



April & May

It's been hot and sticky — just how I like it. Everything that is growing is rich and virulent. This is the time for fruit and light salads; who could think of slow-roasted lamb shanks when we are basking and baking in forty-degree heat with jaw-dripping humidity? Mind you, by the time this goes to print we will be in the throes of autumn and braising will be back again.

Lemons are so commonplace in cooking I sometimes forget they are an ingredient in their own right. To remind myself I want to say a big thank you to all the lemons I have squeezed, grated, baked and preserved with a 'dash' here and a 'wedge' there. One of the best acids in the world, lemon juice balances and brings out the flavour of so much of my cooking. In this lemon contemplation I dived into my books and looked to see how many of my favourite food writers liked lemons and if they respected them as much as I do. I also Googled lemons and it took me to a site called 'bush lemons', a lesbian climbing group in the Blue Mountains. I have yet to see the connection with lemons — maybe it's a bush thing? [Ed: lemon = slang for lesbian. Yes, really!]

Nobody knows the true home of the lemon, but for me it is a Mediterranean staple and many of the leading growers are from this area. When I think of the key Mediterranean ingredients like olives, olive oil, tomatoes and garlic, always sitting close by in my mind is a bowl of lemons.

In the 1800s, people started using the word 'lemon' to describe people who were sour. Later it became a slang word for 'worthless thing'. Over time, 'lemon' came to refer mainly to cars that continually broke down or did not work. I think this is a little harsh on the poor lemon; plus sourness is very necessary in cooking.

The lemon tree is hearty and able to grow in very poor soil, but the one thing it does not like is cold weather — and apparently young lemon trees in California need to be protected from rabbits. When I read this I could not imagine my rabbits being remotely interested in nibbling on a lemon leaf.

Alice Waters (from Chez Panisse restaurant) in her fruit book talks about the Meyer Lemon, which is one of the many lemon varieties. A hybrid of possibly a lemon crossed with a mandarin, it has a soft skin and, although juicy, is much less acidic and therefore perfect for making lemonade or Alice's deep-fried lemons with artichokes (that sounds delicious). Olive, on watching an episode of *Jamie's Italy*, was entranced with him baking mozzarella in lemon shells and declared, 'Can we go to Italy instead of Greece this year' — all because of some lemons.

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Claudia Roden in *The New Book of Middle Eastern Food* reminds me of the classic soup from Greece — *Avgolemono* — made with a fragile suspension of eggs and lemon, which has to be done off the heat as the acid of the lemon can curdle the eggs. And as I made tzatziki the other night, I was reminded how without the juice of the lemon the flavour of the cucumber would not come out, nor would the acid cut through the richness of the thick creamy yoghurt — surely a very clever ingredient. Years ago when I was a chef, if my hands were inscribed with dirt that no amount of detergent could get off, I would run my fingers through a cut lemon, which would help move it. The lemon acted as a kind of natural bleach. Whenever I have a miserable cold I drink warm honey and lemon juice. The one thing I have never done with lemon juice is pour it over my hair to make it go blonde, but I hear that does work.

I turn now to *Roast Chicken and other stories* by Simon Hopkinson, and smile as I read the recipe for lemon delicious pudding, one of my mum's favourites. In his second book, *Second Helpings of Roast Chicken*, Simon gives a whole chapter to lemons. He reminds me of a traditional English dessert, the Syllabub, a lightly flavoured cream (a kind of English zabaglione or mousse).

I think about the first time I had lemon sorbet. I thought it was so refreshing and, rather like a green salad, a palate cleanser and way to revive after very rich food.

So once again I say thank you to the yellow fruit that will always have a place at my table.

Renee Grisebrook



Visit Manna From Heaven at the Eveleigh Markets on Saturdays from 8am to 1pm



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Recipe

Alex the other night cooked me some roasted chicken with lemon. I thought it was preserved lemon, but no, she had just roasted it with slices of fresh lemon. I decided to roast some lemons just on their own so I could have them to use on fish or cold poached chicken.

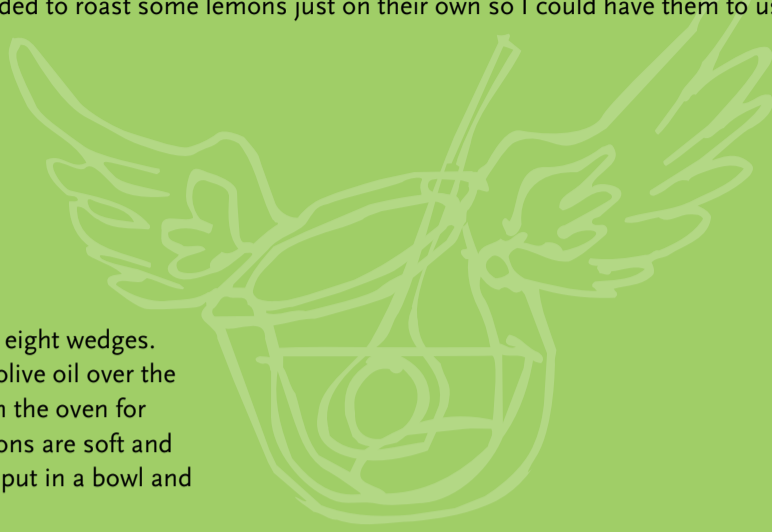
Roasting Lemons

- 2 medium-sized lemons
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- Salt and pepper

Set the oven to 150°C
On a chopping board, cut the lemons into eight wedges. Place in a small roasting tin and pour the olive oil over the top. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Roast in the oven for twenty-five to thirty minutes, until the lemons are soft and slightly brown at the edges. Leave to cool, put in a bowl and store in the fridge until ready to use.

Later in the week I tossed some chicken thighs in some pesto and the roasted lemons and baked them with more olive oil and thin slices of garlic. With a beetroot-and-french-bean salad and steamed couscous it made a lovely summer dinner outside.

And tonight I am going to pan-fry some fillets of fish, then make a sauce with pine nuts, a couple of pieces of the remaining roasted lemon finely chopped, a handful of currants and some verjuice and a handful of parsley all poured over the fish.



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Armarcord by Marcella Hazan

As I turned the last pages of Marcella’s autobiography I felt extremely sad to end this humble tale of a life in food. Marcella Hazan began America’s love affair with cooking Italian food. Her first book was *The Classic Italian Cook Book* followed by *More Classic Italian Cooking*. These are simple, practical books to learn from. Along with writing these and other books Marcella taught people how to cook, first in her home in America and later in Venice and other parts of Italy. Her husband Victor became her collaborator; they have been together a long time, enjoying many lunches, wines and cigarettes. There is nothing cheffy about this delightful book: she was a cook first and foremost and she liked nothing more than to have her students gather round her table and sit and start the preparation for an Italian meal. I would have loved to sit round that table listening to her talk about the different varieties of artichokes while we rolled out some pasta or peeled and chopped some garlic. As I read descriptions of her careful preparation for her husband’s lunch, I can quite easily visualise them eating, sipping wine and discussing the food.

special of the month



We will continue with our three gluten-free fruit cakes — strawberry and white chocolate, pineapple and marigold and dark chocolate and blackberry — come and try them at the growers’ market at Eveleigh market.

We have places available in our parent-and-child cooking classes in the next school holidays held here at Manna From Heaven in Marrickville. For bookings, please call Katie on 9517 3688. Saturday 18th April or Saturday 25th April 2pm–4pm.



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