard as it sets, rather than sinking.

SERVES 6

Ingredients

225g plain flour

pinch of salt

225g very cold butter, diced

100ml very cold or iced water

200g streaky bacon, chopped—dry-cured, smoked bacon is best

320ml double cream

4 eggs and 2 egg yolks (plus 1 egg white for brushing the pastry)

Method

1. Sift the flour and a big pinch of salt into a large bowl. Stir in the diced butter, then rub it all together so that it’s crumbly.
2. Pour about half of the water into the flour/butter mix, and combine with a knife. Then add just enough extra water to bring the mixture into a ball of dough. Cover with clingfilm and leave to rest in the fridge for 20 minutes.
3. On a lightly floured work surface, shape the dough into a rectangle, then roll it out until 3 times its original length.
4. Grab the top edge of the dough and fold the top third towards the centre, then bring the bottom third up to meet it, so that your dough has 3 layers. Give the dough a quarter turn and roll out again until 3 times the length, fold again as before, and chill for a further 20 minutes.
5. Preheat the oven to 180°C (350°F). Lightly oil a 3cm-deep 20cm-diameter tin, and line it with the pastry, leaving an extra few centimetres overhang to prevent shrinkage. Line the pastry shell with foil—making sure to put the shiny side down so it doesn’t stick—and weigh it down with baking beans or rice.

6. Blind bake the shell in the oven for 40 minutes, then remove the foil and beans, and patch up any holes with any leftover raw pastry (if needed). Brush the base with egg white and return to the oven for 5 minutes. Carefully trim the overhanging pastry to neaten it up.
7. Gently fry the bacon for 8-10 minutes, until it’s cooked, but not crisp. Drain on kitchen towel and spread half over the hot base.
8. Put the cream, eggs and extra yolks into a large bowl with a generous pinch of salt, and beat together until frothy. Pour into the pastry shell, then sprinkle over the rest of the bacon and slide it into the oven.
9. The quiche will take about 20 minutes to cook, but keep an eye on it—it’s done when it’s puffed up and golden, but ever so slightly still wobbly at the centre.



GOOD VARIATIONS

Mushroom (my preference is Swiss brown), feta and spinach, prawn and garlic, smoked salmon and dill, or Mediterranean-style—roasted capsicum, zucchini, onions, artichoke hearts,

black olives and sun-dried tomatoes. If you can’t be bothered making the puff pastry, try shortcrust pastry (see page 148), but omit the sugar and add a pinch of salt.

BAD QUICHE

Mass production lines have done this classic French dish a grave disservice. Watery filling can be another problem. If not sticking pedantically to the classic quiche Lorraine, you can add pretty much anything you like to the custard base—cheese and leek, spinach, flaked salmon, even prawns... but you need to make sure that whatever it is won’t ooze water into the pastry. This means you need to sauté ingredients such as leeks, onions and bacon, and blanch and then squeeze the liquid out of vegetables such as spinach.

If you find that the quiche looks fine, but that the whole thing deflates like a balloon on leaving the oven, it means you’ve cooked it too hot and too fast.

PAVLOVA

This billowing cloud of sugar and egg white is the perfect finish to a family meal or a celebratory feast, but there are four key tricks you need to remember.

First, use very fresh eggs. These will be easier to separate, their proteins will be more stable, and they'll whip much better than those that are old or just out of the fridge.

Second, make sure the sugar is completely dissolved in the egg white. Check by rubbing some of the mix between your fingers. If it still feels grainy, keep whisking until it is completely smooth. Don't be tempted to miss out on adding the acidulant (such as lemon juice or vinegar) as this stabilises the egg whites and will help prevent your pavlova from cracking.

Third, think about how you like your pavlova.

For a softer crust and a more marshmallow-like texture, cook it at a slightly lower temperature, say 140°C (275°F)—cooking at 150°C (300°F) will give a slightly crunchier crust and drier filling.

Finally, once the cooking time is over, simply turn off the oven and leave the pavlova in the oven until completely cool. Don't even open the door and take a peek as the change in temperature might cause your meringue masterpiece to collapse.

Once you have your perfect pavlova, you can decorate it with whatever fruit or other toppings take your fancy. Some prefer sweetened cream and strawberries, while others opt for crème fraîche, honey and mango, or a few sliced bananas tossed in lemon juice and raspberries for a colour contrast.

SERVES 8-10

Ingredients

4 free-range egg whites

pinch of salt

250g caster sugar

2 teaspoons cornflour

1 teaspoon white wine vinegar or lemon juice

2-3 drops vanilla essence

300ml cream (or a mix of cream and crème fraîche)

fruit (strawberry, passionfruit, raspberry, blueberry, kiwi fruit)

Method

1. Preheat oven to 180°C (350°F) and line a baking sheet with baking paper. Draw a 20cm circle on the paper as a guide.
2. Beat the (room temperature) egg whites and salt in a clean, non-plastic bowl until smooth, shiny peaks form.
3. Beat in the caster sugar, a little at a time, until the mix is stiff, shiny and light as air.
4. Sprinkle in the cornflour, white wine vinegar or lemon juice and vanilla essence, and fold lightly together. Dollop the mixture onto the prepared baking paper circle and smooth the top and sides.
5. Place the pavlova in the oven and immediately reduce the temperature to 150°C (300°F), or 140°C (275°F) for a softer outside and chewier centre.

6. Bake for 60-75 minutes (depending on your oven) then turn the oven off and leave the pavlova to cool.
7. When completely cool, top with fruit, cream, crème fraîche—whatever you choose.
8. You can also cook the pavlova several days in advance and store it in a cool, dry place in an airtight container.



THE DESSERT WARS

The jury is still out on whether the pavlova actually originated in New Zealand or Australia, but it's generally agreed that the inspiration for this delicious dessert was the Russian ballerina, Anna Pavlova, following one of her tours to the Antipodes during the 1920s.

One possibility touted by pavlova sleuths (and a hypothesis that allows both countries to hold their heads high) is that the original recipe came from the Australian writer, Emily Fetter, in a 1926 New Zealand-published book, *Home Cookery for New Zealand*.

BAD PAVLOVA

Shop-bought pavlovas, while convenient, are packed with enough sugar to make your teeth ache and are often so dry that every skerrick of saliva will instantly flee your mouth. There's simply no comparison with the homemade variety, although many people are too nervous to chance their luck—perhaps because they are scared of the dessert's tricky reputation.

To ease your mind, here's how people generally go wrong:

- * The egg whites won't whip up properly—this could be due to a dirty bowl or whisk, flecks of yolk or shell in among the whites, forgetting the acidulant or cornflour, or adding the sugar in one great rush at the start (this can double the time it takes to whip the whites to a foam).
- * Sugary droplets on the surface of the meringue—overcooking.
- * Liquid oozing from the meringue—undercooking.
- * A golden suntan—oven temperature is too high.
- * Total collapse—overbeating the eggs, or opening the oven door during the cooking or cooling time.