

A Time of Innocence

At first, I was pleased with my attempt at a potager, but now the brassicas have been nibbled to lace, and the runner beans haven't set. The courgettes, however, keep coming. Every morning I am greeted with another half-dozen small torpedoes.

Wondering what to do with this quantity of summer squashes, I suddenly remembered a Greek dish that I encountered in 1964 whilst undertaking the then obligatory hitchhiking expedition for anyone in possession of a kaftan and/or goatskin coat and desire to see the world. It was a time of innocence.

'Little Shoes'

1 kilo of small to medium courgettes

170g grated cheese

3 chopped onions

1 tbsp chopped parsley 3 eggs

90g breadcrumb 60g butter

500ml Béchamel sauce and seasoning

Cook the onions in a little water until soft. Add butter, parsley, cheese, breadcrumbs and two beaten eggs. Season. Top and tail the courgettes and cook in boiling salted water until soft but still firm. Cool and drain. Split lengthwise, remove some of the pulp, put a spoonful of the filling in each one and place in a baking dish. Add a beaten egg to your Béchamel sauce and pour on top. Sprinkle with grated cheese and bake in a hot oven until golden. Adapt the filling at will.

The rediscovery of this recipe led me to dig out my battered 1960s copy of Elizabeth David's *French Provincial Cooking*. David had discovered a courgette soufflé commonly served in French roadside cafés, rather different to the greasy egg, sausage and beans served up in catts over here at that time. I remember admiring the gastronomic

sophistication of French truckies. In England we'd only just become acquainted with yoghurt, spaghetti was the only pasta available, French sticks were a novelty, and no one knew what to do with an avocado except to apply the name to sanitary ware.

We are all middle class now, and happily stick carrots in cakes, forgetting that it was a necessity when sugar was rationed. Courgette cake is the new carrot cake and recipes abound; Nigel Slater does a good one, but Nigella Lawson's is my favourite. I soon discovered jams, chutneys, pies, quiches and fritters and that peeled and sliced thinly lengthways, courgettes make instant vegetable 'pasta', when introduced briefly to boiling water.

Courgette Soufflé

3 or 4 sliced courgettes

4 egg whites

2 egg yolks

125 ml milk

30g butter

5 tbsp grated Parmesan

2 tbsp flour

2 ramekins

Oven 170C, gas 4, 350F

Butter the ramekins. Place the sliced courgettes in a frying pan with a tablespoon of water and cook gently until soft. Sieve to create a puree. Drain off excess moisture. Make a very thick Béchamel sauce with the butter, flour and milk. Add the courgette puree, egg yolks and grated Parmesan. Mix together and season well. Whisk the egg whites until stiff. Fold them into the courgette mixture with a metal spoon. Divide the mixture between the ramekins, place them in a tray of water and cook for 15 to 25 minutes. You should have a creamy, gooey centre. Can also be baked in a large soufflé dish, but adjust the cooking time.

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