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## THAT'S AMORE

"Simple cooking is what I've always known and loved," says author Julia Busuttill Nishimura, whose latest cookbook celebrates seasonal comfort food. "It's the sort of food I grew up eating: thoughtful, considered and uncomplicated. This idea was reawakened by my time in the Italian countryside, a place that profoundly impacted the way I cook."





# made with love

**JULIA BUSUTTIL NISHIMURA** HAS GATHERED A LEGION OF FANS WITH HER EASY-TO-FOLLOW RECIPES. HER NEW COOKBOOK TAKES COMFORT FOOD TO THE NEXT LEVEL

by **RACHEL SHARP** photographed by **ARMELLE HABIB**



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The author and son Haruki; her husband Nori Nishimura is a professional chef; variations on simple focaccia (recipe on p119). OPPOSITE: Spaghetti with fennel and prawns (recipe on p119)



## DEVOTED FOODIE JULIA BUSUTTIL NISHIMURA IS POETIC LICENCE PERSONIFIED WHEN IT COMES TO HER SIGNATURE RECIPES.

Despite being born in Melbourne to Maltese parents and marrying her soulmate from rural Japan, the author and Instagram star's name is so synonymous with delicious Italian fare, you'd think she hailed from the Tuscan countryside.

Her hit debut cookbook, *Ostro*, released 2017, and newest tome, *A Year of Simple Family Food*, out late August, are both based on a firsthand knowledge of Italian cuisine's ethos, fuelled by a lifelong food fascination. "At the Maltese Club as a kid, I'd always find myself in the kitchen watching the chef," says the now 32-year-old mother of sons Haruki, 4, and Yukito, five months. "I cooked our Christmas lunches from 12 years old, and spent my teens reading cookbooks every weekend. Back then, the only people writing them were Stephanie Alexander and Jamie Oliver, so it didn't enter my mind it was something I could do."

After studying politics and Italian at university, she moved to Southern Tuscany to work as an au pair. "The entire culture—the food, the people, the friendliness—just felt like home to me," she recalls. "The family I worked for lived next door to the nonna [who loved cooking], in a beautiful villa with an olive grove. There was so much care in shopping for ingredients. We'd drive to different farms to buy pasta and pecorino and ricotta."

After returning to Australia to finish a master's degree in teaching, Busuttill Nishimura started a cooking blog as a hobby. Little did she know it would catch the eye of a major book publisher and soon become her full-time occupation. "Like *Ostro*, my new book is inspired by Italy, because that's the food my family eats most at home—along with the occasional Japanese meal, thanks to Nori," she says of her husband, who is a chef at hotspot cafe Cibi, in Melbourne's Collingwood. "We have hundreds of cookbooks between us,



and our kitchen is a really creative space where we always bounce ideas off each other."

Now, more than ever, she says, home-cooking comfort food has emotional appeal. "It's not winter yet, but people are already going for that heartier food [during the COVID-19 crisis] because it really does make you feel comforted." She agrees a silver lining of lockdown was the upswing in households cooking together and finding their way back to a traditional sit-down scenario. "Food and family are intertwined. That notion of being together and sharing food at a table is a practice often lost in our busy lives. No matter what the day's brought us, just setting the table and enjoying a meal together is reassuring. And for kids, cooking is just fun. Haruki loves it, especially baking. He helps chop his own vegies."

Busuttill Nishimura's best tip for anyone wanting to improve their cooking prowess is as laid-back as her recipes. "Just be patient. I've made cakes before that were disasters but I learn from my mistakes and try again," she says. "I can't cook like a five-star Michelin chef, but I don't need to. The [following] recipes from my new book are ones I treasure, but it's the ingredients and sentiment that bring them to life."

### JULIA'S MUST-HAVE KITCHEN TOOLS

#### QUALITY KNIFE

"A really good-quality kitchen knife makes cooking a breeze. I buy mine from Japan."

#### MORTAR AND PESTLE

"Cheap, sturdy and so useful. I grind spices and even make pesto in mine."

#### FOOD PROCESSOR

"This simplifies everything, especially if you love baking. Mine's a KitchenAid."

#### MICROPLANE

"The easiest way to grate things like citrus zest, nutmeg and even fresh parmesan."

#### CHOPPING BOARD

"A good-quality, solid wooden one is an absolute essential. Plus, they look great."



Broad bean salad with mint and pecorino (recipe on p120).  
OPPOSITE TOP: Haruki loves to help out with the baking.





Braised short ribs

## THE RECIPES

### SPAGHETTI WITH FENNEL AND PRAWNS

Serves 4

100ml virgin olive oil, plus extra to serve  
1 fennel bulb, finely chopped and fronds reserved  
sea salt  
250g cherry tomatoes, halved  
4 garlic cloves, finely chopped  
¼ tsp fennel seeds, roughly ground  
½ tsp dried chilli flakes  
320g dried spaghetti  
300g raw prawn meat, roughly chopped  
juice of half a lemon

**1** Heat olive oil in a large frypan over a low-medium heat. Gently fry fennel with a pinch of salt for about 10 mins, stirring occasionally, until soft and aromatic. Add cherry tomatoes, garlic, fennel seeds and chilli flakes and cook for about 4 mins, until tomatoes are beginning to soften. Use the back of a wooden spoon to help tomatoes burst a little from their skins. The sauce at this stage should be jammy and thick. Turn on heat. **2** Meanwhile, cook pasta in a large saucepan of generously salted boiling water for a minute or 2 less than the cooking time instructed on the packet, until just under al dente. Drain, reserving 250ml (1 cup) of cooking water. **3** A few minutes before pasta is cooked, turn heat under the sauce to high, add prawn meat and cook for about 2 mins until just opaque. **4** Add cooked spaghetti and most of cooking water and cook, stirring continuously, for a few minutes longer or until the pasta is al dente. If sauce begins to look dry, add remaining cooking water. **5** Stir through reserved fennel fronds and lemon juice, and serve with an extra drizzle of olive oil.

### BRAISED SHORT RIBS

Serves 4

2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil  
1.2kg beef short ribs  
sea salt  
1 French shallot, chopped  
4 garlic cloves, bruised  
3cm piece of ginger, sliced  
250ml (1 cup) saké  
500ml (2 cups) beef or chicken stock  
100ml soy sauce  
100ml mirin  
100ml rice wine vinegar  
2 tbsp brown sugar  
1 star anise  
steamed rice, to serve

### QUICK CUCUMBER SALAD

1 Lebanese cucumber, roughly chopped  
2 spring onions, sliced on the diagonal  
1 tbsp toasted sesame seeds  
2 tbsp sesame oil  
1 tbsp rice wine vinegar  
sea salt

**1** Heat olive oil in a large saucepan or cast-iron pot with a lid over a high heat. Season ribs with generous pinch of sea salt, sear on all sides until golden. Remove ribs, drain all but 1 tablespoon of oil from pan. **2** Fry shallot, garlic and ginger for 3 mins. Pour in saké, simmer for 2 mins. Return ribs to pan with remaining ingredients (except rice). Bring to a simmer. Cook, covered, over low heat for 3 hours or until meat falls off the bone. **3** For salad: mix cucumber, onion and seeds in a bowl. Whisk oil, vinegar and a large pinch of salt in another bowl and pour over salad. Stir to coat, leave to sit for a few mins. **4** Remove ribs from the pan, transfer to a serving bowl. Strain sauce into a saucepan, simmer over a medium heat for 3–4 mins to thicken slightly. Pour over beef, serve with rice and salad.

### FOCACCIA

Serves 6–8

1 peeled waxy potato (150g), roughly chopped  
200g semolina flour  
300g finely milled flour  
5g active dry yeast  
10g fine sea salt  
350ml warm water  
extra virgin olive oil, for drizzling

### POTATO AND TALEGGIO TOPPING

150g taleggio cheese, roughly sliced or torn  
2 waxy potatoes, finely sliced  
sea salt  
rosemary, to garnish

**1** Cook potato in a small saucepan of boiling water until very tender. Drain and allow to cool briefly, then mash until smooth and set aside. **2** Meanwhile, combine flours, yeast and salt in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with a dough hook. Mix on medium speed, add potato, then warm water in a steady stream. Increase speed to high and mix for 10 mins until the dough is smooth, elastic and soft, but not sticky. Alternatively, mix everything together by hand, then turn out onto a floured board and knead until smooth. **3** Place dough in an oiled bowl and either cover and leave in a warm place for 1 hour until the dough has doubled in size, or place in the fridge to rise overnight (I highly recommend this if you have time, as it allows flavours to develop and will result in a fluffier, more aerated focaccia). If the dough has risen in the fridge overnight, allow it to come back to room temperature before moving to next step. **4** Preheat the oven to 220°C. Grease a 30cm round baking tray with olive oil and line with baking paper. (Lining with baking paper is optional, so feel free to just grease tray directly with olive oil if you prefer; this will result in a slightly crunchier base.) **5** Using your hands or a pastry scraper, tip the dough from bowl onto prepared tray. Using your hands again, gently spread dough outwards towards edge of tray. Set aside to rise in a warm place for a further 30–45 mins. The dough should be nice and puffy. If using topping, gently press pieces of taleggio onto dough, then cover with finely sliced potato (alternatively, just leave plain). Drizzle focaccia with olive oil and sprinkle with sea salt. **6** Bake for 30 mins or until golden and cooked through. Scatter hot focaccia with the rosemary. Allow to cool briefly, then transfer to a wire rack to cool. Focaccia is best eaten on the day it's made.



## HOME MADE PASTA HINTS

### HAVE FAITH

“Homemade pasta has been romanticised, but it's simpler than you think. Essentially, if you can make playdough, you can make pasta.”

### CLASS ACTION

“Join a weekend class in your area. They're fun and make learning easier. In Melbourne? Visit [julia-ostro.com/pastaclass](http://julia-ostro.com/pastaclass) for details.”

### TRY YOUTUBE

“These videos can be really helpful to watch, especially when it comes to learning to shape traditional pasta properly.”





### SLOW-ROASTED TOMATOES WITH MINT AND MOZZARELLA

Serves 4

800g roma tomatoes, halved  
extra virgin olive oil, for drizzling  
sea salt  
60g blanched almonds  
large handful of mint leaves, extra to garnish  
1 small garlic clove, peeled  
150g buffalo mozzarella, torn

**1** Preheat the oven to 160°C. Line a baking tray with baking paper. **2** Arrange tomatoes on tray, drizzle generously with olive oil, scatter with salt. Roast for 1-1½ hours until tomatoes are soft and begin to look a little dried. Set aside to cool. **3** Pound almonds to a rough paste using a mortar and pestle. Add mint and continue to pound. Add garlic and a pinch of salt and keep pounding until well combined. Stream in just enough olive oil to make a spoonable paste. Season to taste and set aside. **4** Arrange tomatoes on a serving plate and top with mozzarella. Spoon over almond mixture, scatter with extra mint and serve.

### BROAD BEAN SALAD WITH MINT AND PECORINO

Serves 4

1.2kg broad beans, podded (you'll end up with about 480g)  
iced water, for refreshing  
large handful of mint leaves  
large handful of parsley leaves  
40g pecorino, shaved  
3 tbsp extra virgin olive oil  
juice of 1 lemon  
sea salt

**1** Blanch broad beans in a large saucepan of boiling water for 2-3 mins until tender, then drain and refresh in an ice bath. **2** Pop broad beans out of their jackets, discarding skins, and place in bowl. Toss with herbs and pecorino. **3** In a small bowl, whisk olive oil with lemon juice and season with a generous pinch of salt. Pour over salad and serve.

**TIP:** If you want to make this salad more substantial, you could add a grain such as farro or some soft-boiled eggs.

“A CLASSIC BAKED CHEESECAKE IS RELIABLE AND DELICIOUS. I TOP MINE WITH WHATEVER FRUIT IS IN SEASON OR LEAVE IT COMPLETELY PLAIN”

### CLASSIC BAKED CHEESECAKE

Serves 8-10

750g full-fat cream cheese, softened  
400g sour cream  
125g caster sugar  
1 tsp vanilla extract  
½ tsp ground cinnamon  
finely grated zest of 1 lemon  
3 eggs, lightly beaten

#### BISCUIT BASE

250g Granita or plain semi-sweet biscuits  
1 tbsp caster sugar  
pinch of sea salt  
½ tsp ground cinnamon  
125g unsalted butter, melted and cooled

**1** Preheat the oven to 170°C. **2** To make base, place biscuits, sugar, salt and cinnamon in a food processor and blitz until you have a fine crumb. Tip mixture into a bowl and pour over melted butter. Mix to combine. **3** Press mixture evenly into base of 26cm round cake tin (not springform) and bake for 10 mins. Remove from oven and place in deep baking tray.

**4** Meanwhile, mix together cream cheese, sour cream, sugar, vanilla, cinnamon and lemon zest until very well combined. You can use a stand mixer fitted with a whisk attachment for ease. Gently mix in eggs until just combined. **5** Pour cheesecake mixture over biscuit base, then fill baking tray with enough boiling water to come halfway up side of tin. **6** Carefully place in oven and bake for 35-40 mins until just set. The centre will still be wobbly, but will firm up as it cools. You can cook cheesecake a little longer, until it really puffs up and colours—this will give you an entirely different cake, more like the style of cheesecake you'd find in Spain. It will be less creamy and have more texture. **7** Allow cheesecake to cool to room temperature, then refrigerate for at least 4 hours. When ready to serve, run a sharp knife around edge of tin and invert cheesecake onto a flat board or plate, then flip back onto serving plate or cake stand. (To help release cheesecake, I usually sit the tin in hot water for 30 seconds, or warm with a kitchen blowtorch or carefully over a gas stovetop. This melts the butter in the base ever so slightly.) Top with your choice of fruit.

Recipes from *A Year of Simple Family Food* by Julia Busuttill Nishimura, available from August; \$40, Plum/Pan Macmillan Australia; panmacmillan.com.au



Classic baked cheesecake. OPPOSITE: Slow-roasted tomatoes with mint and mozzarella