



# cook.

better.

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SIEVEKING  
VERLAG

# contents

Introduction, 8

Our Basics, 16

Chapter 1: **Garlic, 34**  
Salad dressing, 40

Chapter 2: **Salad, 42**  
Green salad with Parmesan  
and pine nuts, 48

Chapter 3: **Tenderness, 50**  
Three-minute chicken, 54  
Chicken schnitzel, 57

Chapter 4: **Flavour, 58**  
Steve's sauce 2.0, 62

Chapter 5: **Onions, 72**  
Nikki's tomato sauce,  
from Giorgio, via Peter, 79  
Brandon's simplistico  
tomato sauce, 82

Chapter 6: **Soffritto, 84**  
Best-ever Bolognese sauce, 94

Chapter 7: **Butternut, 98**  
Roasted, 100  
Butternut soup, 102

Chapter 8: **Veggies, 104**  
Buttery carrots, 107  
Garlicky green beans, 110  
Cheat's 'creamed' spinach, 112

- Chapter 9: **White Sauce, 114**  
White sauce, 118  
Cheese sauce, 120  
Cauli cheese, 120  
Macaroni cheese, 122  
Creamed spinach, 124  
Lasagne, 126
- Chapter 10: **Mushrooms, 128**  
The mushroom base, 132  
Sauce, 134  
On toast, 134  
Creamy pasta, 134  
Pasta sauce, 134
- Chapter 11: **Heat, 136**  
Foolproof fillet, 142
- Chapter 12: **Flames, 148**  
Fat-stack lamb chops, 154  
Butterflied leg of lamb, 156  
Rib-eye steak, 159
- Chapter 13: **The Weber, 160**  
No-peeking chicken, 169  
Gravy, 172  
Chicken stock, 174
- Chapter 14: **Potatoes, 176**  
Baked, 179  
Mashed, 182  
Roasted, 186
- Chapter 15: **Chocolate, 188**  
Ganache, 191
- One Last Thing ... 192

## how it came about

Why do a book? Well, one night we went to Nikki's brother, Steve, for dinner. He made a tomatoey chorizo pasta he'd found online, while we sat at the kitchen counter and watched. It was his debut cooking performance—for us, at least—which was more exciting than anything else.

The recipe, by Irish chef Rachel Allen, took no time at all, tasted yummy and wasn't intimidating to make. Steve's need was something quick yet impressive—and it definitely fulfilled that promise! But on the way home we wondered how different it would taste cooked in our kitchen, applying techniques we've picked up along the way.

So we went out and bought exactly the same ingredients. This time we sliced the chorizo not thick but wafery thin, and cooked it until crisp to release its orange oil; we crushed the garlic to a fine paste and cooked it low and slow in extra-virgin olive oil rather than adding it raw to the boiling tomato. And so it went on.

The next day we dropped off a serving with Steve.

'OMG,' he texted, 'I just tasted your sauce. It's amazing! What did you do? So much flavour ... but more subtle and less spicy ... but still rich ... It's ... delicious!'

Right then, it dawned on us: just because we're not formally trained doesn't mean we can't help people cook better—in fact, it probably works to our advantage. Thing is, it's hardly rocket science: no matter what the recipe, no matter how simple or exotic the ingredients, the method determines whether or not you're making the most of those materials.

To illustrate the point, and you may think we've lost the plot from the get-go, turn the page. We're kicking off with a recipe that's not a recipe and (if you count salt and oil) involves only three ingredients. But when it comes to understanding the importance of 'how', there's nothing quite as effective as the humble corncob and its golden fruit.



## popcorn

*If magician David Copperfield were a chef, he'd love popcorn. Chuck a handful of corn into a metal container with some oil and, 90 seconds later, voila! It's like turning water into wine, and all you need to know are a few basic dance steps around the stove top to ensure a perfect batch of puffy corn clouds—with no burnt bits and no leftover kernels.*

*Corn pops because the moisture inside the kernel superheats and expands, blowing up the fibre inside. Logically, if you let corn dry out you don't get a good 'pop'. Old corn is bad corn. The answer is to keep the bag in the freezer to freeze the moisture in the kernels. – B*

*Heat the oven to 50°C (120°F), fill a bowl with enough popcorn to eat now and tip the rest into a baking dish. Leave the dish in the oven and refill your bowl with warm popcorn during ad breaks. This is also a great way of reheating any leftover popcorn the following day. – N*

about 2 tablespoons vegetable oil  
1 cup popcorn kernels  
salt

1. Put a large pot, about 20 cm (8 inches) in diameter (we use our stock pot), on a large stove plate at medium-high heat (see page 32) and pour in the oil—just enough to cover the bottom.
2. Now throw in two kernels of corn. You'll see the oil start to heat up and as soon as the two kernels pop, the oil is ready to receive its willing victims.
3. Fish out the two pop-test dummies (a wooden or metal skewer is the right tool) and add the cup of kernels. Add a couple of pinches of salt (and a turn or two of the pepper grinder, if you like)—this seasons without making the final product overly salty.
4. Now comes the crucial dance step mentioned above: in order to keep the corn from burning, you need to shake the pot while it's all going off inside. Imagine you're trying to 'stir' the kernels around without lifting the pot off the heat. This will require making circular motions—as if you're panning for gold—while keeping the bottom of the pot on the hotplate. Yes, it will look silly, but believe us it's worth it!
5. The popping should be violent—and short-lived, probably no more than 90 seconds. As soon as it slows down to one or two pops per second, remove the pot from the heat, rip off the lid and pour the popped corn into a bowl. Sprinkle with more salt to taste. Push play on the DVD. Go mad.

*Makes 2 large bowls*



## herbs & spices

There are loads of herbs and spices out there and, as you spend more time cooking, you'll certainly discover your favourites. To start you off, what we've used in this book are the most common ones that—with the exception of basil—should be readily available all year round. Get to know them by smelling and tasting before adding to food and, over time, you will become familiar with their properties.

Softer, more delicate herbs are generally good for adding in their fresh form, towards the end of cooking, while hardier herbs can withstand—and often benefit from—the cooking process. The fresher your herbs, the more potent they will be. Whole spices keep their potency for longer than ground spices; they should last in an airtight container for up to a year.



The image shows four types of fresh herbs arranged vertically on a light-colored surface. At the top is a bunch of flat-leaf parsley with several stems and lobed leaves. Below it is a smaller bunch of curly parsley with its characteristic ruffled leaves. The third herb is basil, showing several large, smooth, ovate leaves. At the bottom is a bunch of chives, consisting of several long, thin, green stems.

## soft herbs

### Parsley: The all-rounder

Parsley is like a good friend; it gets along with just about everything and it's always there when you need it. And just as a dusting of icing sugar can salvage a flopped dessert, a scattering of chopped parsley can hide a multitude of sins. Wash and dry parsley very well; it takes on the texture of mulch if chopped when wet, diluting flavour and making sprinkling tricky. Chop just before using, and don't hang on to leftovers.

*Sings with:* garlic, chicken, potato, cream, butter, lemon, olive oil, pasta

### Basil: In love with tomatoes

Fragrant, fresh basil with ripe, red tomatoes is the scent of summer. Whether on a plate or in the ground, basil and tomatoes go well together. Another classic basil pairing is pine nuts and Parmesan, which, when pounded together, makes pesto. Basil is delicate, it turns black when bruised (and bruises easily), so always tear leaves with your fingertips rather than using a knife, and pluck them off the stem just before serving.

*Sings with:* tomato, olive oil, Parmesan

### Chives: Lo-fi onions

Skinny and grass-like, chives have an onion aroma when cut (they're members of the same family). Wash and dry well before using, as wet chives squash under a knife—especially if it isn't sharp. We like to snip chives straight into a pan or over a dish using clean, sharp kitchen scissors. That way, it's possible to get them really fine.

*Sings with:* butter, chicken, potato, egg, peas

## what to do

*We use one board exclusively for onions, garlic, pickles, chillies, basically anything that makes its presence known. – N*

*Garlic crushers look easier but end up being finicky and messy—and, worse, produce something that's halfway between minced and a real paste. Useless! Rather play with knives. – B*

*If you're worried about your hands smelling of garlic after chopping, rub them on something stainless steel—like your sink—and rinse in running water. I have no idea why it works, but it does. – B*

*Garlic operates on a 'first in, last out' basis. In other words, if you want it to be a subtle background flavour, cook it off slowly at the beginning. If you want a zesty garlic bite, add it towards the end. – B*

We chop garlic on the same board and with the same knife we use for onions—no scratching in the drawer for a separate implement and less washing up later. A knife also gives you more control in getting the garlic to a fine paste, and once you get the hang of it you will never reach for a garlic crusher again.

Salt is the secret ingredient here (sea salt flakes work particularly well). When mincing garlic or scraping it into a paste, the rough salt crystals grind against the chopped clove, breaking it down into a sticky, semi-liquid state. Miraculous!

- Place a garlic clove on a wooden board and press down on it with the face of your knife blade to pop off the skin.
- Peel it and give it a rough first chop to break it up.
- Sprinkle with salt and keep going until it is finely chopped.
- Now you can either continue until it's minced (chopped really fine) or ...
- Work it into a smooth paste. Cover the minced garlic with another (generous) sprinkling of salt and place the flat face of the blade over it. Press down on the blade face and drag it over the garlic, smearing down and to the side as you go, until it dissolves into a creamy pulp.

### Mince or paste?

We use garlic paste for dressings and sauces—like Steve's sauce on page 62—and mince it (chopped incredibly fine) when the garlic needs to coat another ingredient, like the green beans on page 110 or the mushrooms on page 132.

### Cooking garlic

Burnt garlic tastes acrid and it's a matter of seconds between crisp, nutty, golden-brown garlic and taking it too far. When frying it in a pan we often add the other ingredients as soon as the garlic is approaching readiness, to bring down the ambient temperature and prevent burning.



whole



chopped



minced



paste

# salad dressing

As long as you have vinegar and extra-virgin in the cupboard, there's absolutely no need to buy salad dressing. You could make like a Greek housewife and dribble them neatly over leaves, or mix them up with salt and pepper to make what the French call vinaigrette.

Initially, the oil and vinegar will appear to combine, but left to their own devices these two will separate into distinct layers. To bind them together and emulsify the lot into one thick, creamy, stable entity, a third party is required—like mustard or puréed garlic. Here's an opportunity to use your newfound garlic knowledge.

*Usually I go overboard with garlic, and I love it in this dressing, but I recommend being conservative—a single liquefied clove is plenty. – B*

*We really mean a smooth paste. Otherwise you'll have oil and vinegar flecked with garlic and not a milky emulsion. – N*

*Please, no balsamic vinegar! It won't deliver on the acidity. Besides, after balsamic was all the rage in the Nineties our shelves are awash with cheap imposters. – N*

*There's already salt in the garlic so Nikki seasons only the salad leaves. I always season the dressing too. – B*

*I still favour the mustard dressing because it takes no time at all. If you don't like mustard, it's worth knowing that we use it for its special properties (like emulsification) and not for an overt mustard flavour. – N*

## garlic / mustard vinaigrette

With garlic, this is known in our house as 'The Alice Dressing'. For years we emulsified our vinaigrette with mustard, but on reading Alice Waters and her mentor Lulu Peyraud, they showed us the light: a puréed garlic clove can serve exactly the same purpose.

**1 clove garlic, crushed into a paste (as explained on page 38)  
or 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard**

**1 tablespoon wine vinegar (red or white)**

**3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil**

**sea salt flakes and freshly ground black pepper**

1. Put the garlic or mustard in a jar, add the vinegar, seal tightly and shake well.
2. Add the olive oil and shake well again until it all becomes one.
3. Taste it—season if necessary. If it's too sharp, add another tablespoon or two of olive oil and shake well. Just remember, though, your dressing should always be more feisty than you feel comfortable with—it will be tempered when spread throughout the leaves.

Makes  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup = enough to dress 120–150 g (4–5 oz) of salad leaves

Make it your own

... add 1 tablespoon finely snipped chives or finely chopped flatleaf parsley to the dressing before tossing it with the salad leaves.



+



=



## green salad with parmesan and pine nuts

*A study in simplicity. Crunchy, sharp, nutty, salty—contrasting flavours and the freshest possible ingredients.*

*We use a vegetable peeler for thin shavings. – N*

120–150 g (4–5 oz) leaves (try 1 large head cos lettuce and 40 g/1½ oz sweet rocket)  
1 x quantity of dressing made with garlic (see page 40)  
sea salt flakes and freshly ground black pepper  
40 g (1½ oz / ¼ cup)—or more—shaved Parmesan  
30 g (1 oz / ⅓ cup)—or more—pine nuts, toasted

1. Clean, dress and season leaves as described on page 46.
2. Sprinkle with Parmesan and pine nuts, and serve immediately.

*Feeds 4 as part of a meal*

### Toasting pine nuts

Heat a pan (no oil added) over a medium-low to low heat and add the nuts so they cover the base in a single layer. Move the nuts around the pan using a wooden spoon or spatula until they are golden all over—watch closely, they burn easily. Remove from the heat immediately. We usually do a packet at a time and store the extra nuts in a sealed jar in the fridge.

### When to serve the salad

Sometimes we'll have it with the mains (like the fillet, page 142). Other times it feels right for a cleansing salad to follow a plate of something very rich. This is the French way, after mains and before the cheeseboard and dessert. Vinegar wreaks havoc with wine (never bring out your finest with salad), so serving it after mains limits the chance of these two being on the table at the same time.

### Combinations we like

- Butter lettuce + iceberg lettuce + thinly sliced radish + mustard vinaigrette made with white-wine vinegar and chives
- Wild rocket + mustard vinaigrette, with roast chicken (page 169)

*Pine nuts are pricy but worth it. Squirrel gold, I call them—do you know how difficult it must be to get them out of a pine cone, without thumbs? – B*

*An interesting assortment of leaves is all I need, but I don't mind additions when they're appropriate. Brandon's Parmesan and pine nuts definitely work. – N*



## need to know

### BIG pot, LOTS of water

Fill a great big pot with more water than you'd ever think you might need—generally pasta should cook in 10 or more times its weight of boiling water, so that's at least 1 litre (34 fl oz) to every 100 g (3 ½ oz) of pasta. For 500 g (1 lb 2 oz) we use a 7-litre (237 fl oz) stainless-steel stock pot.

*This cannot happen in a microwave. If you ignore us and wind up with sludge, we are not responsible. – N*

### Boil vigorously!

Put the pot over a high heat (lid on) and bring the water to a galloping boil. If there's enough water tumbling around each strand or piece of pasta to keep them separate, there's no need to add oil.

### Make it as salty as the Mediterranean

Once the water is churning madly, add the pasta. The bubbling will stop—this is when we add the salt. Add enough to make it as salty as the sea. The salt brings the water back to the boil faster and seasons the pasta. Give the pasta a stir and replace the lid until it's boiling rapidly again.

### Boil for 7 minutes

Now here's the real secret. From the moment everything starts bubbling again, take the lid off and cook for exactly 7 minutes. Then taste a piece to see if it's ready—you want it firm but not chalky. Ninety-nine percent of the time 7 minutes will result in perfectly cooked pasta, but there are always exceptions to any rule—some shapes may need a minute or two more. Just remember: it keeps on cooking once it's out of the pot, and when finishing with the sauce (see page 70).

### Drain but don't rinse

As soon as the pasta is done, drain immediately in a colander—otherwise it will keep on cooking in the water. But don't drain completely dry and whatever you do, don't rinse it under the tap! The starch on and around the pasta will help the sauce thicken and adhere. Oh, and don't let cooked pasta stand in the colander—it will congeal; use it right away!





## garlicky green beans

*Halving the beans lengthways looks elegant (and cuts out a lot of the prep work) while garlic adds oomph. This also allows the beans to be reheated without compromising colour.*

You'll need the stalk for leverage when splitting them later. – B

350 g (12 ½ oz) green beans, DO NOT top and tail them  
4 cloves garlic, peeled  
sea salt flakes and freshly ground black pepper  
3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

*You want your beans tender and bright green. Hard beans are not cooked beans. They should give way to your bite, not fly off your plate or squeak against your teeth. – N*

1. Get a pot of water on the boil, cook and blanch the beans (as on page 109).
2. Now the fun bit: splitting the beans. Grab the little stalk at the top of a bean and pull downwards—it may break off but will start dividing the bean into two long halves. The bean will now be prepared to split and should come apart easily (if necessary, finish it off by running your fingernail down the seam and separating it into two).
3. Continue until all the beans are split.
4. Roughly chop the garlic, sprinkle with sea salt flakes and keep chopping until it is very fine (minced—see page 38).
5. Heat the oil in a pan over medium-low heat and cook the garlic for 4 to 5 minutes until soft but without colour—this is as much about flavouring the oil as it is about cooking the garlic.
6. Add the beans and heat through, tossing around the pan to mix with the garlic. Season generously and serve.

*Feeds 4 as a side dish*

Make it your own

... do yourself a favour and as soon as you've served it, add a fine grating of Parmesan.

