



[Monday 26th December 2011](#)

Dear Customer

I hope you had a nice Christmas and are continuing to enjoy some rest and relaxation before the New Year starts. 'Fat chance', I hear you say. Rest and relaxation don't suit me, I prefer to be busy. The less time I have to think, the better. Today is Boxing Day and it has made me wonder if this is what 'retirement' looks like. Boxing Day over and over again until you pop your clogs. I'm sorry it's the time of year – too much reflection. The good news is that the days are now lengthening by 2 minutes a day. Two minutes a day doesn't sound much but 14 minutes a week does. A lot can be done in 14 minutes. Whenever I go into the garden, it is just before the sun goes down on the afternoon or evening before the fortnightly green bin collection. Rather than pottering and gently nurturing the plants and crumbling the soils, I go into a frenzy of weed pulling and dead-heading to make sure the bin is crammed full in time ..... and it always ends badly. I get stung by a wasp or stinging nettles or I get bitten by another insect, or I think I do and that's just as bad. The other day there was a twig sticking out of the apple tree which I didn't see and I walked into it with my eye ball. When I was in London it was really reassuring as most people just don't bother with their gardens, they haven't got time. My brother's garden is a free-for-all for weeds and bits of old rubbish that blow in. You could see there had been some pot activity over the summer but they now just had bits of brown mush in them. I poked my head over to see his neighbour's garden – even worse. A professor in the nearby National Physical Laboratory, what a mess. There were old black bin bags, a staircase choked with moss and weeds. She hadn't been out there for years.

I am allowed to say this now that it's over, but I hate Christmas. Even when my parents were alive I found it too sad to bear – the clock ticking away relentlessly. I think it's only dawning on me now that I had an unusual family. When I was little I would go up to bed and my sister would beckon me into her room and start on at me about the universe and the meaning of life. I was only about 6 and her 4 years older. She'd eventually let me go to bed at 3am and I'd then lie awake thinking about mortality and infinity. I would come down for breakfast to eat either dry bread or a pancake which is all I could manage and a glass of water. As I sprinkled the sugar on my pancake my dad would tell me that the only difference between sucrose and fructose was the angle that light refracted through the molecules – or something like that. He would laugh – he thought the world was incredible and nature's ironies. The world was incredible and fascinating to him until the day he died.

I'm sure I did have toys, lots of them, but I can't remember them. All I can remember are IQ tests and dad counting down the seconds on his watch – three, two, one, GO. And I was off, arranging the building blocks, the sequences of patterns. And my

wonderful, loving mother - 'my darling, you can do and be anything you want'. I remember how strongly she emphasized this to me. It's incredible isn't it that we can spend a lifetime piecing together why we are what we are.

I hate the post-Christmas feigning of 'yes, I had a lovely Christmas thank you' when you've spent it on your own and the only visit you've paid is to your soul. I did get some invites – my brother, my friend in Exmoor, my cousin in Ireland but I couldn't face the packing, the preparations, the present buying and the long drives, so stuck it out on my own. I scraped some semblance of Christmas together – got a little tree, made a little chestnut roast, chopped some parsnips, stripped a sprout stalk and made a bit of mash. I watched Happy Feet. I had half an M and S Chocolate Swiss Roll and some cheesy puffs for tea and watched Downton and Eastenders. I got through it.

My dear cousin married a Guinness and I remember years ago when I first went to see them in their winged, Georgian mansion near Dublin, it was near Christmas and I arrived bearing gifts. I didn't know what to get their children - creatures related to every monarch of Europe. I tried to remind myself they had as many genes in them from my Welsh Grandmother ( Grans ) as they had from Diana Mitford, but it didn't work. In my brilliance, I remember buying for one of them, a little naval Christian Dior dress – do you remember that photo of the Tsar of Russia's children before their execution by the Bolsheviks ? Well it was one of those dresses. In hindsight, fit only for a pseudo-Victorian porcelain doll. I arrived to find these super-trendy, normal little girls. I'm such an idiot. Her husband told me he had family who 'farmed' in these ( northern) parts. Very strange, I thought, that he should be related to some 'by gum' Yorkshire farmers. It only dawned on me weeks later – Duke and Duchess of Devonshire – Chatsworth. How would I know, my family worked and educated their way out of the sculleries and the pits.

Anyway, back to the practicalities of living and cooking. It is celeriac week and here are a few recipes you could try:

### **Oven-Roasted Roots Frittata**

*600g mixed roots eg onions, celeriac, carrots, parsnips, beetroot, potatoes*

*1 large clove garlic*

*3 tbsp olive oil*

*8 medium eggs*

*handful mixed herbs eg chives, parsley, thyme – finely chopped*

*20g Parmesan or other hard cheese, grated*

*sea salt and freshly ground black pepper*

*Preheat the oven to 190C/ Gas 5. Thickly slice onions if using, peel the carrots and cut into 5mm slices. Peel celeriac, beetroot and parsnip if using and cut into 1-2cm cubes. Cut potatoes into 1-2cm cubes. Put all the veg in an oven-proof dish about 23cm square. Add the garlic, oil and plenty of salt and pepper and toss well. Roast for about 40 minutes, stirring halfway through until the veg are tender and starting to caramelize in places. Beat the eggs together with the chopped herbs and add some more salt and pepper. Take the dish from the oven, pour the egg evenly over the veg and scatter over the grated cheese. Return to the oven for 10-15 minutes until the*

*egg is all set and the top is starting to colour. Leave to cool slightly, then slide out the frittata onto a plate or board. Serve warm or cold.*

### **Celeriac with Apple, Raisins and Parsley**

*200g peeled celeriac  
1 eating apple  
50g raisins  
handful flat-leaf parsley*

#### **Dressing:**

*1 tsp mustard  
1 tsp sugar  
1 tbsp cider vinegar  
2 tbsp sunflower oil  
Salt and pepper*

*For the dressing, shake all the ingredients together in a screw-topped jar to emulsify. Cut the celeriac into matchstick-sized pieces. Transfer directly to the bowl of dressing so they don't brown. Peel, quarter, core and thinly slice the apple and add to the salad with the raisins. Taste and adjust seasoning. Serve straight away or leave for an hour or so allow celeriac to soften slightly. Toss in the parsley just before serving.*

### **Leek and Cheese Toastie**

*15g butter or margarine  
50g strong Cheddar, grated  
2 medium leeks, the white and pale green part only – washed and sliced  
3 tbsp double cream  
2 thick slices robust bread  
salt and pepper*

*Melt the butter or margarine in a small frying pan over a medium heat and add the leeks. As soon as they are sizzling, turn the heat down quite low and sweat gently, stirring often, for about 10 minutes. Stir in the cream and cook for a minute or two until the cream is bubbling. Take off the heat and stir in two-thirds of the cheese and add salt and pepper to taste. Preheat the grill. Toast the bread lightly. Spread the leek mixture thickly over the bread and top with the remaining grated cheese. Grill until bubbling and golden and serve straight away.*

Hope you have a lovely continuing break,

Kindest wishes,



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