

CLAIRE THOMSON

THE FIVE O'CLOCK APRON

PROPER FOOD FOR MODERN FAMILIES



THE FIVE O'CLOCK APRON



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About the Book

Faced with the daily challenge of what to cook for her three young children, chef and mum Claire Thomson made it her mission to inspire parents stuck in a teatime rut. Every day she makes a 'proper' tea, tweeting it at 5pm – from that her blog '5 O'clock Apron' was born and a popular *Guardian* column on cooking for children followed.

Claire wants to inspire other parents and invigorate the concept of family cookery. Cooking shouldn't be a chore, one meal for the grown-ups and another for the children. Claire's fresh, exciting meals are versatile and flavourful enough to please everyone around the table, encouraging parents to view food differently, to refresh their culinary imaginations and find real joy in cooking for their children.

Featuring sections on milk, bread, grains, pulses, rice, vegetables, fruit and fish, *5 O'clock Apron* will engage and empower parents. Not just a recipe book, but a way of thinking about how to shop, cook, eat and celebrate as a family, Claire provides a unique insight, as both a mother and a chef, into what really makes food appealing for children.

About the Author

Claire Thomson is a food writer, chef and co-owner of Flinty Red restaurant in Bristol. She has three young daughters and writes a regular *Guardian* column on cooking for children. She lives in Bristol with her family. This is her first book.

CLAIRE THOMSON

THE FIVE
O'CLOCK
APRON



For Grace, Ivy and Dorothy with love...
and plenty of vegetables.







I COOK, A LOT...

...often with the clock ticking and the 'I'm hungry' anthem gaining traction. Breakfast, lunch, supper. Snacks too. Children can eat an extraordinary amount, all things considered. It's therefore essential that this food is nutritious, delicious and relatively easy to produce. My background as a chef has helped enormously in this regard. When cooking for my three children (and often those of others), I try to cook with imagination, ease and, for the most part, speed. I am lucky. But for some, the task of producing food – day in, day out – seems like a relentless chore.

Short on time and week-night weary of imagination, it is all too easy to fall into a cookery loop. Spaghetti Bolognese Monday and shepherd's pie Thursday offer an easy, albeit lobotomizing, rhythm to the week. Children are notorious when it comes to what they will and won't put in their mouths. Contrary, wilful, at worst fussy, having to cajole kids into eating food they don't want is one of life's most frustrating, time-consuming and head-bangingly awful tasks.

Here's my suggestion: turn cooking on its head. Heal the schism in family cookery. The notion of children's food is something to baulk at. Smiley-faced food is ridiculous – food should look like food. Make food interesting. And children will then be interested in it. Children like flavour-FUL food, as do the grown-ups cooking and eating it themselves. Make vegetables core to the family diet. Make them exciting and joyful. Cook a cabbage with bulgur, tomato and garlic, 'sweeten' it with cinnamon and allspice and serve it with plain yoghurt to dollop and toasted seeds to sprinkle over. Where once cabbage might have sat untouched on the side of the plate, that same cabbage is now golloped greedily.

Having to cook separate food for children is laborious and unnecessary. Whether parents choose to eat an early supper with their children or whether it's eaten separately, the prospect of cooking just one meal is appealing. The recipes in this book are versatile enough to appease everyone and are transferable to a more adult-appropriate supper time (along with extra salt, perhaps, and a glass of wine).

More than just writing a book, in an apron and on a crusade, I'm keen to inspire and invigorate the concept of family cookery. Standing at the stovetop, I cook with affection and with an eye for sustenance.

Elbows down. Knives and forks at the ready, and we're off ...

HOW LONG IS A PIECE OF STRING?
HOW BIG IS A TEASPOON?
AND HOW MUCH IS A GLUG?



THOUGHTS ON MEASUREMENTS AND OTHER KITCHEN TRAPPINGS...

SALT

When cooking for children, I am judicious with salt. If I do use salt, I tend to add it at the beginning of the cooking. This way what salt you do use will integrate better with the food and, so the theory goes, you then need less.

For food that is cooked with children in mind, then destined for grown-up consumption, I like to have some crunchy sea salt flakes or rock salt in a mill on the table to add per person, per plate. Salt is crucial to enhancing the flavour of food. I would far rather use salt wisely in my cooking at home and steer clear of more processed foods. That so many breakfast cereals and biscuits list salt as a key ingredient is something I find a mite malevolent.

With salt as such a matter of personal preference, I have found it tricky to be exacting about quantities in my recipes. Above all, food should be tasted throughout the cooking process. The term 'seasoning' (I use it often in this book) is a helpful reminder that food will always be specific to individual taste. Ingredients are seasoned with salt, pepper, spice or herbs according to who is eating them and with what they are being eaten.

OLIVE OIL

Again, in writing this book, I have found it agreeably problematic to nail exact measurements to the wall of my olive oil usage. A splosh into a pan to sauté some vegetables might

equate to a couple of tablespoons. A trickle on to some yoghurt to serve at the table with a pilaf might end up just being the one tablespoon. And while I am happy with the measurements given for olive oil in these recipes, they are guidelines. The adage 'how long is a piece of string' rings true for me, my cooking and that bottle of olive oil. Glug. Glug. Glug ...

That said, good olive oil is pricey and for this reason I never use the really good stuff to cook with. I much prefer to appreciate the flavour of good olive oil used to dress cooked food. A slick of fruity olive oil on top of some baked cannellini beans or lentils is magic. I cook with more ordinary everyday olive oils. A homemade tomato sauce wouldn't taste the same if not for the onion and garlic gently sweated in olive oil. It is worth noting, however, that olive oil does have a lower smoke point than vegetable or sunflower oil, so there really is little point in using olive oil when cooking anything that requires hard frying, as the oil can burn and become acrid.

BUTTER

The secret weapon of any chef, butter will make things taste unimaginably delicious and look both glossy and wonderful. I have previously worked in restaurants that make their mashed potato, almost but not quite, with more butter than potato. In home cooking, butter consumption is never quite as flagrant, of course. By all means use melted butter in lieu of oil for cooking in these recipes if you like.

One final thing on butter: brown butter is heaven sent – toasty, caramel buttery liquid spiked with a squirt of lemon juice. On its own spooned over grilled fish or partnered with plain yoghurt to dress vegetables, rice or lentil dishes, brown butter will make your food sing and your mouth water.

HERBS

I use an awful lot of herbs. They add flavour, vibrancy and freshness to food. But they surely are funny things to quantify. Basil in summer is incalculably different in taste, smell and herby punch to the pathetic supermarket packet airfreighted from afar and bought mid-winter. Use herbs seasonally and generously and you'll get more bang for your buck.

Hard herbs like rosemary, thyme, sage, oregano or bay I would encourage you to add at the beginning of the cooking time. For these herbs to permeate a dish, the longer they cook the better. Soft, bright herbs such as basil, mint, dill or marjoram like a showy late entrance to food. As for dried herbs, I avoid them, with the exception of dried mint or good-quality oregano dried on its stalk. Both give different and admirable qualities to cooking from their fresh alternatives.

Roughly speaking, in these recipes, a small bunch totals 15g of picked herbs and a large bunch 25g. Thyme leaves and rosemary needles I give as a spoon measurement.

CHILLI FLAKES

I like Turkish Aleppo or Urfa chilli flakes. Aleppo gives a medium heat with a sweet note and Urfa a smokier earthy hit. I buy mine from my local Turkish grocer, but have also seen them in Asian stores and online. Used in conjunction with salt as a table seasoning, these chilli flakes are deliciously addictive. Look out for the packets that have a sticky red residue clinging to the cellophane, as this moistness is a good thing and denotes fresher flakes.

SUGAR

Like salt, sugar is a contentious ingredient. We should be cautious about how much we use. That said, I like the sense of fulfilment to be had in making various sweet treats at home. Children like making cakes, biscuits and puddings, and I'd be hesitant to demonize sugar by forbidding it. I am happy for my children to eat sweet things but on the basis of an occasional and delicious treat, and not a mainstay.

STOCK

Restaurants use a lot of stock. Great big vats of it are moved around the hob and jostle for stove space. Quite apart from giving a terrific foundation to cooking, stock made from scratch is a thrifty and thoughtful cookery practice to embrace. Buy good-quality meat and make stock from the bones. I find chicken or ham to be the most useful form of stock in the food I cook. I love the moment when I root through the freezer and find a forgotten tub of stock to use as a flavoursome base for a soup or braise.

LEMONS

I have an involuntary lemon-picking reflex. I cannot help myself buying one or two when food shopping. Just in case I don't have one in the fruit bowl at home. (I should note that this is almost unheard of.) The great big, imperfectly shaped sunshine-yellow ones with gnarled and cratered skin are my favourites, and unwaxed, even better. Quite apart from looking lovely, lemons flatter much of the food I cook. Lemons give

counterpoint, lifting a dish and adding characteristic freshness and punch. Juice, flesh and zest – I love a lemon, I do.

SEASONED YOGHURT

By seasoned yoghurt I mean plain yoghurt with salt stirred in. Other additions – a scant clove of crushed garlic, lemon juice, a slick of olive oil, chilli flakes, fresh herbs, dried mint, grated raw vegetables (for raita/tzatziki) or ground sumac – are terrific too. Yoghurt served like this is a regular on the table, especially served alongside certain rice, spiced or vegetable dishes.

ROASTING SPICES

Absolutely and definitely worth doing. Have your pestle and mortar or spice grinder stationed beside the stovetop and leave it there to grind whole toasted spices for use in your cooking as and when. Into a dry frying pan go the whole spices, then snap, crackle, pop and at first whiff of the spicy smoke, they're ready to grind for a flavour that really resonates. Roasting spices and freshly grinding them does justice to their inclusion in a recipe.

TOMATO SAUCE

I always find it's worth making quite a big batch of tomato sauce, at least twice the quantity, refrigerating or freezing what I then don't use. A spoonful of well-made tomato sauce is both easy and a brilliant flavour supplement. Its versatility is endless. I am a fan of good-quality whole tinned tomatoes and

would always prefer to use these over an imported and out-of-season tomato. More of which later...

To skin fresh tomatoes, cut a small cross at the base of each one, place in bowl and pour over boiling water. After 1 minute, remove from the water and the skin should peel off easily.



MEAT THERMOMETER

I just can't imagine why anyone wouldn't have one of these at home. In a restaurant kitchen there is a certain amount of professionalism and kudos in knowing when a piece of meat or fish is perfectly cooked. Having to cook nine different rib-eye steaks on a grill and four orders of fish all in different pans, all of which started at different times, demands that chefs be in touch physically with the food they cook. A quick jab of a forefinger on the surface of a steak, or a deft lift of flesh from the bone on a tranche of fish to assess how well cooked it is, is a vital skill.

It isn't like this at home. A digital meat thermometer can tell you exactly whether something is perfectly done. It will assuage any fears about whether that enormous hunk of protein you have in the oven is cooked sufficiently. By all means gauge your cooking times just by touch, but a meat thermometer is an accurate and helpful tool. Use one in halloumi and yoghurt making and correct temperatures are no longer guesswork. Thermometers are cheap. Buy one.

WEIGHING

We have a beautiful old bright grass-green set of scales at home. Lugged back from Thailand (heavy and ridiculous in a back pack), it looks very lovely on the kitchen window ledge. It lives there unused. Less romantic, and given a good thrashing, are my digital scales. Measuring ingredients with the other set involved many little bowls each totalled up and tipped into a final mixing bowl.

It's a wonder to use a digital set, pressing zero each time I weigh a new addition, with each ingredient exact and housed in that same and final mixing bowl. I can weigh and mix a cake or some bread dough in minutes. For example, when making bread: ZERO 300g white flour ZERO 200g wholemeal flour ZERO 4g dried yeast ZERO 5g salt (and I even weigh the...) ZERO 375ml water.

Weighing liquids can take a bit of getting used to. Professional bakers will swear by it as a more precise method. Low-density liquids such as water or milk are easy to measure like for like in grams and will give by far the most accurate reading.

IN SHORT...

All eggs used here are free range and medium unless specified otherwise. Oil for dressings is extra-virgin olive, otherwise ordinary olive oil for cooking. All milk and yoghurt is full fat. All herbs are fresh. All parsley is flatleaf. All onions and garlic are peeled. All oven temperatures are fan... You get the general idea.

SERVES 4

Lastly, serves 4. Recipes given in this book are for the most part skewed to feed 4. But a world without leftovers would be a sorry one indeed. Roast a whole chicken with rice and spices and serve with yoghurt – by all means polish off the rice, but don't feel compelled to eat all the chicken. Serves 4, with some left over for the next day and a stock from the bones perhaps. Likewise, a tiny cake or too few muffins will never seem right.

Children, like adults, can also have very different sizes of appetite. 'Serves 4' is a guideline. 2 adults + 2 children. Or 3 adults. Or 2 hungry adults with leftovers. Or 6 children home for tea after school, one of whom is a baby. And so on. Phew.



Recipe List

BÉCHAMEL SAUCE (WHITE SAUCE)

YOGHURT

LEEK & YOGHURT SOUP

LABNEH

HALLOUMI CHEESE

EASY PEASY ROSE ICE CREAM

BUTTERMILK & RHUBARB PUDDINGS

MILK

The milky breath of a baby, a milky moustache frosted just so and the dulcet 'glug-glug-glug' of the milk bottle every morning. It's little wonder I begin with milk. A miracle drink and a marvellous ingredients to boot – we get through vast quantities of it in our house.

Not so long ago, we lived and worked near a dairy farm at the very tip of Cornwall. Rain, wind or shine (Christmas Day included), a heaving monochrome herd of cows would twice a day amble past our window en route to the milking sheds. Some days, I'd sit with Grace on the low stone wall and we'd watch these bovine beauties, heavy with milk, push and jostle each other along. Their walk back was lighter; it seemed to take them less time to reach the field. The spectacle left a road patchworked with poo, much to the amusement of my daughter and of those held up in their cars on those weaving Cornish lanes.

Occasionally we went with the farmer and collected milk to drink straight from the tap of the tank filled from the just-milked cows. Unpasteurized, warm, creamy rich and almost sweet, it was milk as I'd never tasted it before. From the restaurant kitchen, we could see the tanker arrive at dusk to collect that day's supply. With easy access to such a quantity of milk, any kitchen prep requiring lots of it also included a lovely five-minute yomp across the field to collect it.

There are innumerable recipes that use milk and here I give you my favourites. A basic béchamel sauce will set you up for very many meals. The alchemy of milk made rich and viscous with butter and flour and flavoured with nutmeg and bay leaf is masterful and has many uses. Making your own cheese and