



INTRODUCTION

'WELL. THE WAY I SEE IT, whether you write it or not, whether you use that word or not, the fact is, it's how you cook. I mean, it's just how you are anyway, isn't it? That's what I think.'

Earnestly, and kindly, Kate leaned across her half-eaten cupcake towards me to emphasise her point, a massacre of crumbs tumbling to the plate from her cream-cheese-frosted fingertips.

'Actually, you know what? I think your shopping just about sums it up.' She laughed as she craned her head round the counter. 'It's all there, in a couple of bags. Don't you think?'

At the foot of my stool lay a filmy blue-and-white-striped carrier bag, and a much larger, stuffed-to-the-brim shopper with fraying jute handles and a large ink stain splaying out of one corner where a pen reached the end of its days. The bags contained the fruits of our shopping trip this morning along the Portobello Road. Several tall, majestic bunches of holy basil, a slim packet of razor-thin beef carpaccio from the butcher, a few pink dragonfruit,



glossy plum tomatoes, some globe artichokes, perfumed Indian mangoes, a treasure trove of nine spice packets including rust-coloured sumac and wrinkly sunburnt chillies, organic potatoes, a loaf of ciabatta, sherbet lemons and a bottle of olive oil.

Maybe she had a point. We were perched on stools in a bakery, a tiny slice of cupcake heaven in west London, restoring our blood-sugar levels after much trudging. It was summer 2007. The 'it' she was referring to being written was this book, a fledgling idea I was exploring and discussing with her. The 'word' was 'fusion', often seen as the real 'f-word' in the world of cookery, wildly misunderstood and misinterpreted, much to my frustration, and thus the subject of our conversation.

I LOVE COOKING. But first and foremost I love eating. Yes, the enjoyment of eating is the thing. The cooking is a close second, and necessary to bring to fruition whatever I desire to eat. And it has been the same ever since I was little. Food and cooking were such a part of my upbringing that it is impossible to disentangle them from my childhood memories. This is why I wrote my first cookery book, *Cooking Like Mummyji*, a love letter to the wonderful Indian food I was grateful to be fed and taught how to cook by my family over the years. It seemed wrong somehow not to try to preserve their delicious recipes and share them with others, just as they had lovingly shared them over the years with me, their wide-eyed, humble apprentice.

Indian home cooking is my culinary soul. It is joy, comfort, nostalgia, roots and medicine to me. However, it is food in general, in all its diversity, that bewitched me right from the beginning and still holds me enthralled to this day.

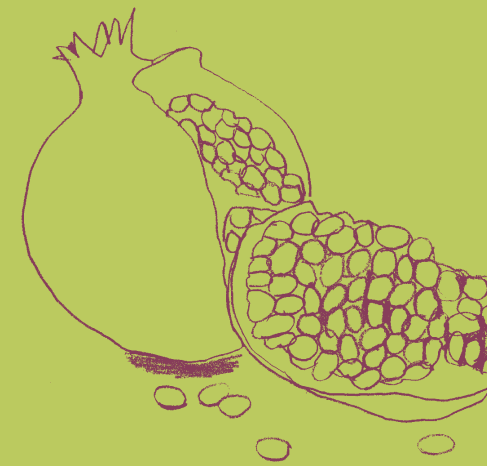
I was lucky to enjoy mouth-watering and wholesome traditional Punjabi cuisine at home, but my family were also keen on eating and cooking all sorts of dishes, embracing new flavours and techniques as they came across them. My mother would effortlessly intertwine all sorts of meals over the course of a week, ensuring not just a nutritional balance but also one of flavours and textures. Pies and casseroles were as much part of my intake as steaming hot, papery rotia, straight from the flames

into my thali. The food that we came across in school, through friends, in the supermarkets and then later in restaurants and on holidays was absorbed into our daily diet and became who we were. Layer by delicate layer, a millefeuille of culinary identity was created.

This had always seemed completely normal to me until I began to be asked if I ever ate, or cooked, food other than Indian. This seemed such a strange question. I think, if you love food, you love food, all types, and I don't conduct a sort of culinary passport control, checking the origins of a dish or ingredient or flavour before I can stamp it as approved to sit on my plate. I welcome new visitors with open arms and as much hospitality and warmth as the dear, trusted old friends of my store cupboards.

And I am delighted by the fact that in the little corner of the metropolis I have made my own, I am able to draw from a rich, sprawling heritage of centuries of ingredients traversing their way across the globe. That with a flick of a lid or stir of a spoon, I can add the perfumed whisper of a Persian court, an echo of cool pine forests at twilight or the faint tap of a tango on cobbled alleyways to my daily urban life, while the cars roar by outside in the dark depths of the evening.

I feel lucky and am grateful to have access to such a wide variety of ingredients, more of which are being stocked in mainstream stores than ever before. By this, I am not referring necessarily to fresh produce, the complex arguments about which could easily fill a book of their own (for, as with much in life, things are rarely as black and white as they seem on first sight). For should we not be supporting local and seasonal produce? Very much so. But what would that mean in the depths of our winters when we cannot bear the sight of any more potatoes and cabbages? And can we afford to be, and indeed is it right to be, so nationalistic when our lives have become so globally interdependent? How do we choose between one farmer's right to a livelihood over another's, especially those disadvantaged by lopsided trade rules? And is it better to put on our plates that which has travelled many times up and down our country by road, with a carbon footprint weightier than that arriving by sea? Or is it about freshness, in which case maybe we should be self-sufficient and eat only what we grow ourselves.



Oh, but then the winter's yield of cabbages serves to deprive and depress me again. As with most things, balance, common sense and fairness, rather than extremism, go a long way.

When I talk about the wealth of ingredients we have at our fingertips these days, I am not so much referring to fresh produce or specialist delis as to the myriad of dry goods, spices, sauces and flavourings available even in the most ordinary supermarket, in the quaintest town. And if you were to walk into any kitchen in Britain and fling open the cabinet doors, chances are you would find lithe bottles of moss-green olive oil nestling alongside dusky soy sauce; sweetly pungent vanilla extract next to incendiary pots of chilli powder; musky dried oregano next to lip-smarting malt vinegar. Here they stand in close proximity, a multicultural assortment, like commuters on the Tube. And just like commuters, never making eye contact, getting off at their relative stops without a glance or a smile.

Too often, the ingredients we have in our cupboards are not explored in day-to-day cooking even as single flavourings, let alone used together outside traditional pairings. Some flavourings, often the ones that were bought distant months ago because a specific recipe needed half a teaspoon, we no longer know what to do with. They silently sit in the gloom, waiting perhaps to be used for that dish once again, but more often than not enduring a slow, dusty demise in the ingredient graveyard.

I am quite dismayed by this, as it seems such a shame not only for it to go to waste, but also for us not to fully enjoy what we have in our cupboards or on our supermarket shelves. Such a shame not to be completely aware of the transformative and versatile properties of the bottles and tubs on the shelves before us, which can enliven our meals and our taste buds so alchemically.

And so, as I continued to cook away in my normal daily life, feeding family, friends and, most importantly and most often, myself, using a cooking style fuelled mostly by greed but also insatiable curiosity, it was pointed out to me that perhaps these recipes could form the basis of a new book. A book that would celebrate, use and combine ingredients from around the world in new ways and get the most out of them.

IN COOKING as in other areas of life, we have our own style and repertoire. A confident, adventurous cook might be at ease with bold flavours. Another might prefer subtle, delicate flavours. It's a matter of taste, and this, even in the most literal sense, is not that easy to define. We've all heard of tastes being divided into salt, sweet, bitter, sour. Many people now add a fifth: umami, which refers to a satisfying savoury meatiness or protein-like quality, most often found in fermented foods but also in aged cheeses and even vegetables such as tomatoes. Culture makes its mark, too. In China, a fifth taste of 'spicy' is added to the basic four. Indians hold there to be six basic tastes: sweet, sour, salt, bitter, hot/pungent and astringent, and, according to the ancient Ayurvedic health system, for optimum digestion all six should be represented at each meal. In ancient times, Aristotle referred to two essential tastes – sweet and bitter, with the sub-tastes of pungent, salty, succulent, harsh, sour and the beautifully self-explanatory puckery.

SALT: feta, halloumi, anchovies, preserved olives, capers, soy sauce, miso, bacon

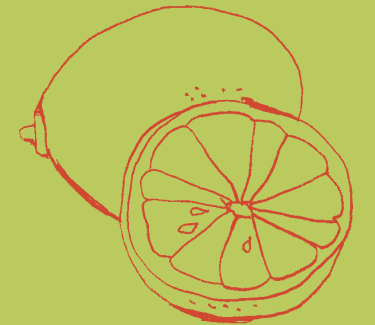
SWEET: fruit, sugars, honey, wine, cream, milk, butter, high-starch vegetables such as potatoes, carrots, sweetcorn and parsnips; some fish and seafood, such as monkfish and lobster; some nuts, such as chestnuts

BITTER: unsweetened coffee, unsweetened chocolate, certain gourd vegetables, paan betel nut, citrus peel, garam masala, paprika, kale, chicory, radish

SOUR: tamarind, lemon, lime, sumac, live yoghurt, vinegar

UMAMI: miso, soy sauce, tofu, Worcestershire sauce, tomatoes, meat, mushrooms, anchovy sauce, Parmesan, roquefort, potatoes, bacon, ketchup, Marmite and Vegemite, meat and fish stocks

Beyond these, the senses and the imagination can take us further: to pungent and peppery, such as ginger and some olive oils; to



agrodolce (sweet and sour), such as tamarind, balsamic vinegar and pomegranate; to salty sour, such as gherkins and pickled chillies; salt umami, such as fish sauce, bacon and anchovy sauce; sweet umami, such as tomatoes and potatoes; sweet astringent, such as cranberries; citric, tart and tangy, such as lemon, lemongrass, lime, lemon thyme and bergamot; woody and earthy, such as anise, cloves, nutmeg, mushrooms, rosemary; creamy, anything from cheese to chestnuts, bananas and coconut; warm and aromatic, such as cinnamon, allspice; even such a category as fresh, clean and light, which might encompass cucumber, mint leaf and starfruit.

Salt itself is like an alarm clock for the taste buds, preparing them for receiving and registering the flavours of food. Everyone's taste buds are different, and different people require different levels of salt. I've learnt through experience always to advise people to use the amounts of salt appropriate to them, which requires, as ever, tasting and checking.

Ingredients can share characteristics, or flavour profiles, no matter where they originate from or where they are now commonly used. Thus, although lemongrass and lemon might be botanically quite different, and belong to different national cuisines and dishes, they both have a citric profile and thus can be used in similar ways, one substituting for another to achieve a subtle change. Some ingredients need other tastes to unlock and release their flavour. If you try garam masala on its own on the tongue, it tastes dusty. Add a touch of salt and it is transformed to aromatic. Paprika tastes bitter alone but then completely different with a drop of the acidity of lemon juice.

Flavours can also change not just according to what you pair them with but also through cooking techniques. Raw cumin seeds taste unpleasant, but dry-roast them for a few seconds in a hot pan or sizzle them in oil and their true flavour emerges. Bite into raw onion and it tastes eye-wateringly sharp and peppery. When slowly cooked and browned, the fibres break down, the natural sugars are released and caramelised, and the taste is rounded and sweetened. Aubergines can be bitter raw but when roasted in their skins, the flavour can change to a smoky umami taste. Freezing, on the other hand, can dull the sweetness of a dish while intensifying acidity. An ice cream or sorbet needs to be sweeter before freezing than you would like the finished product to taste.

Some tastes and flavour profiles complement others. A touch of balsamic will bring out the sweetness of ripe strawberries. I might highlight the herby quality of basil by combining it with creamy pine nuts in a pesto, to serve with neutral gnocchi, say, or I might combine it with lemon to bring out its citrus notes. Creaminess – not water or sugar – works well in reducing heat. Gulping water down when you've eaten too much chilli doesn't help at all, and might even make it worse, but yoghurt or coconut milk will work to reduce heat: whether added in the cooking or consumed alongside. Not for nothing are yoghurt drinks, and especially salty ones, a feature of the national cuisines of some very hot countries.

I haven't talked much about 'hot' for chillies. Technically, this isn't a flavour but a physical sensation. Capsaicin, which is contained in chillies, causes a sensation of burning in the mouth, and this reaction combines with our taste reception. This in turn triggers the release of endorphins, compensating for the 'pain' in a similar way to the effect of morphine, leading to the pleasure that the brain registers upon eating chilli, and which is thought to be why chillies can, for some people, be addictive. This is also believed to be why the threshold for chilli can increase over time.

Balance and proportion are important. My favourite approach is to work with three flavours: maybe in a classic combination that is subtly adjusted by using alternatives with similar profiles, such as apple and mint with lemongrass instead of lemon, or by taking a classic pair and adding an unexpected third (perhaps one that has a known relationship to one of the existing pair), such as lime, basil and mandarin, or tomato, balsamic and cumin. The third ingredient is often, although not always, used in less intensity than the main two. I don't usually use more than three main flavours. There might be other flavours in a dish, but they will be there in supporting roles.

For many of the recipes in this book I have described the process that went into their creation: what inspired them, what kind of result I was after and why I combined the flavours that I did. All the dishes come from the starting point of the flavours themselves and not the national background of ingredients. I also suggest, at the end of most of the recipes, how you can substitute other ingredients with a similar flavour profile or take the dish in a different direction.



I have given weight, volume and size measurements for the recipes, but don't rely solely on the numbers, judge with your eyes too. Train yourself to assess quantities visually. This, along with developing and trusting your palate, will eventually free you to cook more spontaneously, just as previous generations were able. Then, when you create new recipes for yourself, as I hope you will do, use all of your senses. Cooking is not just about what happens in your mouth. Look at the colours you are putting together, the physical textures of the ingredients, be guided by the sound they make to let you know, for example, if they are crisp enough, and, as with tasting wine, smell your ingredients and finished dishes to fully appreciate them and to learn to recognise the flavours in their glorious entirety. I mostly cook with simple techniques, so that nothing detracts from the flavours, which for me are the most important thing. When you are trying out new flavours for yourself, use them in a technique you are already confident of.

NONE OF THE RECIPES in **Flavour** was created for the sake of it. They were all born out of genuine hunger and curiosity on my part. Although some of the ingredients will be a little harder to come across than others, the majority can be found in any large supermarket; the rest, included for those who want to be a little more adventurous, can be found online or at an ethnic supermarket. A lot of these ingredients, especially spices, keep well in the cupboard or can be frozen, and so it is both worthwhile and enjoyable to make a trip to a Japanese or Indian or Thai supermarket and stock up once in a while – now that you have in your hands some inspiration for how to use them outside of the obvious dishes, and won't bin them after a solitary teaspoonful.

Cooking with unfamiliar ingredients or combining familiar ingredients in unfamiliar ways can feel like food Russian roulette, which is risky when you are hungry. However, with a focus on simplicity and only a couple of flavours at a time, the rewards can be great. Building confidence and trusting your palate is wonderfully freeing, taking enjoyment of food to another level and igniting infinite new food possibilities, rather than eating what someone else deems you should like. I've never much gone for blind faith or absolutism in anything. Of course, everyone needs

guidance and a framework when they start to learn something new, but where this can take you is limitless and up to you, and, crucially, *for* you.

And this is what Kate reminded me of over our cake break that day, which made me finally decide to put this book together.

The simple fact is that although it is right and respectful to uphold culinary traditions, food has been fused since the beginnings of civilisation. Over millennia, ingredients have travelled out of their homelands and across the globe with everyone from pioneers to pirates, scoring their trajectories across maps amid war, colonisation, mission, trade, survival, adventure, slavery, conquest and exploration. Of course, all ingredients were originally indigenous to a particular part of the world, yet it is near impossible to find a national cuisine constructed solely from ingredients born and bred in the homeland.

What I find interesting is the way in which new ingredients and flavours were embraced but techniques and style often remained traditional. This, to me, is elegant and honest fusion. Being open and welcoming, learning about the new and innovative, yet also upholding tradition and not compromising identity. The two elements complementing and enriching each other, without competing or diluting.

If Indians had sat in their corner, at arm's length from the odd-looking curved chillies the Portuguese had brought, which Columbus called 'the pepper of the Indies', eyeing them up suspiciously and saying: 'Er, no, sorry, wouldn't be authentic to use those, I'll stick with the black pepper, thanks,' then almost all of the Indian dishes familiar to us in Britain today simply wouldn't exist. Someone had to make the first bold move and put the chilli with the turmeric. We all know the rest.

Borders have been drawn and redrawn throughout history. Perhaps with cooking there are now no borders at all: we can enjoy the tastes of many parts of the world in our own homes very easily, whenever we like.

I am not a chef of any description. I am a home cook, taught by family initially and then self-taught, who has committed her recipes to paper and print. That's all. I hugely admire chefs, but I am not one, nor do I have any desire to be one. I learn what I need to at my own pace and as the recipe requires, and so can you.



Home-cooking is not competitive cooking, unless you have serious issues. It is about the food you, your friends and family enjoy. Every so often I try something new, sometimes out of curiosity, sometimes out of the necessity to use something up, but I only cook it for myself, freezing leftovers if needed. I tend not to try new dishes out on other people straight away. Cooking for guests can be stressful and can reduce anyone to a bag of nerves, so save your most confident cooking for then. Once I'm happy with a new dish, then I introduce it to friends. Whatever didn't work has also added to my store of knowledge. It will be the same for you. Ultimately, your taste and your opinion are what matters.

The one thing I am sure of is that you, just because you're reading this, have a genuine love of food and a passion for cookery, which is not dependent upon what style it is or what your background is, or whether you have a deli or farmer's market nearby or live in the country rearing your own meat, or how much technique you know or whether you frequent fancy restaurants. A person who loves cooking can always create gastronomic magic.

My love as ever,

