

# Reader, I marinated it

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Friday, 25 November 2011

## Clafoutis grandmère

*à la Virginia Woolf*

*500g cherries*

*3 eggs*

*150g flour*

*150g sugar*

*10g yeast, prepared in warm water if necessary*

*100g butter*

*1 cup of milk*

She placed the cherries in a buttered dish and looked out of the window. The children were racing across the lawn, Nicholas already between the clumps of red hot poker, turning to wait for the others. Looking back at the cherries, that would not be pitted, red polka dots on white, so bright and jolly, their little core of hardness invisible, in pity she thought of Mrs Sorley, that poor woman with no husband and so many mouths to feed, Mrs Sorley who knew the hard core but not the softness; and she placed the dish of cherries to one side.

Gently she melted the butter, transparent and smooth, oleaginous and clear, clarified and golden, and mixed it with the sugar in a large bowl. Should she have made something traditionally English? (Involuntarily, piles of cake rose before her eyes.) Of course the recipe was French, from her grandmother. English cooking was an abomination: it was boiling cabbages in water until they were liquid; it was roasting meat until it was shrivelled; it was cutting out the flavours with a blunt knife.

She added an egg, pausing to look up at the jacmanna, its colour so vivid against the whitewashed wall. Would it not be wonderful if Nicholas became a great artist, all life stretching before him, a blank canvas, bright coloured shapes gradually becoming clearer? There would be lovers, triumphs, the colours darkening, work, loneliness, struggle. She wished he could stay as he was now, they were so happy; the sky was so clear, they would never be as happy again. With great serenity she added an egg, for was she not descended from that very noble, French house whose female progeny brought their arts and energy, their sense of colour and shape, wit and poise to the sluggish English? She added an egg, whose yellow sphere, falling into the domed bowl, broke and poured, like Vesuvius erupting into the mixture, like the sun setting into a butter sea. Its broken shell left two uneven domes on the counter, and all the poverty and all the suffering of Mrs Sorley had turned to that, she thought.

When the flour came it was a delight, a touch left on her cheek as she brushed aside a wisp of hair, as if her beauty bored her and she wanted to be like other people, insignificant, sitting in a widow's house with her pen and paper, writing notes, understanding the poverty, revealing the social problem (she folded the flour into the mixture). She was so commanding (not tyrannical, not domineering; she should not have minded what people said), she was like an arrow set on a target.

She would have liked to build a hospital, but how? For now, this clafoutis for Mrs Sorley and her children (she added the yeast, prepared in warm water). The yeast would cause the mixture to rise up into the air like a column of energy, nurtured by the heat of the oven, until the arid kitchen knife of the male, cutting mercilessly, plunged itself into the dome, leaving it flat and exhausted.

Little by little she added the milk, stopping only when the mixture was fluid and even, smooth and homogenous, lumpless and liquid, pausing to recall her notes on the iniquity of the English dairy system. She looked up: what demon possessed him, her youngest, playing on the lawn, demons and angels? Why should it change, why could they not stay as they were, never ageing? (She poured the mixture over the cherries in the dish.) The dome becomes a circle, the cherries surrounded by the yeasty mixture that would cradle and cushion them, the yeasty mixture that surrounded them all, the house, the lawn, the asphodels, that devil Nicholas running past the window, and she put it in a hot oven. In 30 minutes it would be ready.

*This is an extract from 'The Household Tips of the Great Writers' by Mark Crick, published by Granta Books at £12.99, available now*

### **Onion Tart**

#### **à la Geoffrey Chaucer**

*225g plain shortcrust pastry*

*1 tablespoon fresh thyme, chopped*

*25g butter*

*2 tablespoons olive oil*

*8 onions, finely sliced*

*Salt and black pepper*

*2 teaspoons caster sugar*

*A quarter teaspoon each of grated nutmeg and ground ginger*

*2 eggs, plus 2 egg yolks*

*425ml double cream*

*Large pinch of saffron strands*

*On a floured board roll pastry that it be thinne,*

*Caste thereto with thyme and line a deep tinne.*

*Trimme the edges neat with a cooke's knyfe,*

*Then bake it blinde at gasse mark fyve.*

*Melt the butter and oyle in an heavie panne,*

*Covered wiv a lidde, as knoweth every man.*

*Then adde onyons in slices fine ywrought,*

*And caste thereto sugar and salte.*

*Cover the panne and turn the heat down low,*

*Stirre every while, else the onyons stick to.*

*Remove the lidde and seethe for ten minutes mo,*

*That the sauce reducteth and darke growe.  
Strewe thereto nutmeg grated, tho keep some by,  
And grounde gyngere, and return to the fyre.  
Lightly beat the eggs and zolkes together,  
And season wiv both salt and black pepper.  
Heat the crème till just warme with saffron rich,  
Then adde the eggs for to mix.  
Spoon the onyon sauce into the pastry case,  
Then pour egg and crème custard into the base.  
Bake in the oven for minutes xxv,  
Til golden brown our tarte be.*

### **Lamb with Dill Sauce**

#### **à la Raymond Chandler**

*1kg lean leg of lamb, cut into large chunks  
1 onion, sliced  
1 carrot, cut into sticks  
1 tablespoon crushed dill seeds, or 3-4 sprigs fresh dill  
1 bay leaf  
12 peppercorns  
Half a teaspoon salt  
850ml chicken stock  
50g butter  
1 tablespoon plain flour  
1 egg yolk  
3 tablespoons cream  
2 teaspoons lemon juice*

I sipped on my whiskey sour, ground out my cigarette on the chopping board and watched a bug trying to crawl out of the basin. I needed a table at Maxim's, a hundred bucks and a gorgeous blonde; what I had was a leg of lamb and no clues. I took hold of the joint. It felt cold and damp, like a coroner's handshake. I took out a knife and cut the lamb into pieces. Feeling the blade in my hand I sliced an onion, and before I knew what I was doing a carrot lay in pieces on the slab. None of them moved. I threw the lot into a pan with a bunch of dill stalks, a bay leaf, a handful of peppercorns and a pinch of salt. They had it coming to them, so I covered them with chicken stock and turned up the heat. I wanted them to boil slowly, just about as slowly as anything can boil. An hour and a half and a half-pint of bourbon later they weren't so tough and neither was I. I separated the meat from the vegetables and covered it. The knife was still in my hand but I couldn't hear any sirens.

In this town the grease always rises to the top, so I strained the juice and skimmed off the fat. I added more water and put it back on the heat. It was time to deal with the butter and flour, so I

mixed them together into a paste and added it to the stock. There wasn't a whisk, so using my blackjack I beat out any lumps until the paste was smooth. It started to boil, so I let it simmer.

I roughed up the egg yolk and cream and mixed in some of the hot sauce before putting the lot back into the pan. I put the squeeze on a lemon and it soon juiced. It was easy. It was much too easy, but I knew if I let the sauce boil the yolk was gonna scramble.

By now I was ready to pour the sauce over the meat and serve, but I wasn't hungry. The blonde hadn't showed. She was smarter than I thought. I went outside to poison myself, with cigarettes and whisky.