

Monday 28th April 2014

Dear Customer,

The geraniums are dead and the fog is still here. Sometimes it is hot fog and sometimes very cold fog and you can't tell by just looking at it – it's only when you've been out in it for 10 minutes. Ten minutes too late for the right coat. I hope your weather treats you better.

Here is a great soup recipe you could try with this week's swiss chard

Red Lentil and Chard Soup

500g split red lentils	2.5 litres cold water
2 medium onions	2 tbsp olive oil
200g swiss chard	50g coriander leaves
2 tsp ground cumin	1 tsp ground cinnamon
1 tbsp coriander seeds	3 garlic cloves, crushed
50g butter or margarine	grated zest of ½ lemon
4 lemons cut into wedges	salt and black pepper

Wash the lentils in cold water and bring to the boil in a large saucepan with the 2.5 litres water. Simmer for 35 minutes, or until soft. Skim off any scum that rises to the surface. Then, using a slotted spoon remove half the lentils from the cooking liquid and set aside in a bowl. Add a pinch of salt to the lentil and water in the pan and liquidise using a blender or whizzer. Return the reserved lentils to the soup. Peel the onions, halve them and thinly slice them. Place a frying pan over a medium heat, add the olive oil and onions and cook, stirring occasionally for 4-5 minutes, until the onions soften and become translucent. Meanwhile chop off the stems of the chard and reserve them for another dish. Chop the leaves roughly and do the same with the coriander. Mix the cooked onions, chard leaves and coriander into the lentil soup and season with the cumin, cinnamon and salt and pepper to taste. Reheat the soup and simmer gently for 5 minutes. Using a pestle and mortar crush the coriander seeds and garlic together. Melt the butter and margarine in a small saucepan over a medium heat, add the garlic and coriander seeds and fry for 2 minutes until the garlic starts to colour slightly. Stir this into the soup, remove the pot from the stove and cover with a lid. Leave to infuse for 5 minutes before serving. Serve garnished with lemon zest and coriander leaves and some good bread. Make sure everyone squeezes their lemon into their soup !

I have never known the Dales to be so busy. There are Tour de France cyclists whizzing about everywhere, practicing the route, and a million and one walkers. I can look the part, I have the boots and dishevelled hair as I mill about in Reeth seeking out refreshments but I generally won't have walked very far – not relatively. Everyone eyes each other up wondering which peaks they've just come off, or whether they're mid-way through the Coast to Coast, how many miles they'd covered. Well today, I felt part of the club. I think I did 100 miles. I did one circuit – a huge loop along the river then up, up, up onto the moors at Fremington Edge, a long way along and then down again. When we reached the car I felt we had it in us, me and Myfa so we set off on a second big loop onto the moors at the other side of the river. At the point of no return, midway round, my legs turned to jelly and I thought I'd had it. We were at least 500 yards from civilisation. At moments like this I conjure up Gary my dog-fur supplier in Greenland, the Arctic explorer. When he faces possible catastrophe, a snowstorm, in minus 40, thousands of miles from the nearest Inuit camp. He says "you just keep walking". It does work actually, you just keep walking.

I had to take my car for its MOT this week. I have had the car for one year and I still haven't seen under the bonnet. I wouldn't know how to open it. I can't believe there's still squirt in the wipers – that will be crunch time. Anyway, it passed its MOT but the girl said she had to make me aware that the brake pipes were corroded and that they were just .7mm thick and that they could pop. I asked her how thick they should be and she said .7mm. She said they should be ok until the next MOT. I asked her what happened when they popped, would I lose the brakes? 'Yes' she said, unconcerned. I told her I was thinking of driving to the South of France imminently and didn't want them to 'pop' on the autoroute. She went off to have a chat with the mechanic. They could do them next week at a special price of £1400. I could do without that little dilemma - will they pop or not.

A friend has invited me down to her house in the Languedoc. She has just sold her place in Bath and is relocating all her animals and belongings down there with the intention of commuting back to work. Such faith has she in Ryan Air. This isn't the 'Fifty Shades of Grey' one, which for me incidentally, is the North Sea. This is my friend who is a clinical psychologist. She's great, she's very academic and has written a lot of important papers and is good company. It's just that she has a disturbing 'foible' – she visits a spiritualist and believes that through the medium, her dead donkey speaks to her. I don't challenge her on it, I politely go along with it even though it causes me some discomfort. Well anyway, who I am to say the dead donkey doesn't.

I love rural France, but to drive through and to have picnic stops in, but not as a destination. It's too spooky. As far as I am concerned, all French roads lead to the Riviera. When I go away, I always have to keep working, she said there is an internet connection in some house or other in her village! I don't know whether to go down or not. I was also going to spend a week sharing a villa with another friend on the 'Corniche des Iles d'Or'. We planned it weeks ago, then we decided we wouldn't, then we would, then we wouldn't, then we would, then we wouldn't. Each cancelling it alternately. The latest is that we will.

I have got Myfa her leishmaniosis collar and checked our passports. I have pre-travel neurosis. I'm worried about being carjacked. As a result I have been avoiding washing the car so it is as filthy as possible to travel down in. The garage wanted to wash it, I said "please don't". I don't want it glinting in the sun at French bandits with it's shiny GB number plates. I don't care about my possessions or my car, though it would be inconvenient, I am terrified of them taking Myfa and chucking her out on the autoroute south of Lyon. Everything about the trip is making me anxious. I find it so hard to extricate myself from Richmond, but when I do, I go for a long time. When I go to the South of France, I never want to come home. It's just getting there !

I hope all is well with you,

Kind wishes,

