

Monday 2nd March 2020

Dear Customer,

Blimey, these winds are wearing. Not good for dog walking. The lower ground is knee-deep in mud, and on the tops you get blown to bits battling the elements. It's invariably the latter for the main dog walk of the day.

In these freak and worrisome times, here are a few tasty recipes you could try:

Chard with Raisins and Pine Nuts

4 tbsp raisins	4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
2 onions, finely sliced	4 garlic cloves, finely sliced
1 tbsp tomato purée	4 tbsp red wine vinegar
1½ tbsp caster sugar	bunch swiss chard, stems cut into 3cm lengths, leaves roughly torn
3 tbsp pine nuts	

Put the raisins in a small heatproof bowl, cover with boiling water and leave to stand for 10 minutes. Drain, reserving 5 tbsp of the soaking liquid and set aside. Heat 2 tbsp olive oil in a large frying pan over a medium heat. Add the onion and garlic, plus a pinch of salt, and sweat gently for 15-20 minutes, stirring often, until soft but not brown. When the onions are soft, stir in the tomato purée, vinegar, sugar, raisins and reserved soaking liquid. Bubble away for 2-3 minutes or so, until the juices thicken. Remove from the heat, season generously, then put to one side. Meanwhile, cook the chard stems in a saucepan of boiling salted water for 5 minutes. Drain well and add to the onion mixture. Return to the heat with the chard leaves and pine nuts, stirring for 2-3 minutes, or until the leaves have just wilted. Splash with the remaining 2 tbsp olive oil before serving.

Chard with Chickpeas and Mint

1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil, plus extra to drizzle	1 onion, finely chopped
2 garlic cloves, finely chopped	1 pinch chilli flakes
bunch swiss chard	2 tbsp tomato purée
75ml dry white wine	400g tin chickpeas, drained and rinsed
¼ lemon, juice	handful mint leaves

Heat the oil, add the onion, garlic, and chilli flakes. Season and sweat for 5 minutes. Roughly tear the chard leaves and cut the stems into 1cm lengths. Add the chard stems to the pan and cook for another 5 minutes. Stir in the tomato purée, cook for 1 minute; add the wine and bubble until reduced. Add the chickpeas, chard leaves and 150ml water. Season, then cover and cook for 5 minutes. Add the lemon juice and all but a few mint leaves. Serve, with mint leaves, a splash more olive oil, and couscous.

Broccoli Pasta Bake

225g dried penne pasta	head of broccoli, cut into florets
salt and freshly ground black pepper	25g pine kernels, toasted
For the Cheese Sauce:	
25g butter	2 tbsp plain flour
600ml organic semi-skimmed Milk	1 tbsp wholegrain mustard
175g mature organic Cheddar cheese, grated	

Preheat the oven to 200°C/ Gas 6. First make the cheese sauce by melting the butter in a saucepan and stirring in the flour. Cook for about 1 minute then remove from the heat. Whisk in the milk a little at a time until the sauce is smooth. Bring to the boil and continue cooking for a further minute or until the sauce has thickened, stirring all the time. Remove from the heat and stir in the mustard and half the grated cheese until melted and smooth. Season to taste. Bring a large pan of lightly salted water to the boil. Add the pasta and cook according to the pack instructions. About 5 minutes before the pasta is ready add the broccoli florets to the pan. Drain the pasta and broccoli together and shake off excess water. Arrange in a 2 -litre gratin dish and pour over the cheese sauce. To toast the pine kernels place on a baking tray under a hot preheated grill, until just starting to change colour. Sprinkle with the toasted pine kernels and remaining cheese. Bake for about 15 minutes until golden and bubbling.

After much deliberation 'shall I, shan't I, shall I, shan't I', I placed a massive stockpile of a Waitrose order to be delivered on Tuesday. I pity the delivery driver and hope no neighbours will be looking out the window when it arrives. It's going into builder's rubble bags then will be hauled into the spare bedroom. Pastas, grains, flour and yeast, toilet rolls, PG Tips, Marmite, cornflakes, almond milk, tinned this, tinned that, tons of chocolate for zinc and iron, a few months' worth of biscuits for anxiety. Every hour the picture changes, looks more worrying. And that they have no understanding of this virus at all. It's a shame my brother sold his remote house on Alston Moor two years ago. In 'England's last great wilderness', it was our notional 'go-to' place for war, pestilence and famine.

I don't know what more there is to say on this Monday morning. Eating plenty of fruit and vegetables, wholegrains, nuts and pulses will help boost our immune systems. Getting some sunshine on our faces, if any there's any to be had, will boost our vitamin D levels which boosts immunity. Exercise, and fresh air if we can find any. I've ordered face masks for me here and for our drivers, and hand sanitisers.

I'm not going to start wearing a mask yet but I will definitely be wrapping a scarf, a very long one, round and round my nose and mouth when in shops and out on the street as the virus hangs in moist air, and then wash it when I get home. It is definitely better than going out with a naked face.

Let's hope the government's attempt at 'containment' works. Their number one priority is to keep us all safe, being merely reactive and taking no preventative measures whatsoever makes me furious. I would shut everything down except essential services and immediately stop all international travel. Millions of people's lives are at stake. Spare a thought for the elderly and the ones with underlying health conditions, they have lives they want to live and families and friends who love them, however tempting it might be to solve the social care, NHS and housing pressures in one fell swoop.

Sending my best wishes,

Isobel