

I TAUGHT THEM TO  
**COOK**

**Sample**



Jenny Ridgwell

# I taught them to cook

Jenny Ridgwell

A memoir of teaching and living in London in 1970s

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This is a memoir of a teaching year in 1972.

It's based on a true story but names have been changed to give privacy to the people involved. All characters in this publication other than those in the public domain are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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## Spag bog

'Class! Today we're making a new dish – spaghetti bolognese. On the TV the cook Zena Skinner said you throw the spaghetti at the wall and if it's cooked it will stick.'

'Yuk' comes a mumble from the stools around my table. I'm their new cookery teacher and they're testing me out. They don't know yet that I've never cooked spaghetti before. Never eaten it either. There's a lot else they don't know about me but I'm not sharing secrets. Not yet and probably not ever at school.

'You can't buy spaghetti around here so I've bought some from a shop near me. You've probably eaten Heinz spaghetti in a tin, but this is different.'

Should I compare the choices in their east London shops to the plentiful offerings from Turkish and Caribbean stalls near my Hampstead flat?

I tip out the golden strands from a long cylinder of dark blue paper with an Italian label.

'Not eating that!' mutters a lumpen boy from one of the stools.

Bert is a name that I learnt in my first few days. He said he'd rather go fishing than come to school and never ever chose to be in my classes.

'Listen Bert. Watch as I make the bolognese. Just four ingredients – mince, lard, onions and tomato ketchup.'

'Me dad won't eat that! He'll give it to the dog!'

'Class. Gather round my gas cooker and watch me cook.'

I melt a lump of lard in a frying pan, brown the mince and onions, then blob in red tomato ketchup and enough water for the sauce. Lid on and simmer. Fancy ingredients like garlic, tomato purée and oregano are off the menu – I'm not risking more Yuks today.

The large saucepan of water is boiling on the gas ring.

'Stand back and I'll show you how the spaghetti cooks. Italians have been doing this for years. It's easy!'

I push long stiff strands into the steaming water. Bits snap off and it takes ages to soften. It looks so easy on TV.

'Class - get ready and I'll call you when my spaghetti is done.'

They clatter out equipment and measure ingredients.

'Come and watch!'

Just like the TV cook, I fork out a long pasta strand and fling it at the wall. It sticks into a satisfying S bend.

'See it's cooked. Strain the rest through a colander – let's get on.'

The room fills with meaty, saucy smells. The boiling pans of water steam up the windows.

It's time for their cooked spaghetti test.

'Miss, the water's so hot. I can't get it out.'

Bert sucks his scalded fingers.

'Use a fork, spoon, anything but your fingers, Bert. Boiling water scalds.'

Strands of pasta fly to hit the nearest vertical surface and soon my walls and ovens are coated in snakes of spaghetti while the stiff uncooked stuff falls behind cupboards and scatters over the floor. This may be fun but my spaghetti test is turning my classroom into a modern artwork.

We're ready to serve. Twirls of spaghetti onto a take home dish, topped with a mound of sauce and sprinkled with grated Cheddar cheese. It's always Cheddar cheese! Parmesan is off the shopping list as it's another exotic ingredient that could send the meal dogwards, and anyway, we can't afford it.

They bring their dishes for a mark out of ten to reflect effort and more importantly, how much washing up is left in the sink. Then it's covered with foil and put into baskets for collection at home time.

Except for the boys. Boys don't bring baskets or cookery stuff to school. Boys rarely take their cooking home. If I want them to cook then I'll need to shop and they'll pay me back.

'Can we eat it now? We'll clear up, honest.' It's Bert and I'm wary.

So while other teachers gossip, snack and smoke in the staffroom, Bert and his mates transform my cookery room into an eatery. Tables are set with blue seersucker tablecloths, green Beryl Ware plates, forks and spoons, water jugs and glasses. This is a proper sit down meal. It wasn't allowed in my last school, but I'm in charge here and yes, we'll do it properly.

'Let me show you how the Italians eat spaghetti. Don't cut it – Italians think that's rude.'

I twirl my fork round the great long strands and slurp it into my mouth.

'This foreign food's alright Miss. I might cook it tonight.'

Bert and friends clear away and charge out the room as the bell goes for my next lesson.

The queue is jostling outside waiting to make rock cakes and jam buns.

## London 1970s

London in the seventies buzzes with energy and there's a frenzy of things to do - wine bars, cheap eating places, art galleries, new musicals and so many theatres. Friends who've arrived in the city have found plenty of job choices, bargain priced flats and they are ready to party. For the past few weeks I've been sharing a flat with Mark, my boyfriend. It's a secret from both sets of parents who might not approve of such goings on before marriage - well we're not telling them so they won't know!

My new job as head of home economics is working in a bustling east London comprehensive.

Each teaching day I speed out of Hampstead in my ancient Mini Traveller past the halal butchers, Cypriot groceries and Afro Caribbean vegetable stalls and into the suburbs. My new school is surrounded by neat streets, where working class families have lived for many generations.

Mothers, fathers, aunts and uncles of my students have been to this school, and not much has changed since. The local shops stock traditional British foods. The evening hot meal of meat and two veg or a Fray Bentos steak and kidney pie sums it up. I must tread softly and not bring too many of my fancy modern ideas crashing into the classroom.

The real culture shock is what I have to teach. To get them through their cookery exam my teenagers must learn how to make a vast range of high fat, high sugar recipes - pastries, biscuits, cakes and sauces. We'll use as much margarine and lard as I can keep in my gas-fired fridge, and as many packets of Tate and Lyle sugar that can be piled into my food storeroom. Bugger healthy eating. I have to teach them traditional British food. FOR THE EXAM. They must learn that mint sauce is served with roast lamb, horseradish sauce goes with roast beef, and apple sauce with roast pork. Those questions are asked in the EXAM and they must learn the RULES.

The cookery textbooks and exam questions pay no attention to multicultural Britain, with little opportunity to celebrate Caribbean cooking and make spicy chicken with fried plantain. No need to learn how to cook dhal or boil a pot of rice. Stir-fried vegetables with noodles and plenty of soya sauce - blah! Falafel with tahini in pitta bread - for goodness sake who would want to eat that! And as for pizza - ridiculous Italian food.

The textbooks make daft statements and tell us that a vegetarian diet has 'a limited choice and can be bulky and unattractive.' We make junket for sick people for our invalid cookery lesson and there is no mention that some religious groups don't eat popular foods like pork pies and sausages.

Things need to change!

## Pink nylon overalls

My work uniform is a pale pink nylon overall which just skims the hems of my mini dresses and produces static charge if I'm wearing a crimplene frock underneath. One sleeve hides an armful of elastic bands, essential for scraping back the fashionably long hair of both boys and girls and leads to a few shouty rants.

'My hair's clean and that elastic'll give me split ends.'

The inside skin on the other forearm shows biro notes to remind me of important tasks for the day like 'Check car tyres' or 'Write a letter to Grandma.'

On rare visits to the staffroom, I remember to remove my overall and rubber gloves before I collapse exhausted into one of the beaten-up staffroom armchairs, and light a cigarette. If not I might be mistaken for the school cleaner and may be told to wash up the coffee cups.

Before we start any cooking, they must obey my chant.

'Hair, hearings and hands – tie your hair back, and remove all jewellery except wedding rings.

No-one is married, including me, so bring me your precious things to lock up!

When my classes find out I'm single, I hear a collective 'Ah'. Prying into the private life of young teachers is a popular diversion in most lessons.

'Have you got a boyfriend, Miss?'

Carol loves gossip - it's a happy time waster. Carol and Vicky wander around school as a pair, and I wonder how I'm going to get them to do any work.

'Carol, it's none of your business – aprons on please.'

'Will you make your own wedding cake? There are cake tins in the cupboard.'

Carol persists in digging for clues.

'Class, and that includes you, Carol, let's see your hands.'

They hold them out for inspection.

'Vicky – take off the nail varnish – the remover's in my desk drawer.'

Vicky tuts with disgust. She'll pay me back for making this fuss. Vicky wants to cook and I'm stopping her with my stupid rules.

The class is checked so we can begin. Once they know I mean business, we speed through the hair, hearings and hands eager to get on with making something to eat.

The TV cooks of the day never obey my hygiene rules. That fancy Fanny Cradock sparkles in her diamond necklace and dangly earrings and even wears an evening dress to cook in. She pokes long red fingernails into pastries and pies and I cringe at the thought of spitting out slivers of red varnish if I ever have to taste her cooking.

One morning, Jim the caretaker is taking down the Housecraft sign on the outside door of my cookery room.

'Jenny. The head wants a new name on your door. What are you called now? Let me know and I'll get a sign made up.'

So am I the Cookery, Home Economics, Domestic Science, Housecraft, Food and Nutrition or Baking teacher?

I wonder if any other teachers have been asked to rename their subject doors. Chemistry could be Blowing things up, Biology - Cutting things up, Woodwork - Sawing things up, History - Old stuff, Art - Colouring stuff, Physics - Boring stuff.

Why do I work in a subject with at least five different names? If a magazine changed its title this often it would have gone bust, out of print and defunct long ago. And it feels as if the future of food teaching is equally dodgy.

The cookery exams in the seventies have different titles. In the sixth form of my high school I begged to study Domestic Science although this subject was not considered challenging enough as an A level for university entrance. I had to take three other A levels as well. My headmistress said I'd never get work if I learnt about cooking. Bah Humbug! How wrong she was.

Now in this comprehensive school, I have to teach two types of exams - O level for the cleverer ones and CSE for the rest, which is the majority of my classes. And they've got different names too! Cookery, Housecraft, Domestic Science, Home Economics .... Bah!

But for the start of my new job I've got to be fast off the starting block to keep classroom order and my first tactic is to tell everyone that they're doing the EXAM. This is a daft decision, as my end of year results are judged on exam passes I achieve and results rely upon students turning up for lessons. But this is a senior high school and their last chance to get any qualifications before many of them leave education for good, so exams are important.

But back to my door name. What is it? I am teaching them how to cook! So let's make a sign called Home Economics. Bah!

Boys don't cook

A gang of grumbly boys bursts into my room. It's an explosive end to my week.

'I ain't doing this lesson! I chose Art! This lesson's for girls or poofers!'

'I'm only here 'cos Mr Smith won't have us in metalwork!'

They glance me up then down, starting with my red platform shoes and up over my beige tights.

The school insists that women teachers wear tights or stockings at all times - no bare legs or trousers. Up past my tartan miniskirt and red ribbed top which today feels a bit tight. Glad I put on my proper makeup. Plenty of mascara and a swish of purple eyeshadow with shiny baby pink lipstick. Boys, I'm ready for you.

We make fierce eye contact.

'Your names please boys?'

'Gavin!' A burly young giant towers over me.

'Ray!' A shorter, but no less submissive boy scowls back.

'Tim.' Tim short for timid? Or timorous? Hardly.

'Len! Not doing exams, Miss! Leaving at Easter! Got a job in me uncle's garage.'

So Len's not bovvered.

'OK boys - I'll see if you can change back. We don't want you doing lessons that you don't like.'

This school was a secondary modern before it was recently renamed a senior high but the ghost of low expectation lingers on. Most students are entered for some sort of exam unless they choose to leave at the end of the Easter term after they turn sixteen. These early leavers dither aimlessly about the corridors, desperate to sidle out of the school gates and bunk off. And quite a few are listed on my registers.

Mr James, the deputy head says he'll pop into the staffroom and ask if the other teachers will take the boys back into their classes. He returns swiftly to tell me no they're full, and anyway, they only teach serious students who are prepared to study. It seems my grumbly gang can't do subjects like Art, Woodwork, Technical Drawing and Metalwork. But they can do Cookery! It's easy! Just spend lessons making jam tarts and cakes. The new teacher will take you. She doesn't know the kicking-out rules practised by other staff.

The next week the gang is back in the queue propping up the wall outside my room.

'OK all of you, come in and gather round my table with your stools.'

My pink nylon overall covers my much-too-short skirt and I've morphed into The Cookery Teacher.

'As it's our first cooking lesson we're using storeroom ingredients - margarine, caster sugar, eggs and self raising flour. And it's all free for this lesson, but you'll need to bring in your own ingredients for the next lessons and leave them in my room in your basket.'

A murmur of horror comes from the back row - basket, bring stuff in. What sort of a lesson are we doing?

'What are we making today Miss?' A quiet, nervous girl is speaking from the front row.

'Your name?'

'Alice.' She's sweet enough to wear her navy coloured Alice band that neatly matches her navy school uniform.

'Miss – I want to do O level Cookery but I'm in this group.' She could have added 'of idiots' or 'boys'.

'Alice, We'll talk about changing groups later.'

'Class, we're making fairy cakes today.'

'What! I said this lesson was for poofsters!'

Gavin stands up to shout - his voice is as large as his size.

'It's a simple recipe – the same weight of egg and other ingredients. Beat the margarine with the sugar until it's creamy.'

I bang my wooden spoon on the edge of the mixing bowl and the soft, shiny mixture plops down.

Gavin will be good at this.

'Crack your egg into a cup, beat it with a fork, stir in, sieve the flour and fold in gently. Then spoon it into paper cases in the tart tins.

Gavin booms again out from his stool.

'When are we doing tarts, Miss?'

'Ha Ha!' He smirks to the group.

'I've never done a tart!'

I really hope Gavin won't turn up to my pastry lessons where we learn about rubbing in and knocking up.

'Aprons on, hair tied back, hands washed – let's get cooking.'

The room busies with weighing and beating then it's into the cake cases for baking.

'Wash up while the cakes cook.'

The warm fragrance of baking cakes is calming us all down. Even Gavin is quiet. He's sitting on the floor by his oven, watching his raw cake dough rise, cook and turn golden brown.

'Onto cooling racks and ready for marking!'

'Len. One mark off. You've made seven instead of six. And they are different sizes.'

Len scowls. Stupid rules of fairy cake making!

Alice has six perfectly formed, well risen, golden cakes.

'Full marks Alice.'

'Gavin – six out of ten.' 'What! Why?'

'Sink full of washing up, Gavin– do it before you leave.'

'Class, please remember to bring your ingredients for next time - a choice between pineapple upside down cake and spotted dick.' I wonder which one Gavin will try.

They pile out the room, fairy cakes packed in paper bags. My boy gang laughs through mouthfuls of sponge and splutters out the crumbs. Only a few bowls and spoons are left in the sinks ready for me to clear up. Next week I really hope Gavin stays away.

Mr Bush, the headmaster has asked to see me after school and talk over how things are going. It will be a two way exchange. In my previous ILEA school (Inner London Education Authority) we provided all the ingredients for students to do their cooking. Now I've got to teach busy exam classes with an annual food budget of £50. How will I manage? Do I pay for my own demonstrations and for their tasting sessions like the cheese tasting? What happens when students don't bring ingredients in? Can I shop and they pay? But then who funds me? I can see some challenges ahead but first I'm going to ask the Science department who pays for the chemicals for their experiments and the Art department if students have to buy art paper and paints when they do a painting. Blast it! This is not going to be easy.

### She Who Ran Away

Before this new job starts in September I visit my school in my summer holidays to check that everything is shipshape and tidy. The clean, shiny school corridors smell of polish and there's an



air of excitement for fresh, new beginnings after the summer break.

Jim, the caretaker, unlocks my door.

Whew! The recent hot, humid weather may account for the stifling heat inside the room but not the smell. Something somewhere is dead or rotting and we need to find it. Twelve cookers line the sides of the room and the hobs are congealed with dark brown sticky spills and lumps of dried food. What was the last teacher cooking and where has she or he gone? No farewell 'Hello and good luck' note. The cooker behind my desk that is used for demonstrations shows evidence of a massive fry up. Blobs of beige grease hang from the eye level grill and drip onto burnt bits in the frying pan below. As I open the oven door, it's clear this cooker has gone through a baking marathon. Even the glass door is splattered with a thick brown layer of entrenched fat.

'Jim, when do these ovens get cleaned up before I start?'

My arm sweeps around to the other cookers which are as filthy as ones left in a student squat. He looks sheepish, opens the windows to let the air in or out and heads for the door. I wonder if he thinks I'm too young to be head of department at twenty three years old, in charge of the mighty task of running two cookery rooms and a school flat.

'The teacher has to do it. I'll let you get on – just put a note under my door when you leave.'

'But Jim – who taught here last and why did she or he go...?'

Too late – he's disappeared into his sparkling corridors and down to the caretaker's hideaway.

From now on let's call her SHE WHO RAN AWAY. And add AND LEFT ME WITH THIS SH\*T.

But onto tracing the smell – I can't have classes arriving to this putrid stink.

Imagine the 'Ugh, Miss, vile smell' comments or 'I ain't staying in this!' They'll be out before I can say 'My name is ...'

A door from inside my room opens into the huge storeroom which could shed some light on the cooking history of this department and maybe hold the clue to the rot. The high ceilinged room is stacked with enough equipment to supply any professional kitchen shop.

What has She Who Ran Away been doing? On the top shelf is a row of long, aluminium fish kettles with lids – big enough to hold some large, unaffordable salmon. So was she cooking for weekend weddings? Jim must bring me a step ladder if we're going to reach those. It will probably be me reaching them. Alone.

Next some flat, black, cast iron griddle pans with welded, curved handles – the sort you see in a stately home kitchen for cooking griddle cakes. Then there are large aluminium preserving pans for jams, marmalades and chutneys.

And sets of tins for a class of twenty or more students. Oblong bread tins, large round Christmas cake tins, Swiss roll and domed sponge flan tins as well as the heavily used and battered Victoria sandwich tins. Piles of beautifully moulded tins to make éclairs, jam tarts, fairy cakes and tiny Yorkshire puddings. Hanging on hooks are metal rings for pastry flans – plain for savoury and fluted for sweet. Do not put your pastry in the wrong ring! Then some pointy tins that look like piping bags, that I reckon are used for cream horns. Was this woman running a private bakery as well?

At floor level there are essential saucepans, frying pans and a collection of pressure cookers, metal colanders and sieves. And stacks of aluminium holey steamers which fit on top of saucepans to steam stuff like jam roly poly and treacle sponges.

She Who Ran Away seems to have taught a marathon of baking dishes and their history can be traced from the encrusted bits of cake, dough and burnt pastry that need to be cleaned off before I can begin.

And if I ask Jim who is going to clean up all this equipment I reckon I'll get a 'The teacher has to do it' answer.

So tomorrow I'll drive back in my Mini Traveller, leaving my friends and Mark lazing on rugs on leafy Hampstead Heath drinking wine and eating picnics with baguettes and Brie. And I'll be sweating in my stinky room ready to begin the filthy task.

The teacher has to do it! But this still doesn't account for the smell.

My early morning drive the next day is hot, very hot and the room still smells of rot. I need to get on. We've got a street party tonight and Mark will bring bottles of wine and I'll make a pile of sausage rolls.

Overall and rubber gloves on, I fill the deep butlers' sinks with scorching hot water and stir in the caustic soda crystals just like my grandmother taught me. The dirty baking trays, cake tins and saucepans are piled on the wooden draining boards ready for soaking. Caustic soda is dangerous stuff, so I need to be careful, but there is a joy in watching burnt bits of food float off from the trays into the scummy water as I leave them to soak.

Now to explore the ingredients in the storeroom and track down the smell. Two large plastic bins contain catering sacks of plain and self raising flour and the shelves are stacked with packs of Tate and Lyle granulated, caster, icing and brown sugar. A row of huge screw top glass jars are filled with bright red glacé cherries, vivid green stems of crystallised angelica, currants, sultanas, raisins, mixed peel, desiccated coconut and almond flakes.

A section of any school food storeroom shelves must be filled with bottles of artificial colouring and flavourings to prop up our culinary skills and enhance 1970s dishes. She Who Run Away has left tiny bottles of red, green and yellow food colouring and essences of vanilla, almond and rum. Red is for rhubarb, pink butter icing and to colour the glaze for strawberry tarts. Green is added to dishes made with gooseberries and cooked apples. Vanilla essence, in a very large brown bottle, is the most popular chemical compote added to fairy cakes and Victoria sandwich. I mix drops of almond essence with semolina for Bakewell tart instead of ground almonds which are too expensive. Rum essence is the ultimate sin, which we dribble into sponges or chocolate truffles at Christmas time. How I long to use the real thing!

And there are so many ground spices which must be for Christmas baking – cinnamon, ginger, cloves, allspice and whole nutmegs like my grandmother grates on the top of her rice puddings. I open the ground ginger pot hoping for a whiff of brandy snaps and ginger biscuits but the brown dust has lost its spicy magic long ago.

On the floor there are heavy plastic containers, sticky with black treacle and golden syrup both with drippy lids, some huge catering tins of red jam, peach slices and a massive jar of Heinz Salad cream. On the shelf above is a row of small tins of Carnation condensed milk. Was she running a sweet factory making toffee and fudge? What the hell was going on in this kitchen?

A cardboard tray of eggs gently warms in the summer heat in a corner of the storeroom. How old are they? Are they safe to use? I'll have to do the jug of water test and see if they float. Bob to the top and they're in the bin along with the old pots of spices.

That only leaves the fridge behind my desk. This strange, gas-powered contraption rumbles away, working overtime to manage its cooling job in the August heat. Surely it will have been emptied before the start of the summer holidays? But no. On the top shelf a metal jug has a pastry brush stuck rigidly in some yellowy brown glob. Looks like her egg glaze pot. Maybe she made some savoury stuff like sausage rolls, cheese straws or Cornish pasties? The shelves below are packed with blocks of lard and a large plastic tub labelled Catering Margarine which smells of fish oil and is flecked with crumbs and smears of jam.

It's time to put the kettle on and test the Typhoo tea bags and dried milk left in the storeroom. And a cup full of glacé cherries, angelica, sultanas and almonds as my lunchtime snack. No time to go down to the bakery at the end of the road - I need to get on and throw stuff away.

The afternoon passes quickly scrubbing the mountain of cookware that emerges stripped clean from the caustic bath. Eclair and jam tart tins are really beautiful kitchen pieces, fit for an antique shop, and will last us for many more years. As I brush the pastry bits from the cream horn tins, I secretly wish that She Who Ran Away would come back and share her cooking legacy or at least give me her recipes and tell me what she was making. She may have left a pile of *Cooking is Fun* books, but a real life pastry cook could teach me a lot of things I don't know and have never made.

The smell of putrefying something or other is still there, but it's time to drive back to the fun and party time in Hampstead.

The next day it's a later start. Our street party lasted well into the early morning and both Mark and myself are nursing headaches.

Today's job is to label and sort the drawers and cupboards under the students' worktables. I'm making them responsible for their own stuff and each drawer is lined with brown paper and drawn with equipment outlines. At the end of each lesson I'll march round and check – it's like the card game Memory. If anything is missing they must search the sinks and bins and no-one leaves till all the equipment is accounted for. I can't have cook's knives hidden in duffle bags or dirty pans left in the sinks.

But still where's that rotting smell coming from? A sniff test round my room leads to my desk. I call Jim and ask him to unlock the drawer and please, leave the key behind. Inside are the putrid remains of an unidentifiable sandwich. She Who Ran Away must have gone off in a real hurry if she left her lunch behind. But there are other unattractive smells.

'Jim, can you help me pull out the cupboards from the wall please? I'll make you a cup of tea.'

His look implies that he'd rather be left undisturbed in his caretaker's room quietly making his own brew.

Our furniture shift exposes leftover baking bits, dirty jam tart tins and the skeleton of a dead mouse.

'Please Jim, can the cleaners come and sort this out? Please!'

I'm done – my room is nearly ready for the new term in my new job in my new school and it's the weekend and it's hot. Mark will take me for a trip to the seaside in his posh company car, and we'll eat crab sandwiches on the beach and breathe in the ozone-filled air.

### Apple crumble

Making apple crumble is like taking a dance class. Their tables are arranged all around me and I dance about in the middle giving instructions and spot dems. A spot dem means I use their ingredients rather than my own to show the techniques for the recipe. With a £50 food budget for the year, a spot dem saves me spending on ingredients for a dish I don't want to take home.

'Class. We're making apple crumble using the rubbing in method which is a very important skill.'

Gavin must be listening as he raises his large head from his slump on the Formica table.

'Sieve the flour and sugar into your mixing bowl, rub in the margarine till it looks like breadcrumbs then twist and shake the bowl to find lumps.'

I lift Len's floury sugar into the air, let it drop into the bowl and squeeze in chunks of margarine with my fingertips.

'What is this method called?'

'Rubbing in Miss.'

'Thanks Len.'

'Miss, if it's an important skill do we need to practice?'

Gavin sniggers his question. It's a wind-up and I know he's not thinking of cooking. Cookery recipes are littered with rude words and I speed up so the innocents don't catch on and claim my lesson has taught them dirty words.

'Alright, let's get on. Bert lift then squeeze! Don't squash it into a lump.'

Bert likes his food and he's not keen when I do spot dems as I can't give him my demonstration dish as a swap for his help in clearing up.

Flour and sugar dust floats in the air.

'How do we know when it is like breadcrumbs, class?'

They chorus the answer.

'Twist and Shake, Miss.'

'Just like Chubby Checker, class! Twist again like we did last summer!'

Who am I talking about? Some American rock singer that had a big hit in the sixties when they were tiny. The class lifts their mixing bowls, twists their hips and shakes any lumps of fat to the top. They wait for my approving inspection as I dance around the tables.

'Perfect Janice!' Girls are dainty with cool hands. Boys have clumsy, hot hands which can quickly squeeze the crumble into a fatty ball.

My Twist and Shake routine is used for a myriad of fatty, floury recipes and we must progress through the skills of combining the ingredients FOR THE EXAM – crumble, shortcrust pastry, rock cakes, flaky and rough puff. Deep down I think it's a way of using cheap ingredients to make high fat, sugary cakes and pastries to fill us up. The British diet and cookery lessons will have to change.

Let's get this lesson nailed. They peel, core and slice a cooking apple into a small foil dish, sprinkle with sugar and cinnamon, then top with the light, crumbly crumble which bakes to a golden crunchiness. The room has a spicy fragrance and I wish I had a demonstration dish for my supper.

'We've mastered one of the basic skills. What's the method called?'

'Rubbing in Miss. Does your boyfriend know how to do it?'

Gavin smirks at the answer but most are just pleased to take this tasty pudding home.

#### Pickled onions and chutney

Since I'm short of funds for my lessons, I've asked for donations of spare fruits and vegetables for our lessons on preservation. London gardens spill out their windfall apples and pears and we get plenty of beetroot and onions from the pickings of allotments. The keener students bring in blackberries and crab apples gathered in forays around Epping Forest or derelict land near the school.

Now my tables are piled with boxes of apples in various stages of decay and a large sack of small onions donated by the school gardener.

The class shambles in and settles on their stools.

'These lessons are about preserving things so that they will last longer. How are we going to preserve these apples and onions so that they keep over winter?'

Silence. They don't care.

'Come on, what shall we do with them?'

'Put them on the compost heap, Miss – them apples look rotten.'

Bert is good in the school garden so he should know. And he's right – we need to remove the battered and bruised fruit but I must teach thriftiness in this throwaway world.

'We're going to use the apples to make apple chutney and pickle those small onions in vinegar.'

From the grumbles and shuffling they'd rather repeat last week's fairy cakes lesson.

'Hurry up – you have to make a choice! Apple chutney or pickled onions?'

They divide by sex. Girls choose chutney, boys the onions. This separation often happens. They are not choosing what they want to cook. The boys and girls just don't want to work with each other.

On a school training day we're told to mix up boys and girls, make them sit next to each other and work in mixed sex pairs.

One evening Mark drove me past the deer in Richmond Park. 'An outing to look at the rutting!' he teases. The female deer huddle together and the giant stags, pumped high with testosterone, roar and patrol their boundaries. No one makes them mix up. I think Mark must have plans for us later. In the classroom, while the girls cook in clean, organised workplaces, the boys create a messy nest of ingredients which soon spill onto the floor and end up being kicked under the tables.

Large teenage boys preparing tiny onions make me laugh as they peel away the withered, brown skins, then top and tail the onions and put them into salted water. Gradually the tears flow.

'What's up Bert? Does this lesson make you sad?'

Bert rubs his fists into his eyes. Now his whole face is pink and blubbery.

'Class – don't wipe your eyes with oniony hands – the juice gets in and makes the crying worse.'

They blink, reddened and bleary.

'Me Nan peels her onions under water.' It's Len who tells me that he lives with his Nan and they each help prepare their evening tea. He says my lessons are his favourite, and I can see how Nan has shared her cooking skills. As he dumps his onions in a bowl of cold water, a stream of dribble runs from his nose, over his chin and splashes in. Plop! Pickled onions and snot – now how are we going to make that safe to eat?

Squeals come from Carol and Vicky who are peeling and chopping some windfall apples.

Carol pins a slug with the tip of her paring knife and its innards ooze onto the table. They group in disgust to watch the slug shrivel in green slime.

'Err Miss – look at this slug – I ain't using them apples.'

Carol holds the dying slug up for the boys to share her revulsion.

'OK, girls! Throw the bruised bits of apples away. We're still going to use the rest.'

'Miss, I ain't eating things with slugs in. Why do I have to do this lesson anyway?'

Carol unties her apron, slings it on the table, heads for the door and beckons Vicky to follow. This is Carol's usual trick to meet her boyfriend at the school gates, but her boyfriend might not find the smell of vinegar and rotting fruit so attractive today. Carol tells me that school, and my lessons in particular, are rubbish. Vicky just trots behind her nodding in agreement.

The remaining girls stir the compote of apples, onions, vinegar and brown sugar into a bubbling broth.

The boys pack their tiny onions into warm Kilner jars and pour in hot Sarson's malt vinegar.

The fragrance from my room often attracts wandering staff and students who sniff the air and open the door and go 'Ah! Bisto!' like the TV ad. Biff is a frequent visitor. He gets sent out of lessons to drift around the school in search of mischief and sources of entertainment.

'Miss – this room always smells lovely – when can I do cooking with you? Please let me in.'

'One day Biff – maybe. Now get on your way. I expect the head is waiting to see you.' I hope it's not for him to be caned.

Steaming apple chutney is piled into jam jars, covered with waxed paper, topped with cellophane and sealed with an elastic band.

The labels on the jars are designed for the highest marks.

Alice's Amazing Apple Chutney 1972.

Paul's Perfect Pickled Onions.

Maybe some are still maturing in a secret east London cupboard, waiting for discovery. And maybe, like Lea and Perrins Worcestershire sauce, they will become a mass produced delicacy found on future supermarket shelves.

## Discipline matters

When they interviewed me for the job of running this department the first question was 'Can you keep your classes in order?'

I answered firmly that I'd survived for two years in an ILEA comprehensive school and I was confident that I'd cope. Now I've got my doubts. There have been some very shouty lessons since I started, and days when they've barged out the room leaving sinks full of dirty washing up. If I can't keep order, I can't do this job. It's as simple as that.

But who can help? During our PGCE studies at London University no one tackles the serious issue of how to manage boisterous teenagers and get them to learn. As I walk around the school, I hear some loud voices, see naughty students leaning on walls outside classrooms, but then pass quiet,

busy classrooms where the students clearly treat the lessons with respect.

Mr Lewes is the man for advice and I trust him to keep my secret. He's taught at the school for years and students pass him in the corridors with a polite 'Hello, Mr Lewes.' He knows the families of the students and has taught some of them too. I bet he never dreads some classes as I do. How does he do it? Am I too young and too new? What techniques must I use? How I'd love to hear a 'Good morning, Miss Hyde' instead of 'Look at her - is she new?'

'Jenny, you'll be fine. Make them know you mean business. Plan your lessons carefully and don't let them get away with things.'

'But I want to be like you. I want to walk into any class and get their attention. My classes are really noisy and excitable.'

'Jenny, we're all different, and teachers have their own ways of running successful classrooms. You're strong and determined, so I know you'll succeed.'

We came up with a plan. My classes already line up outside my room and I let them in when quiet. But once inside there's often a tussle and a few thumps between the boys. Mr Lewes says he'll deal with the ones who regularly forget their homework, cooking ingredients or money to pay for stuff and until things settle, they cannot eat at lunchtime in my room. And there will be no mention of the cane.

Now I've got a theory about them eating in my room. We fuss about laying the table and using proper plates, then we sit down together. And talk and share. And sometimes they tell me about their families. And sometimes they share unfair things. They get a 'Mind your own business' if they ask for any of my secrets, but I'm pleased to chat and enjoy their teenage banter.

Mr Lewes is insistent. 'Lock your room at break times, visit the staffroom and mix with the other teachers. And come and join us at the pub on Friday evenings.'

This sounds like a very grown up agreement but the pub down the road does not fill me with glee. It's a dismal, 1930s building designed for smoking, drinking and old men. During opening hours the Public Bar is filled with a lot of them. I'd rather be with my jolly friends in the pubs of Hampstead sipping cold lager and eating crisps.

### Going metric

In the 1970s school cookery rooms around Britain received instructions to replace all cooking equipment that uses old imperial measures like pounds, ounces, pints and inches. **WE ARE GOING METRIC!**

Out go sturdy metal jugs to measure pints and fluid ounces and in come plastic ones with metric millilitres.

Out go the heavy weighing scales with metal weights in pounds and ounces. In comes cheap, plastic scales measuring grams and kilos. They have a plastic arm that swings round a dial, and when boys push too hard on the weighing bowl, the arm snaps off, broken forever.

Our money went metric on February 15th 1971 and how people moaned that it was a trick to put up prices. The five new pence coins replaced the shilling, and we use fifty new pence coins instead of ten shilling notes. Adding up metric money is easy. Changing my school recipes into grams and litres is a real headache. The maths is complicated. There are 28.35 grams to the ounce, 453.6 grams to the pound, one pint is 568.2 millilitres, and one inch is 2.54 centimetres. People round numbers up or down and no clear guidance arrives for swapping from imperial into metric.

Outside the classroom the world carries on with the old measurements. Milkmen deliver milk in pint glass bottles, pubs sell pints of beer and the greengrocer prices his fruit and vegetables in old money and weighs them by the pound. Shops sell packets of lard and margarine in half pounds and flour in three pound paper bags. **BUT I HAVE TO GO METRIC IN MY CLASSROOM.**

All my handwritten school recipes are in metric and on days when they cook their favourite recipe from home, it leads to chaos. They bring in treasured cuttings from magazines and newspapers and even Nan's handwritten recipe book. Liz is stern with me.

'Nan says you need to use pounds and ounces to cook this cake else it won't work.'

I wonder if, in the future, someone will have to look up what oz, lb and pt mean.

### The Governor's tea

Dawn, the school secretary, pops her head round my cookery room door.

'Jenny, can you make the Governor's tea next week? Oh, and by the way, the head says he will increase the capitation for your ingredients but please provide evidence to show how much money you need for the year.'

This kind woman has nurtured me since I arrived and it's no time to complain about extra work.

'Normally about fifteen to twenty people turn up. Nothing fancy. We just need a few sandwiches and some scones, biscuits and homemade cakes. The teacher before you got the girls to do it. We'll pay you for the ingredients.'

Well, that's alright then. The girls can do it. On top of all the other things they are learning and cooking in my lessons, somehow me and the girls will find time to prepare a not-too-fancy homemade tea for fifteen to twenty people.

I wonder if visitors to my cookery room have any idea of what it takes to manage my large classes who cook throughout the day. My door bursts open first thing as students bring baskets of ingredients for lessons. Then deliveries arrive from the butcher or greengrocer. I'm emptying the dryer and folding clean tea towels and dishcloths, hanging up clean aprons and shoving those that need repair into a drawer.

Next to register my form group, then classes stream in ready to cook, eat, clear and pack, get homework, find out what to bring next week or come for help with revision. When the bell rings at the end of school, I tidy my food storeroom, check the eight sinks, twelve cookers, cupboards full of mucky baking tins, saucepans, frying pans, drawers full of cooking tools, and my precious, locked cupboard holding a few old electrical whisks and a Kenwood Chef. I wash dishcloths and tea towels again in the ancient twin tub, spin them just damp and hang them back in the gas-fired dryers ready for the morning when they must be folded and packed away again. Then sweep and clean the room before the cleaners turn up – they won't do it if it's too messy. I check that the ovens and gas rings are turned off, and that the rubbish is ready for collection.

'Bye' teachers call as they scurry past my room, off to the pub or home to a cosy family and a cooked dinner.

Much later I collect my marking and list the food to buy for the next day. And all with no help.

In my first week, a lad brings over a pile of muddy football shirts, socks and shorts.

'Sir says can you wash and dry these? The last teacher did it.'

Of course, I will find time to prepare the Governor's tea and wash the bloody football shirts. I'm new here and want to get on with people, but somehow, sometimes things must change! Unless they'd like me to sleep in the school flat!!

On my drive back to Hampstead I plan my argument.

In this school, does the Art department paint the school walls?

Do English students write the school brochures?

Will Maths present the school accounts?

And does Science manage the school grounds and dig the gardens as part of their biology studies?

No!

SO WHY SHOULD I PREPARE A LITTLE GOVERNOR'S TEA FOR UP TO 20 PEOPLE AND WASH THE BLOODY FOOTBALL KIT!

My grandmother told me that one good turn deserves another. And it is my turn.

Carol and Vicky are a natural choice for the tea task. This pair of school ragbags never bring ingredients to my lessons, and instead sprawl heads down on the worktables, comparing their latest boyfriends, picking their split ends and flicking bits onto my floor. They've cooked their way through the cheap ingredients in my storeroom and are bored with making jam tarts and scones. Any reprimand from me gets a tornado reply.

'Miss, we're leaving at Easter, you can't make us do nothing.'

Other teachers have somehow removed them from their registers and it seems this pair is mine, for whole afternoons until they leave school.

'Carol and Vicky – you're going to make the Governor's tea. Here are the recipes, write a shopping list to buy the food next week. This is the menu.'

I pass them a handwritten list:

### **Governor's tea menu**

Egg and salad cream sandwiches

Asparagus rolls with brown bread and butter

Fruit scones with butter swirls

Brandy snaps with whipped cream

Butterfly cakes with piped butter icing

Tea with milk and sugar

When I worked as a waitress in Wicksteed Park's Tea Pavilion in Kettering these are things we'd serve for afternoon tea. The Park is famous for its crunchy brandy snaps which we serve with a swirl of piped cream. Brandy snaps look impressive but are really hard to make and I hope that Carol and Vicky are up to the challenge.

The day before the tea party Carol and Vicky grumble in with shopping baskets laden with golden syrup, Heinz salad cream, boxes of eggs, punnets of mustard and cress and show-off cans of asparagus. My elaborate Governor's tea menu is a cunning plan to increase my food stocks. After this first baking session, we'll have plenty of spare ingredients and I can use real butter instead of that catering tub of County Supply Margarine that tastes of fish.

On tea party day the rest of the class busies themselves making Swiss rolls. Carol and Vicky must dress to impress as someone might pop in to check the tea progress, and they won't want to see a scruffy pair messing with their food.

'Girls, hang up your duffle coats, take out your chewing gum, tie back your hair, and wash your hands. Then put on clean overalls before you start.'

Ha ha! I've got a couple of white cook's overalls ready for special occasions. As they button up, the girls transform. Their short skirts and half undone ties are hidden. A pair of smart cooks emerges.

I've prepared the hostess trolley with tray cloths, teapots, milk jugs, sugar bowls, teacups and saucers, small plates and serving platters. We need napkins and knives, cake forks and teaspoons, tablecloths and d'oyleys. And we mustn't forget the tea strainer. We're serving proper tea and need to make sure that all the china and cutlery is sparkling.

'Carol and Vicky, can you check that everything is clean?'

They glower at me.

'Why can't someone else do this, Miss?'

'Because they want to do an EXAM and you don't.'



This tea will test their stamina. As they start their baking marathon I keep a watchful eye knowing that at any time they could erupt, slam down their tools and leave the room shouting 'We ain't doing no more! We ain't your cooking slaves!'

Into the oven go the scones, then a swift clear up ready for the sponges which they will transform into butterfly cakes. Finally our biggest cooking challenge of all – brandy snaps.

Dollops of gingery, sugary, syrupy dough go into the hottest oven and out come golden brown craters which must be worked at speed. Each snap is lifted, wrapped round a wooden spoon handle and held in place till it forms a roll. Your hands feel warm and greasy, but there is no time to enjoy this pleasure. There are trays to process and more baking in the oven.

I join team Carol and Vicky to finish off the brandy snaps with piped cream, glacé cherries and tiny angelica leaves. Wicksteed Park would be proud.

Then it's on with the sandwiches.

Peeled, hard boiled eggs, mashed smooth with salad cream, mixed with mustard and cress then spread onto soft Mother's Pride white bread with the crusts removed and cut into quarters.

We drain precious mushy spears of asparagus from the cans and place them on buttered brown bread, roll them tightly and cut into small portions. Canned asparagus is expensive and portions cannot be too generous.

The sandwiches go on a plate with a plain d'oyley. D'oyleys matter in my cookery world. Plain for savoury, frilly for sweet, and these rules must not be broken.

Another hostess trolley is piled with sandwiches, buttered fruit scones, brandy snaps, and butterfly cakes.

The rest of the class gathers to coo over Carol and Vicky's work, amazed that these two can produce anything edible. The feast is finished with hot brewed tea and we wheel the trolleys into the headmaster's study. The Governors smile but I'm more thrilled at the surprised looks from the teachers on the school panel who know this unruly pair from their wanderings around the school corridors.

Carol and Vicky return with me to my cookery room. I'm too tired to ask them to clear up. Instead I give them a bag of spare sandwiches and cakes.

'Thanks girls – you've been great. Impressive cooking. Oh and have you got my shopping change?'

Vicky offers me a handful of coins then they throw down their overalls and resume their usual scruffiness as they wander off into the dark night, cackling through mouthfuls of sandwich.

The next morning I arrive early as usual, to start a busy day. In despair, I see the hostess trolleys, parked outside my room, piled with dirty teacups, empty plates, crumpled napkins and teapots full of cold tea leaves. As my form group catches up on their gossip, I don my overall and rubber gloves to clear up before my cooking classes arrive.

That weekend I prepared my case for Mr Bush, the head and chief fund donor. I need ancillary help and more money for ingredients. This cannot go on. I won't teach, clean up and be a drudge on my own.

A few days later, I got a note telling me to come after school and interview candidates for the ancillary position. Help is coming.

The following week, my chosen angel, the marvellous Cynthia, will arrive to be my right hand woman and saviour and work with me for five hours a week. It's not enough, but it's a start.

The school secretary pops her head round the door with more news.

'Jenny, you'll be pleased to know the school kitchens have agreed to take over making the Governor's teas.'

As my grandmother said, one turn deserves another.

I hear later that the PE department is buying an automatic washing machine and tumble dryer, and I am free to soar ahead and teach my subject with no distractions.

## Angel Delight

I'm really in love with Angel Delight, especially the butterscotch flavour. What a magical new product this is! Add milk to the powder, then whisk until it thickens to peaks of buttery, sugary, foamy chemical alchemy. It's finger lickingly good. But what is it made from? There are no clues on the packet but why should I care?

I send my mother a coupon for a free packet explaining that it takes less than a minute to make. She's a busy primary school headmistress, and Angel Delight could be her answer for speedy puds. I get no thankyou's in her letters back to me and I wonder if she'd say 'it's muck' like she did when I tossed her lettuce, picked fresh from her garden, in French dressing instead of using salad cream.

Today we're making Angel Delight tart for our lesson on Convenience Foods. The class brings in a packet with their choice of flavour – vanilla, chocolate, strawberry and the perfectly scrumptious butterscotch. I've bought some ready baked pastry shells that we'll fill with Angel Delight and sprinkle Hundreds and Thousands on the top. Another new product that comes in loads of bright colours and gives a crunchy, sugary topping to this amazing dish. My mother would be horrified. Staff have collected empty packets and cans that they use at home and left them in my room. My demonstration table is laden with colourful display boxes of Instant Whip, Bird's Chocolate Blancmange powder, a can of Campbell's Condensed Mushroom Soup, Green's Sponge Mix, and a packet of Quick Jel. Then there's the essential convenience stuff from my storeroom - Carnation Evaporated Milk and bottles of Heinz Salad Cream and Tomato Ketchup.

I hold up the cardboard carton of Vesta Beef Curry that Mrs Smith said was her favourite. It still has a whiff of exotic spices.

'Class, this lesson's all about using convenience foods to make our lives easier. Mrs Smith says this curry's so quick – just add hot water and it's ready.'

Bert puts his hand up as the rest gather on the stools.

'Miss, me mum says you're supposed to teach us cooking, not opening packets.'

Len mumbles something about not eating foreign food.

'Look! We have to learn about convenience foods for the exam. Angel Delight tart is a perfect convenience food for easy puddings for busy mothers. It saves lots of bother.'

My brain cells scream at the nonsense coming out of my mouth. There is no food yet invented that looks remotely like the creamy, soft foam of butterscotch Angel Delight. It is not a convenient way of inventing anything, just a spectacular triumph on its own. Does it really need to be mixed with milk? Will water do instead or is this part of the Drinka Pinta Milka Day campaign?

I show them how to whip the powder and milk into foamy peaks, then I pile the Angel Delight into the pastry.

'Get going with your tarts then come round for a mark when you are done.'

Len and his group snigger. Ah! It's the tart talk that has made them laugh again.

We're quickly done, which is the point of convenience, and they file past carrying plates of tarts piled with pastel coloured foam. It's a joke giving them a mark for following instructions from a packet of chemicals but they've packed them away and they're off.

It's the end of the school day and I wrap my hands around a warm mug of tea and cut a slice of beige, foam-topped tart. A spoonful of creamy, caramelly froth melts in my mouth. Nutritional value of this pudding – bah humbug! Who cares! Thankyou Mr Food Chemist for this taste sensation.

## End of Sample.

### The history updates

Writing this memoir in 2021, I'm reminded of things that were missing in the seventies. Many homes did not have a telephone - my parents didn't and there wasn't one in the rented flat or bedsit house. There were no mobile phones. It is amazing how we managed any kind of pre-booked social life.

The seventies was a time of change, but financially, times were hard. Britain dithered between imperial and metric - new decimal currency, old weights and measures, distance in miles, the temperature in Fahrenheit. New kitchen equipment was being introduced. Many homes did not have refrigerators. Chest freezers gradually became popular, as did slow cookers, pressure cookers and electric mixers.

Microwave cookers arrived in the late seventies along with the introduction of ready meals and 80% of us use them in our kitchens today. The labels on food products had no list of ingredients, date marks or details of nutritional value. So we couldn't compare the quality of sausages or know the contents of a tin of soup. And we had to guess how old our fresh food was. I was guilty of keeping a very old jug of beaten egg in the fridge to glaze pastries and surprisingly my classes didn't get food poisoning.

The textbooks that we used in school described women and girls doing the cooking, but I had plenty of boys in my classes and it was not fair to use them. A *New Metric Edition of Cooking is Fun* by the Good Housekeeping Institute was printed in 1974 so at least we were cooking in grams and litres. The book, written for students of domestic science, only referred to girls doing the cooking so no progress there.

In 1979 I was asked to write a synopsis for a school food textbook based upon the lessons in this memoir. After sending in three lots of sample scripts, I was commissioned to write my first textbook, *Finding Out About Food* which went on to sell over 120,000 copies.

Based on its success, I started my next book *Food around the World* and for research I visited the diverse groups living in London and explored their authentic recipes. Since that time I have written over seventy textbooks with sales of over a million copies.

These are some history updates from the stories in the book.

### Spag bog

On April 1st 1957, the BBC showed a film of a family harvesting spaghetti from their spaghetti tree. Many people believed the hoax was true and as we didn't know that spaghetti was made from wheat and water as it was not an everyday food in the 1950s. People asked the BBC for advice on how to grow the spaghetti tree and were told to put a sprig of spaghetti in a tin of tomato sauce.

### Boys don't cook

The Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 meant that boys and girls had equal access to all subjects in schools and equal opportunities when choosing practical subjects. However, studies showed that boys were discouraged from taking the subject by their teachers, peers and parents.

In a report on '*Gender roles and the curriculum boys and home economics*' published in 1983, Susan Johnne criticised the strong female bias of the home economics textbooks and questions set for the exams. Her report showed how boys changed their minds when they discovered that so many girls took the subject and that it was considered cissy to cook.

In 1981 only 7% of boys were entered for exams in domestic subjects.

Teachers at the time were not allowed to set their own home economics practical tests despite the multicultural mix in many cities.

Here are some exam questions from the time that reinforce the role of the woman as cook, caterer and cleaner for her husband and family. Remember, these questions were given to boys and girls for their practical and theory exam and I had to persuade them that it was old fashioned, and things would change!

#### Practical exam questions

1. Your brother and a friend are playing football. Prepare, cook and serve a substantial meal for them on their return home. You are all going out for the evening. Iron the shirt your brother will wear and sponge and press either the skirt or trousers that you will wear.
2. Your father and brother are going fishing for the day. Launder your father's sweater. Leave to dry and press it if it dries in time. Make some meat pasties or pies and pack up with salad and fruit and a flask of coffee for their picnic meal. Cook and serve a substantial two course dinner ready for their return.

#### Theory exam questions

1. Suggest two dinners for a housewife who does her own cooking and shopping. a) a dinner cooked quickly on her return from shopping, b) a dinner which can mainly be left cooking while she is out.

In 2019 the GCSE entries for Food Preparation and Nutrition, Home Economics and Hospitality and Catering were 18506 Male, 35063 Female = 34% Male 66% Female so it's changed a bit!

#### Wearing trousers

In the 1970s the dress code for women teachers in the London region did not allow us to wear trousers at work. We wore skirts or dresses with tights or stockings - bare legs were only allowed if you taught PE. In 1969, when Mick Jagger married Bianca, she wore a trouser suit - a shocking new fashion choice! I too chose a trouser suit for my going away outfit after my wedding, which my family also found strange.

#### She who ran away

These are examples of the things I left outside my cookery room for people to take.

Now on sale on eBay as vintage kitchen equipment - iron griddle pan, £40; French aluminium fish kettle £40; 12 hole bun tin £16; 4 cream horn tins £40; mince pie tin £20.

#### What's in a name?

Nigel Slater in his memoir *Toast – The Story of a Boy's Hunger* – seemed frustrated that his domestic science teacher Miss Adams took so long to teach him cooking. He was part of the name change when cookery became home economics, and his teacher praised his Victoria Sandwich which 'rose like a dream' and had a perfect 'crumb'.

In 1990 the subject changed its name to Food Technology. This meant students had to learn about the industrial production of food products and make a food product that could be sold to a target group.

In 2020 the names began to change again. My 2021 Survey of Food Teachers found that 62% wanted to call their subject food and nutrition, 33% were calling it food, 2% home economics, 2% hospitality and 1% food technology so the confusion carries on.

#### Discipline matters

Caning was abolished in 1987 in UK state schools.

A survey of ILEA schools in 1976-1977 showed that one in five girls was caned at least once that year.

Teachers still have legal powers to use reasonable force to remove disruptive students.

## Going metric

### Timeline for decimalization and metrication

1971 British currency decimalised. A Government campaign to prepare the public for change.

1971 London schools adopt the metric system.

1973 UK enters EEC and commits to adopting the metric system.

1974 Metric system taught in all British schools. Metric packaging begins.

1979 The Conservative Government under Margaret Thatcher abolishes the Metrication Board.

1980 Most Commonwealth countries have completed metric conversion. Britain lags behind.

1995 All packaged goods sold in Britain have to be labelled in metric units.

2021 Milk and beer are still sold in pints.

My research with the Guild of Food Writers found that we are the only country that produces recipe books with measurements in metric and imperial units - 50 years after schools changed to metric! Both Britain and the USA have yet to complete the changeover.

Many of the students I was teaching from the 1970s would be over sixty years old so most of the population must have discovered metric measures by now!

Years later during a cooking class, a student asked me 'What does oz mean?' I thought he meant Australia, but no, he was using a recipe with the old imperial system.

## Acknowledgements

This memoir has taken fifteen years to write and COVID lockdown gave me time to complete. I'd like to thank Eleanor Fox, Sue Goodchild, Janet and Bryan Stuart who have patiently read the sections as they emerge from my dusty computer and offered encouragement and advice. Many friends have shared memories of London fashions, restaurants, reminded me of what we ate and the challenges of teaching.

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Google provides many insights and research for fact checking at a time when travel has been so limited, so thankyou to all the organisations and people that post. Marguerite Patten's book, *Cookery in Colour* was my bible when I was learning to cook and I visited her at home for tea and to check on my cooking facts. Why did we use fluted and plain flan rings, which d'oyley was correct, why the figure of eight to fold in flour? Such daft questions when there was so much to ask her.

I'd like to thank the students, whose names have all been changed for this book. One of them met me in the maternity ward of Whipps Cross hospital when we were both giving birth and said 'Hello Miss'. I corrected her - there were nurses listening. 'It's Mrs, now.' Even in the 1970s it was important for me to be married when I had children. How times have changed.

Thankyou to all the food teachers who are working so hard at teaching the next generation of students how to cook.

Simon Ridgwell, my son designed the cover and helped with techie stuff and advice. His most important tip was to get on and write to the best of my ability. Simon designed the Nutrition Program which is used by hundreds of schools.

And finally to Mark. We went through a blip in 1972 which was the year of this memoir, and he never knew about the other men in this story.

To quote Charlotte Bronte's famous line from Jane Eyre - 'Reader I married him' so it worked out in the end. Mark died in 2018 and he supported me for over fifty years when I was teaching in London schools, writing my textbooks, starting a business training food teachers around the country and producing resources and internet sites for food education. One of his favourite dishes was Stuffed Lambs Hearts from my Awful Offal lesson which he really enjoyed when I tested the recipe for this book.

Jenny Ridgwell 2021

## Summary

In 1970, I started teaching cooking in a north London comprehensive school, determined to share my passion for learning about food but I was faced with two mighty challenges. Firstly, keeping classroom discipline and secondly, the frustration of teaching out of date cooking skills with a large and diverse group of students. Exams tested traditional British baking skills and used textbooks written to train girls to become housewives.

After two years I became head of department in an east London comprehensive school and at twenty three I wanted to run things my way. It was the first time boys were allowed to choose cookery in my school and as the new teacher my register included students that no-one else wanted to teach.

Exams were the driving force and we worked through the seasons and preserved apples and onions in the autumn, made Christmas cakes, Seville orange marmalade in January, and prepared the first pink rhubarb in early spring. Shrove Tuesday was pancake day and the boys guffawed at learning the skill of tossing. They would josh and tease at the many rude words we had to learn about cooking.

The summer term brought the dreaded practical exam which tested us more than *The Great British Bake Off*. For two and a half hours they cooked a two course meal with all the trimmings, did some baking and for CSE exams carried out outdated tasks like starching and ironing a tray cloth. Their tables were laid with their cooking and an array of crockery, cruets sets, sauce boats and a flower arrangement. And they followed the d'oyley rule - plain d'oyleys for savoury and frilly for sweet. Behind the scenes my private life was crumbling. Newly single, I moved into a dismal Hampstead bedsit and friends set about getting me off the shelf. At twenty three I was considered old to be looking for a partner. London was a playground for young people and there were plenty of food markets, wine bars, inexpensive restaurants and newly opened fashion shops to feast on.

This is a story of a memorable year starting in September 1972 and it's also a piece of social history. Life in Britain and especially London was changing fast. The seventies was a time of unrest and financial challenge for many and our food choices were changing with so many new ingredients like avocados and Angel Delight. It was the last year that students could leave at Easter when they reached sixteen so some left school with no qualifications and I wonder how they managed with nothing to prove what they could achieve - this made them challenging to teach! Many people supported me along the way and I'd like to thank family and friends, and especially my grandmother who spent so much time with me sharing the joy of preparing fruits and vegetables from her garden.

The cookery exams at the time drove me mad as the questions were written for girls and housewives and I railed against the exam boards to change. Eventually I became a chief examiner and was able to set my own questions and curriculum.

The textbooks we used had astonishing facts that no-one seems to have checked - vegetarian food was described as difficult to prepare and missing the flavours of meat and fish. They had to learn stuff like which sauce to serve with lamb or beef which in multicultural London made no sense. Most of the lessons that I taught became part of a new textbook commissioned by Oxford University Press, called *Finding Out About Food*. My editor wanted to include some daft things I'd taught like rolling an egg on the floor to see how it came back and we had recipes like spaghetti bolognese made with tomato ketchup. *Food Around the World* was my next school textbook so I was able to research many recipes and stories from the mixed communities where I'd taught. My passion for food continues and I set up my own company training food teachers in the ever-changing challenges of education. Since 1980 I've written over seventy textbooks and set up The Nutrition Program which students use to analyse recipes, diets and meals.

Jenny Ridgwell 2021

## A review from Christine Thompson

I have known Jenny since the 1990s through my work as a Food Adviser/Inspector for a large County and worked closely with Jenny on her many successful courses. On my visits to schools at this time her textbooks and courses were the main source that teachers grew on for inspiration in their teaching. I regularly met secondary heads of food departments after school to discuss updates and many travelled miles to come to share experiences and ideas. If they knew Jenny would be there, whole departments would voluntarily attend. When Jenny was writing new material she was keen to capture the teachers' opinion before publication and many trialled her work giving her detailed evaluation of their findings which she listened to and took on board.

One of her many successes has been the development of the Nutrition Program for schools. It's ease of use on schools IT networks was at the forefront of technology. Jenny is held in high regard by teachers and students not only in this country but around the world. Her books are still being printed and used and she continues to work on new material and updated earlier editions.

The experience Jenny gained teaching Food subjects in the 1970s led her to challenge the thinking of the establishment at that time by writing modern textbooks and involving herself with the Examination Boards. Within a short period of time she became a chief examiner. She went on to inspire and influence change when food education was not given the respect it deserved. It was based on outdated ideas of a past age.

Since then she has continued to publish many textbooks and successfully run courses for teachers round the country based on meticulous research ensuring that every detail was based on evidence.

Teachers and students have a lot to thank Jenny for her lifelong dedication to Education.

Christine Thompson Hampshire Inspector for Design and Technology from 1992 - 1998  
Ofsted Inspector for Design and Technology 1995 - 2007

Christine Thompson is a great supporter of food education, and inspired and helped me run many training courses for food education around the country.



As a young teacher in the 1970s Jenny starts a job in an east London comprehensive school teaching cooking. London bursts with diverse food cultures, but students must study for old fashioned exams learning about baking cakes, invalid cooking, how to starch tray cloths and presenting meals using the right d'oyleys. It's a time when boys take cooking lessons for the first time and they love teasing about rude cooking terms but don't want to bring their ingredients into school in shopping baskets.

Meanwhile there's chaos in her personal life. She moves into a dismal bedsit and sets off to discover the food markets and new London eating places. Friends and family are frantic for her to get off the shelf - an essential requirement for a twenty three year old.



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