

BACK IN THE KITCHEN WITH LIZZIE PARTRIDGE

As I have form for the inclusion of dubious recipes in some of my novels, it was suggested by readers that I might be able to offer words of culinary wisdom during the current season of lockdown and empty supermarket shelves. I hesitated. My own diet, now I live alone, is ten parts whimsy to one part good dietetics. But then I thought, why not consult Lizzie Partridge? Her days as a TV cook may be long gone, but Lizzie was never short of opinions, culinary or otherwise. I found her still lurking between the covers of *Anyone for Seconds?*

Laurie: Lizzie, my readers, your fans, wondered whether you had any advice on cooking during this crisis.

Lizzie: Not really.

LG: Perhaps something on imaginative use of ingredients from the store cupboard?

LP: Oh, *store cupboards*. Well, let me think. Disappointing, aren't they, on the whole? Ideally a store cupboard should be stocked with things you love, not things that seemed sensible and worthy when you bought them. I mean, when you're quarantined and you're longing for something nice to eat, the last thing you want to find in your cupboard is a can of lentils.

LG: You don't like lentils?

LP: I'm not saying that. There's nothing wrong with lentils *qua* lentils. They're just not what you dream of when you're hungry and you're not allowed out.

LG: Are there are lentils in your cupboard?

LP: Inevitably.

LG: What else?

LP: Okay. Something I've done of several occasions is put a can of sardines in my basket, believing them to be sardines in tomato sauce, which I quite like, and then when I get home I discover they're sardines in oil.

LG: Which you don't like?

LP: I don't hate them. I just don't like getting 3 a.m. reminders of what I ate for lunch. But, if you have potatoes, here are a couple of things you can do. Mix the oily sardines with mashed potato, season with a squiff of lemon and a pinch of cayenne, and you have a perfectly nice fish paté. You can loosen it up with a bit of natural yogurt, if it's too stiff. Or, here's another idea, add a beaten egg to the mashed-up sardines and potatoes and make fishcakes. Coat them in flour before you fry them.

LG: That sounds like a plan. What else?

LP: Chickpeas. They look dull but they're quite handy to have. I use them with sweated greens - spinach or sad-looking lettuce or anything leafy - to serve with spaghetti. It's best if you perfume the cooking oil with garlic first. By the way, it's well worth slipping the chickpeas out of their skins. If you squeeze them gently, they just kind of pop out. It doesn't take long and they'll be much more digestible. And you know, if you don't have chickpeas or leafy greens you can also make an excellent pasta sauce with just olive oil, garlic and chilli.

LG: You mentioned sad-looking lettuce. Do you think there's a tendency these days for people to throw away food that's still useable?

LP: Absolutely. It's like they've been robbed of their common sense. Look, I don't use fish that's glowing in the dark or meat that's turned green, but some people are ridiculous about Best Before dates and I'll name and shame two of them right here: my daughter, Ellie, and Tom Sullivan.

LG: Is Tom still in your life?

LP: Yes. Sort of.

LG: But you don't live together?

LP: No, no. I can't live with a man who irons a knife-crease into his jeans. But we're good friends. Friends with benefits, let's say.'

LG: Sex?

LP: Not during lockdown. I was thinking more of his expertise ordering food deliveries on his computer. What else can I tell you? Stale bread or croissants or anything like that makes excellent French toast. As long as it

doesn't have a blue fur coat, use it. Smooth peanut butter makes an okay dressing for noodles, if you mix it with soy sauce. I might move on to that once I've used everything in the fridge.

LG: What about sweet stuff?

LP: Sweet stuff can be a problem. I'm not a baker but as soon as the supermarket sold out of flour and sugar, I wanted to bake. Perverse, isn't it? I'm told you can make a kind of ice cream with frozen over-ripe bananas, but I haven't tried it yet. I might, when I've exhausted my stash of Christmas selection boxes.

LG: You have a stash of selection boxes?

LP: I buy them for Noah and Esther, but they're not allowed them.

LG: Noah and Esther are your grandchildren? I think when we left you at the end of *Anyone for Seconds?* you only had Noah, but Ellie was pregnant again.

LP: Yes. And not very happy about it. It wasn't part of The Plan. Ha!

LG: So she had a girl?

LP: Yes, Esther. Very pretty, dark curls and brown eyes. She's far less hovered over than Noah was but their lives are still micro-managed. And they're not allowed anywhere near the demon sugar. I have a long position on white chocolate.

LG: Don't you like white chocolate?

LP: Well, any port in a storm. You can melt it to make a sauce, to pour over frozen berries, but that requires cream and if you're on lockdown rations you may not have any. Personally, I'd trade all my white chocolate for a Curly Wurly. But I'll tell you a nice store cupboard discovery: pearl barley. I don't remember why I ever bought it...

LG: Maybe to make Scotch Broth?

LP: Unlikely. I don't like Scotch Broth. But anyway, I made a baked, sweetened pearl barley pudding. It was like a rice pudding only nuttier. Superior to rice pudding, I'd say. I'll definitely make it again.

LG: That was creative. Where do you get your ideas?

LP: Haven't you heard? Necessity is the mother of invention. And speaking of mothers, Muriel wants me to tell you about Woolton Pie.

LG: Your mother's still alive?

LP: Very much so. She's on a mission to be the last woman standing at the Evergreen Club. Every funeral she goes to, the sweet scent of victory grows stronger. Woolton Pie was a war-time invention. Whatever root vegetables you could get, drowned in Bisto gravy and secured beneath a pastry lid. There, I've told you about it. Don't feel any obligation to try it. Those were different times. Rations were stingy, they had Hitler to worry about, and people still longed for something resembling a meat and potato dinner. We think we're having things tough. We're not. Now something I always have too much of is marmalade. I make it every year, because I love the smell, but I hardly ever eat it.

LG: Suggestions?

LP: Stuff a spoonful in a chicken breast. Or put it in a bread and butter pudding. Make a Marmalade Tom Collins, if you have any gin.

LG: Lizzie, about your mother? One of my readers asked whether she might be willing to be interviewed?

LP: Muriel? Interviewed? Why?

LG: Some people find her entertaining.

LP: Some people enjoy being whipped.

LG: Will you ask her?

LP: If you insist. Just one thing though.

LG: Go on.

LP: Do not give credence to anything, *anything* she says about me. Crystallised angelica. Now *that's* a mystery. I've never used it, never planned to use it, and yet there's a tub of it in my store cupboard.