



**Monday 1st January 2024**

Dear Customer,

Happy New Year ! I hope you had a lovely Christmas whatever you were doing. The weather has been terrible hasn't it. Up here it's been dark and poured with rain every single day, not to mention the gale force winds. Today though, Monday morning, it's beautiful and sunny. My road is like Oxford Street with hundreds of people going past on their New Years Day walks – dogs, prams, bobble hats.

And to get us back in the groove, here are a few tasty recipes you could try this week:

**Braised Celery**

1 head of celery	2 tbsp olive oil
1 garlic clove, finely chopped	1 tsp dried thyme
1 bay leaf	1 small glass white wine
300ml vegetable stock	salt and pepper

Preheat the oven to 180°C / Gas 4. Trim the root and leaves from the celery. Keep the leaves for garnishing. Slice the stalks into 2-3cm pieces at an angle. Put the oil in an oven-proof casserole or frying pan and add the celery. Add the garlic, thyme, bay and wine. Turn up the heat and let the wine reduce by half. Tip in the stock, season and bring to a simmer. Put on the lid or cover tightly with foil. Bake for 30 minutes, turning once half-way through. Return the pan to the hob and heat until the liquid reduces to a syrup. Chop any leaves that you may have removed at the start and stir them into the celery. Remove the bay leaf and serve.

**Butternut Squash and Lentil Bake**

oil for frying	knob of butter / margarine
1 tbsp light brown sugar	350g unpeeled butternut squash, sliced into 1cm rounds
350g tomatoes, sliced into rounds	½ tin dark green lentils
1 tsp dried thyme	100g cheese
1 tsp Dijon mustard	150ml cream
small handful of breadcrumbs	2 garlic cloves, finely chopped

Preheat the oven to 180°C / Gas 4. Heat 1 tbsp of oil with half the butter and half the sugar in a frying pan. Add the squash, in a single layer. Fry on a medium heat for 2-3 minutes, then turn and fry for another 2-3 minutes, until starting to caramelize. Remove the pan from the heat and transfer to a plate. Repeat with the remaining butter, sugar and squash. Grease a casserole dish with oil. Arrange alternate layers of squash, tomatoes, lentils, thyme and cheese, seasoning each layer and finishing with a layer of cheese. In a bowl, mix the mustard, cream and 4 tbsp of water. Pour it over the veg. Bake for 20 minutes then scatter the breadcrumbs over the top. Bake for approx. 15 more minutes, until the top is golden and the squash tender.

**Leek and Ramiro Pepper Tagliatelle**

150-200g tagliatelle	1tbsp olive oil
300g leeks	2 Ramiro peppers, cut into thin strips
1 garlic clove, peeled and crushed	1 tsp thyme
pinch of dried chilli flakes	olive oil, for drizzling

Wash and trim the leeks and cut into 8cms lengths and then into ribbons. Cook the pasta according to pack directions. Meanwhile, warm the oil in a large frying pan and add the leek and pepper strips, garlic and thyme; cook for 5-8 minutes until tender. Drain the pasta, return it to the pan. Stir in the leek mixture, season well and sprinkle with chilli, if you like, then drizzle with more oil

During the 'twilight zone' period, apart from sleeping most of the time, nodding off on the sofa, even in the mornings, I painted a table. A while back I bought a structurally unusual Chinese coffee table on Ebay. I loved it except it was black and didn't fit with my décor. I bought some light turquoise paint and painted it.

I have never done anything like this before. Well maybe I did in my youth, around the time I first arrived in London when I lived with my sister for a while. She shared a flat in a tenement block with some fellow art students near Russell Square. I had a cardboard box for a bedside table and woke up at 3am one morning choking with smoke inhalation, to find my box in flames as I'd fallen asleep without blowing out the candle. Around that time, it's plausible I may have painted something, I seem to remember making jewellery. But I am not a craft or DIY person. I don't have the patience or steady hand for such things.

I started off quite well, was very careful – first coat brilliant. The second coat was more rushed, and by the time I was on my last coat of the finishing toughener I was creating bubbles and finding dog hairs stuck in it. I was quite pleased with myself though and it does look amazing in its new colour.

With the newfound realisation that I can transform things with the magic of paint, I have decided to paint my Bergere sofa and chairs ( my parents' , can't get rid of them, have never found anywhere they look right ). They will become white. I looked over at my dad's baby grand piano, could never get rid of it, but it's overbearingly dark brown and soaks up the light, has bugged me for years. Then I had an eureka moment. 'No !' 'Surely not !', 'Why not ?' There is no reason why I can't paint it white, like Elton John's piano. I went online and ordered three tins of white furniture paint. It's a daunting task because whatever bad paint job I manage on it, I will have to live with it, there will be no way back.

We have had almost no sun since the end of June. I'm sure many of us are suffering vitamin D deficiency. Might be worth a trip to a sunbed if we can't make the Costa del Sol. My friend in Perpignan said they ate Christmas dinner outside, it was 20C.

I was reading a thread on Twitter – very British problems and what people found bizarre here. Apart from the size of our plugs and separate hot and cold water-taps, it was that the only information anyone could give, on the subject of swans, is that they can break your arm.

Longing to see the first snowdrops. We shall see what the year brings !

Kindest wishes.....Isobel