

Advance party

Plan ahead and swap the stress of cooking for pleasure instead, writes author **Jane Lovett**

Getting ahead is fundamental for me. With my organised cap on, I can cope calmly with most things. Without it, I become flappable and stressed, and as far as entertaining is concerned, I don't enjoy a minute of it – the cooking or the assembled company – and far less, clearing up afterwards. Not only does forward preparation reduce stress levels, but it also allows more time to spend with family and friends, as well as eliminating last-minute washing-up considerably. Win, win.

It beats me as to why anyone would attempt to simultaneously cook multiple recipes from scratch; yet through my demonstrations I have come to realise that many people believe it's the only option. This is entirely understandable, given that generally recipes reel off the method, with the last instruction being to serve immediately. And so ensues a last-minute frenzy for the cook attempting to get several dishes made from scratch, and finished all at the same time.

Where's the fun in that? We are home cooks first and foremost, and what we bring to the table is far more than just the food. The table is the place where we congregate and come together to communicate, share experiences and delight in the present moment as well as create memories. And so, with a little advance preparation, we might bring more love and joy to the table than pent-up stress. ■

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The Get-Ahead Cook by Jane Lovett is published by Apicius Publishing, £20



Salmon and prawn brioche burgers with watercress, lime and wasabi mayo

Burgers hardly need introduction, however these are healthier than most, yet no less tasty for it. To get ahead, do steps 1-2 up to 24 hours ahead, cover and refrigerate.

Makes four to six

500g salmon fillet, skinless
350g frozen cooked prawns, thawed, drained and dried (225g thawed weight)

4 spring onions, trimmed and roughly chopped

2.5cm piece of ginger, peeled and roughly chopped quite small (or ready-prepared from a jar)

olive oil

4-6 brioche burger buns, halved

crisp lettuce leaves

½ a small red onion, very thinly sliced (you won't need it all)

4-6 large shell-on cooked prawns (optional)

salt and freshly ground black pepper

6 tbsp mayonnaise

2 good handfuls of watercress

2 tsp wasabi paste

freshly squeezed juice of ½ a lime

1 Cut 300g of the salmon into chunks and process briefly with roughly half of the prawns, the spring onions, ginger and some seasoning, just until it becomes paste-like. Scrape into a bowl. Cut the remaining salmon into 1cm dice and stir into the salmon mixture. Check the seasoning. Shape into four large or six smaller burgers and set aside.

2 Process the mayonnaise, watercress and wasabi paste together, then add the lime juice. Check the seasoning and set aside.

3 Heat a frying pan with a little olive oil, and fry the burgers for 2-3 minutes on each side, depending on their thickness, until a golden crust has formed. They should still be slightly undercooked in the middle. Alternatively, heat a griddle pan until very hot, brush the burgers with a little oil and cook as above. Meanwhile, lightly toast the buns,



Photographs: Tony Briscoe

golden brown and bubbling. Leave for a few minutes before transferring to a serving platter or board, and a few more minutes before eating – if it's too hot, it will taste of nothing.

Lime and coconut panna cotta with mango purée and pistachios

These delicious panna cottas are very easy to make and convert even non pudding eaters to the "dark" side.

For vegetarians, use agar as a setting agent instead of the leaf gelatine. You can also make to the end of step 2 up to 3 days in advance. Step 3 can be prepared at any time on the day.

Serves eight

400ml tin of coconut milk

400ml double cream

5 tbsp caster sugar

3 limes

4 leaves of gelatine

1 ripe mango or 1 x 400g tin of mango in syrup or mango pulp

½-1 tsp icing sugar

a few pistachios, roughly chopped

1 Put the coconut milk, cream and sugar into a milk pan. Gently bring to the boil, stirring occasionally, and simmer for a minute or two. Add the zest of one, and the juice of 1½ limes. Pour into a jug and set aside while you prepare the gelatine.

2 Submerge the gelatine leaves in a bowl of cold water and leave for 5 minutes to soften. Remove from the water, squeeze out any excess liquid and stir the leaves into the still-warm cream mixture. Pour into 8 mini pudding moulds, ramekins or other small dishes, or pretty glasses. Cool, cover and refrigerate until set (preferably overnight).

3 Peel the mango, slice the flesh from the stone and reserve two slices. Process the rest into a purée with the icing sugar to taste. Cover and refrigerate. If using tinned mango, strain and then purée the flesh, adding icing sugar to taste.

4 To serve, if turning out, dip the moulds briefly into a bowl of hot water or loosen around the edges with your finger and turn out onto individual plates. Dice the reserved mango and serve separately or arrange with a little purée around each panna cotta. Scatter with the pistachios, and grate a dusting of zest from the final lime over each plate. If serving in glasses, flood the tops with a little mango purée and decorate with the pistachios and lime zest.



Spinach, mushroom and taleggio galette, main; salmon and prawn brioche burgers with watercress, lime and wasabi mayo, above; lime and coconut panna cotta with mango purée and pistachios, right

being careful not to burn them as the brioche contains sugar.

4 Spread both halves of each bun with the wasabi mayo. Arrange lettuce leaves on each base, followed by the burgers, a dollop of the mayo, red onion slices, the reserved prawns and then the lid of the bun. Finally, if using, sit a large prawn on top and secure in place with a cocktail stick.

Spinach, mushroom and taleggio galette

This is rustic, super-savoury, very easy and delicious. To get ahead, make to the end of step 5 up to 24 hours ahead, cover and refrigerate. Bring back to room temperature an hour or so before cooking. Or, prepare steps 1 and 2 up to 3 days in advance and store.

Serves five to six

350g mixed mushrooms

a good knob of butter

1 clove garlic, crushed

a little grated nutmeg

500g fresh spinach

1 heaped tsp Dijon mustard

200ml crème fraîche

250g shortcrust pastry

a few sprigs (4-6) of fresh thyme, or 1-2 tsp dried

1 egg

85g taleggio cheese, straight from the fridge

nigella seeds and fresh thyme sprigs, to garnish

salt and freshly ground black pepper

Revival of aqua vitae brings back spirit of the past

A new 21st century aqua vitae has just hit the market, believed to be a close copy of the original herbal spirit produced by Tironensian monks 500 years ago in Fife, now made by one of Scotland's newest distilleries.

Twenty years ago Drew Mackenzie Smith of Lindores Abbey Distillery came across a reference to his family farm on the banks of the River Tay, which includes the ruins of Lindores Abbey, recognising it as the spiritual home of Scotch whisky.

"It was just two lines in the tax record in connection with Friar John Cor, who in 1494 was commissioned by King James IV to turn eight bolls of malt into aqua vitae.

"Since this is the first written reference of Scotch whisky, my mission has been to return distilling back to Lindores. For our initial product we decided to continue where the good friar left off, making something authentic, not just another gin," says Mackenzie Smith.

The monks, who came from Tiron 40 miles southwest of Paris, were very advanced in science and horticulture. At Lindores they had Scotland's largest pear tree and orchard (the 'Lundoris' pear is particularly sour) and bee hives, with extensive herb gardens. On the Tay estuary they exchanged salmon and fleeces for spices on the boats from Flanders.

Aqua vitae, the herby spicy spirit drink they made from local malted barley, was used as a medicine or tincture (it was also used to dry gunpowder). In a 13th century treatise, Theoricus had described that 'it killed fleshe wormes if you wash your hands therewith', moderately taken it sloeth age and strengtheneth youth', 'kepth the stomach from wambling, belly from wirtchyng and bones from acheing'.

James IV of Scotland was a man well-learned in medicine, who actually paid people to let him dress their wounds or draw their teeth. He had his own alchemist in Stirling Castle making herbal tonics – they distilled everything from dew to human blood (apparently very popular). Since the Black Death



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of 1350, alchemists had become popular, tasked with curing ailments and prolonging life; the average life expectancy in the 15th century was just 30. In 1505 King James also gave the Guild of Surgeon Barbers exclusive licence to manufacture aqua vitae in the burgh of Edinburgh.

Today, the man tasked with creating this limited edition aqua vitae is the new Lindores apothecary, Tim Foster. Just two years ago Foster was selling software to councils, before he decided to change career and embark on Heriot Watt's Brewing and Distilling course supervised by Dr Annie Hill. Foster's project was on aqua vitae.

"I discovered that if you want to extract the best flavour you need to do it under vacuum," says Foster.

The aqua vitae is distilled in pot stills, then infused with a blend of sweet cicely, fennel, cleavers, lemon verbena and Douglas fir, macerated by hand for seven days in the 100 per cent Fife new make spirit, before bottling is done off-site. No oak is used, although the distillery have purchased Tiron, bourbon and sherry casks for finishing their malt whisky.

With all this macerating of botanicals, you would be forgiven for thinking the new aqua vitae spirit sounds a bit like gin – but no juniper is used. Aqua vitae is actually closer to other famous herbal liqueurs, originally made by monks using age old recipes, like Benedictine and Chartreuse.

Tastewise, it reminded me of two other famous liqueurs – Drambuie (which is much more honeyed) and Cointreau (the famous triple sec



which has a more orange flavour).

So how do you enjoy this new incarnation of aqua vitae? "My favourite serve is in a rocks glass over a block of ice with a twist of orange peel – or for a longer drink, pour over ice and add ginger beer and grapefruit juice," says Mackenzie Smith.

The team at Edinburgh's Timberyard have also been experimenting with new aqua vitae cocktails:

After a Dark 'n' Stormy

50ml aqua vitae

25ml grapefruit

good pinch of salt

Serve in a highball glass over a block of ice, top with ginger ale and garnish with a grapefruit twist.

After a Rusty Nail

35ml aqua vitae

15ml blended Scotch

10ml honey syrup

Stir down and strain off into a rocks glass over a block of ice and garnish with a lemon twist.

After a White Manhattan

45ml aqua vitae

15ml white vermouth (Cocchi)

5ml dry vermouth (Great British)

Stir down and drain into a coupe with a pastis rinse. Garnish with a lemon twist.

Visit the Apothecary at Lindores Abbey: distillery tours daily 10:30am, 12 noon and 2pm: £12.50 per person, www.lindoresabbeydistillery.com

Lindores Abbey Aqua Vitae

Aromas are very subtle, with a slight hint of ginger and clove. The palate has a welcoming citric burst with pineapple and caramel backnotes, smooth, rounded, slightly oily in texture, finishing with a dry bitter lemon twist. Alcohol: 40 per cent. ■ £40 (70cl) from distillery gift shop or online www.lindoresabbeydistillery.com

Join Rose's Classic Wine Dinner in Rhubarb, Prestonfield on Thursday 10 May, £96, (4 courses & 8 wines), www.rosemurraybrown.com