

Monday 14^h January 2013

Dear Customer,

Hello ! It's Sunday, I am writing this with one eye out the window, waiting for the snow.... due any time. I got stocked up with provisions this afternoon – heaven knows what is coming. It is disconcerting and brought to mind the 26th April 1986, looking out my window over London, waiting for radioactive particles to start fluttering down after the Chernobyl disaster. I had a birds-eye view over London – top floor flat at the top of a hill. We were advised to keep our windows shut. It was terrifying. In the UK a total of 10,000 farms were affected and until all restrictions were lifted in June last year, there were still 334 Welsh and 8 Cumbrian farms whose livestock were having to be regularly tested for radiation poisoning from contaminated land.

We have red onion squash in the bags this week, spring greens, cucumbers and plum cherry tomatoes. Purple Haze carrots are in again. One might think they are newcomers but they actually pre-date orange carrots by over 3000 years. There are drawings of purple carrots in ancient Egyptian temples. Until the Dutch breeders produced orange ones in the 17th Century – wild carrots had been purple, white, red or yellow. The purple ones not only contain the vitamin A and beta-carotene of orange carrots, but they are also rich in anthocyanins, the antioxidant which gives blueberries their distinctive colour. These blue and purple pigments are thought to enhance vision, memory, control weight and protect against heart attacks ! You could grate them with orange ones, add a vinaigrette, some seeds and raisins for a colourful salad. You could slice them, drizzle with olive oil and sprinkle with thyme and roast them, which enhances their sweetness. Here are a few recipes you could try with this week's ingredients:

Panade a perfect winter dish

8 tbsp olive oil	4 medium onions, finely sliced
2 cloves garlic, peeled and chopped	salt and freshly ground black pepper
600g spring greens, cut in 1 cm strips	300g slightly stale bread, cut in 2cm cubes
175g grated Gruyere, or other hard cheese	500ml hot vegetable stock

Heat half the oil in a large saucepan over a medium heat and add the onions. When they are sizzling turn to a low heat, cover the pan and cook gently for half an hour stirring occasionally until very soft and golden. Add the garlic and some salt and pepper halfway through cooking. Heat the oven to 180C/350F/Gas 4. Meanwhile steam or boil the spring greens until just tender. Put the cubed bread in a large bowl with the remaining oil and more seasoning and mix well. Take a shallow oven dish and spread a third of the cooked onion over the base, followed by a third of the bread then a third of the cheese, then half the cabbage. Repeat these layers finishing with the final onions, bread and cheese. Make sure the stock is piping hot and pour it over the dish, allowing it to soak into the bread. Cover with foil and bake for 30 minutes, remove and bake for 30 minutes more until golden brown and bubbling. Remove from the oven and let settle for 10 minutes before serving.

Tuscan-Style Roasted Squash

1 squash	1 dried red chilli
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper	handful of sage
1 stick cinnamon, broken in to pieces	olive oil

Preheat the oven to 180C/350F/Gas 4. Halve the squash, remove and reserve the seeds, the cut squash into slices or chunks with the skin on. With a pestle and mortar, or an improvisation of one, bash up the dried chilli with a pinch of salt. Add the sage leaves, the cinnamon pieces and enough olive oil to loosen the mixture. Rub the whole lot over the squash pieces so they are well covered. Place the squash in one layer in a roasting tray and season lightly with salt and pepper. Sprinkle over the seeds, cover tightly with tin foil and bake for 30 minutes, or until the skin of the squash is soft. Then, remove the foil and cook for another 10 minutes until the squash is golden crisp. Remove the cinnamon and serve.

Squash and Raisin Tea Loaf

200g light muscovado sugar	4 large eggs, separated
200g finely grated raw squash flesh	finely grated zest and juice of 1 lemon
100g raisins	100g ground almonds
200g self-raising flour	pinch salt
1 tsp ground cinnamon	grating of nutmeg

Heat the oven to 170C/335F/Gas 3 and line a 10cm x 20cm loaf tin with baking parchment. Use an electric whisk to beat the sugar and egg yolks for 2-3 minutes, until pale and creamy. Lightly stir in the pumpkin, lemon zest and juice, raisins and almonds. Combine the flour, salt and spices, sift these in, then fold them in. Beat the egg whites until they hold soft peaks. Beat a heaped tablespoonful of egg white into the batter to loosen it, then fold in the rest as gently as

you can. Tip into the prepared tin and level the top. Bake for about an hour, until a skewer comes out clean. Leave to cool for 10 minutes in the tin, then transfer to a wire rack to cool completely before slicing.

I'm worried about Ernest – he hasn't recovered any affection for the sheep – in fact, it's worse. He told me that he just sees them as monsters now. I know he has been absorbed by the Dickens I gave him for Christmas. Surely David Copperfield hasn't done this to him....or Pickwick Papers.....or maybe it has. For any newcomers to farmaround, Ernest, 63, has been looking after my sheep for the last 7 years. He was a Dales farmer but with a difference – very sensitive and a lover of classical music. He hadn't read a book since leaving school or ever been further than 15 miles from Richmond in his life. I started giving him books to read – the classics, which he devoured. He particularly fell for the Russians - Tolstoy, Dostoevsky etc. When I had to go away for business reasons he often came with me. It was a joy for me to show him parts of the country he never thought he would visit. He is now widely recognised in the area from having appeared on TV and having done countless interviews. He was even recognised in Exmoor. He says that it has changed his life. But he can't cope with the sheep any more and I am proactively trying to find someone else to look after them and a new home for them. It is proving very difficult. I spent 3 days on the internet, looking for a small farm to rent or grazing and found nothing whatsoever in the whole country. My friend Helen, the night I told her of my problems, found a solution in a dream. She was cooking – chopping up vegetables then cut open a clove of garlic and inside it was a country estate.

Kind wishes,

Isobel