

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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Why had she pulled her last diary from the shelf where she had only just placed it? Surely it would be more interesting to look up one of her earlier diaries, smack the dust off against her knee and pore over the events of travels long past – a train trip through the Austrian Alps to the swamps outside Venice, walks along the Danube in springtime Budapest with blocks of winter ice still ringing against the pylons of the Elisabeth Bridge. She recalled that none of these diaries talked about food.

No, I needed to bring to mind my latest trip and the muddle of my brain did not help. On a torn scrap of paper I listed the food I'd cooked in Hong Kong. The first choice, surely not made by me, a cherry galette, was a strange one. I never cooked sweets at home, and this was a most complex one – pastry spread with a frangipane – a paste, if I remembered, of ground pistachios, brown sugar, honey, and who knows. This in turn I topped with fresh stoned cherries until they ran out. I'd substituted halved grapes, hadn't I? Surely not stoned olives? The little angels wouldn't have been polite enough to let that pass.

Then I cooked for a barbecue when they had guests, another Australian couple and their daughter who was at school with the older angel. The little visitor had Down's syndrome. They all played together until, not unusually, my angels grew tired of Ella.

The dish I cooked was a piece of beef roasted in the oven after being smothered with English mustard and then sprinkled with dukkah powder. (The 'in' word for this sprinkling process is 'rain.')

This must have been a modern variant of the roast beef I cooked when first married, smothered with mustard and sprinkled with

black pepper. In those days no-one had to lift the pan in and out of the oven for me. Yes, it was cooked to perfection.

A few days later, I cooked a broccoli soup, very simple, with chopped onion cooked in the pan until just transparent, and broccoli florets cooked until soft in chicken stock, then whizzed to a purée with a Bamix. Did my daughter-in-law suggest this to me in the hope that the angels would eat up their broccoli? Usually served, steamed on a plate, most unappetizing. And yes, the angels did. They spooned it into their little mouths with gusto, but with much spillage. I thought, how much easier to eat, drink, or take soup in a mug, as I always did now. The journey from mug to mouth was much less shaky than that from bowl, to spoon, to mouth. And, for some reason, I thought, eyes focused on that spoon induced instant shaking.

The next venture was again sweets, and this time I could not afford to stuff up. The following day my son and I were to visit the little angel's class for 'snack and story.' He was the story and I was the snack. The angel had insisted on cupcakes, with cream cheese icing. Somehow the cupcakes came out of the oven smaller than I had ever seen. There they were at the bottom of the patty pans. She didn't mind, all the more room for her to decorate, with coloured jellies, blood-red hearts of symbolic Catholic church origin, and chocolate chips. Despite my nervousness, they were a success. My son's experience of giving presentations to pin-striped-suited merchant bankers ensured the attention of a floorful of three- to four-year-olds of both sexes to his story-telling. Though even he admitted that the sight of those sweet little things, cross-legged on the floor and open-mouthed with expectation, had him temporarily quaking. He worked the room well, as the current patois would have it.

One evening we'd watched a cooking programme on TV the subject of which was the favourite meals of childhood. 'What was yours?' my daughter-in-law asked her husband. He didn't hesitate. 'Chook breast cooked with a mustard cream sauce.'

I remembered that this was often a treat when the boys had friends to sleep over. It had the added virtue of extreme simplicity. So I cooked it the following night after thinning the breasts by cutting them lengthwise and bashing them with the end of a knife. At home I had a marvellous hammer for belting the bejesus out of recalcitrant schnitzels. I browned the chicken, removed it from the pan and then fried some chopped onion in the same pan and added cream and mustard, which I swirled around until a light curry shade. I then returned the chicken for coating all over in the sauce. What could be simpler with angel hair pasta and a green salad?

At last my trip drew to a close, and for a Christmas-style treat, my son and I cooked dinner for the whole family the night before I left. First we had crackers and dips while I presented the angels with books as farewell presents, as well as a souvenir magazine of Kate and Will and The Wedding.

The dish I cooked was a whole roast chook and a paste of butter softened with chopped prosciutto, lemon rind and chopped herbs. The butter was then gently eased under the skin which I massaged to spread it evenly. I was able to place the tray with spuds to roast in the oven myself. Thank heavens my son came home early and was able to lift the tray out for basting. He in turn roasted sliced eggplant and tossed a salad. I could not remember if we had dessert, but with the roast smothered in reduced pan juices and the vegetables, it was probably irrelevant.

As she pored over her diary entries, enhanced by memory, she reassured herself that with these meals, as well as paying for the odd meal out, she had helped pay her way, had not been too much of a burden on her family. Yes, she thought, she had done her bit – paid for the washing done by the helper, paid for her gradual annoying deafness and slowness in dragging arthritic joints and wheezing lungs up hills, while the others waited patiently ahead.

She had even earned that view of the harbour just over the balcony with its traffic of huge container ships almost top-

heavy with their loads. How did they stay upright in heavy seas? Beside them in the twinkling waters, ferries and motor launches accompanied them like the shoals of little fish that accompany whales. And at night all you could see were the rows of pearly lights moving eerily through the gloom.

And how could she forget the first floor shop on Hollywood Road with its glass cases filled with hundreds of tiny netsuke. At last with the help of the proprietor she chose a tiny frog and a monkey under a palm tree. 'They are made from mammoth tusks,' he said, 'that they find buried in the ice.'

As she massaged the tiny pieces, no bigger than her thumb nail, between her thumb and forefinger, she wondered if she believed him about the mammoth tusks being buried in the ice. But she did know she would love to return to Hong Kong.

But had she done enough to be invited back?