Monday 4ᵗʰ January 2021

Dear Customer,

I hope you're well and managed to have some semblance of a good Christmas. At least we made it and here we are in 2021.
It's perhaps not the perfect start to the New Year but it's our New Year. We've been through the wringer haven't we.

I have never ever seen so many people walking past my house, thousands of them including multi-generational family groups of up to 10 and 15 people, all back for Christmas, all ignoring tiers and restrictions, all wearing bobble hats. My lane is very scenic and normally I love seeing the walkers out appreciating the views. But it reached a crescendo this weekend after the snow fell, there was mayhem. Twelve men from the Swaledale Mountain Rescue arrived and an ambulance after a sledging incident, and someone got stretchered away. A neighbour sped past on his skis then hit the tarmac saying he'd lost control. Dogs and children, sledges and snowmen, all life was here, in this perfect Bruegel wintry scene.

There was an ONS survey in the summer, Richmondshire people were the happiest in the country. A pandemic becomes them it seems. Their joy heightened in August when the petrol station at the bottom of the road burst into flames. I have never seen them look so elated. I was coming back from seeing the sheep and got caught in the cordoned off roadblock. The whole town had descended to watch it burn, they were filming it gleefully, chatting, musing about whether or not the staff were still inside. Descendants of the same crowds who would have once flocked up Gallowfields Road on a Sunday morning to watch the petty criminals being hung to death. You can take the man out of the 15th Century but you can't take the 15th Century out of the man.
Noone died. Rumour has it that it that a mini Morrisons petrol station will rise from the rubble.

Here are some tasty recipes you could try this week:

Beetroot Falafel

1 tbsp olive oil, plus extra for brushing	1 onion, chopped
2 cloves garlic, chopped	2 tsp ground cumin
250g beetroot, cooked	400g tin chickpeas, drained and rinsed
125g breadcrumbs	1 Hen Nation Egg, beaten

Heat the oil in a large frying pan and cook the onion and garlic for 5 minutes until softened. Stir in the cumin and cook for a further minute. Preheat the oven to 200ºC / Gas 6. Pat the beetroot dry on kitchen paper and roughly chop. Place in a food processor with the onion mixture, chickpeas, breadcrumbs and egg.
Whizz together to make a firm paste. Using damp hands, roll the mixture into 20 even-sized balls and place on a non-stick baking sheet. Brush lightly with oil and bake for 20–25 minutes until crisp and heated through.
Serve warm with tzatziki or vegan alternative and a mixed salad.

Roast Beetroot Spaghetti

450g beetroot, scrubbed	1 large onion
1 tbsp olive oil	2 garlic cloves, unpeeled
300g spaghetti	75g walnuts, toasted and roughly chopped
handful dill, roughly chopped	50g vegetarian feta, crumbled or alternative

Preheat the oven to 200˚C/ Gas 6. Cut the beetroot into 1-2cm wedges and the onion into 8 wedges. Toss them in the oil on a roasting tray, season and roast for 20 minutes. Add the garlic and cook for 15 minutes more until the beetroot is tender. Meanwhile, cook the spaghetti for a minute less than the pack instructions. Scoop out some cooking water, then drain. Put half the cooked beetroot in a blender with the onion, 65g toasted walnuts and a pinch of salt. Cut the ends off the garlic and squeeze the cloves out of their skins into the blender. Add 6 tbsp of the reserved pasta water and blend until almost smooth.

Return the spaghetti to the saucepan over a low heat and stir through the beetroot sauce, with a little more pasta water if needed, until everything is coated. Season and serve scattered with the dill, feta and remaining beetroot wedges and walnuts.

Sweet Potato and Potato Dhal

2 tbsp vegetable oil	1 onion, finely chopped
4 garlic cloves, crushed	700g mix of potatoes and sweet potato, diced
2 fresh bay leaves	20g fresh root ginger, finely grated
1 cinnamon stick	2 tsp ground cumin
2 tbsp mild or medium curry powder	400g tin coconut milk
225g red split lentils, rinsed and drained	50g pack fresh coriander, roughly chopped

Heat the oil in a large pan. Add the onion and cook for 5 minutes until soft. Add the garlic, cook for 1 minute, then stir in the diced potato and sweet potato, along with the bay leaves, ginger, cinnamon, cumin and curry powder. Add the coconut milk, lentils and 600ml water. Bring to the boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for 20-25 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the lentils and vegetables are tender and the sauce has thickened. Season and stir in the coriander. Serve with rice.

It's Sunday and the hoo-ha is about whether any schools should be re-opening. It might be a noble desire to exclude and ringfence children from the pandemic but they are inescapably part of it. To not shut schools perpetuates the misery and only benefits the virus. Surely some clever brains can draw up plans to support any vulnerable children and put additional learning into non-lockdown periods, reduce the length of school holidays, even repeat the school year next year if necessary.

Our Covid rates in rural Richmondshire are higher now than Manchester, Sunderland, Teeside and other big Northern urban areas. It doesn't surprise me. One glance at the local forums and there are still people arguing that it's just a flu. Before Christmas I ordered some boxes of chocolates from the local chocolatier. I went to pick them up. The door of the tiny shop was closed and a dozen or so ladies were sitting drinking coffee, chatting, at the tiny tables they'd managed to squeeze in. The air was thick with aerosols. Not a mask in sight. I stood outside and asked if they could bring my chocolates out, feeling sick that others would nonchalantly step in. They were exercising their rights under our Tier 3 restrictions to sit in that Covid stewing pot. They just have no grasp of the risks, no grasp of the gravity of what's happening. Immediate full lockdown sadly the only option.

Kind wishes and have a good week !

Isobel