

simply the best

Michele Cranston reckons great food shouldn't be complicated. She tells **Julie Hosking** how to make entertaining easy.

You may not judge a book by its cover but I definitely judge a cookbook by the number of sticky notes I put inside it.

Those colourful notes are like little flags I can whip out whenever culinary inspiration is low. Without even reading them, I know they will say things like “most of my ingredients are in your pantry/fridge”, “I don't require a Michelin-star chef to interpret”, “you can throw me together in less than half an hour”, and, my personal favourite, “everyone will love me, even the fussy kid”.

Judging by the number of notes I've scattered through her latest cookbook *A Simple Table* then, Michele Cranston is my new kitchen saviour and it seems I have other time-poor mums to thank.

“I'll probably get myself in trouble saying this but cookbooks have become a lot about ego and the books that are out there are either restaurant books or trying to tell us something new,” the mother of one explains. “But I was aware, having stood in those playgrounds for years, that in a way what people really want is lots of real food that they can just cook at home. All the school mums think it's hilarious that I've kind of used them as inspiration. I was the one they were always asking ‘What am I cooking tonight’ and it made me realise that we just don't have that commonsense cookbook anymore.”

The author of 10 *marie claire* cookbooks, who is also food editor at large for the *Australian Women's Weekly*, has tailored this far more personal project accordingly, breaking chapters up into how we eat and who we're eating with. So there's two bowls; four plates; one pot; weekend platters; on the side; pretty spoons; and teacups and cake plates.

“Two bowls, for example were the sort of things that I kind of throw together in a bowl, I like a lot of salad things with lots of fresh herbs,” Michele says. “Then I sat down and thought about family meals based on a lot of those playground conversations and I started to make lists of all those things.”

Many of the recipes are borne from her own experience, like the time she spent as head chef at Bills in Darlinghurst honing the ever-popular corn fritters, before heading off to London.


“I probably do the salmon and corn fritters once a week because it's the only way I can get my son to eat fish,” she says with a laugh. “I was at Bills for years, making all those corn fritters, and I was trying to get Sam to eat fish and then I thought if I threw salmon into the corn fritters, maybe ... and now that's a favourite.”

Michele is also a big fan of easy crowd pleasers, something that will endear her to many a home cook gearing up for the silly season of entertaining. “There's a really yummy (aromatic butterflied) chicken that I always do when I have a lot of people coming around,” she says. “You just butterfly a couple of chickens and baste it, and throw it in the oven, and then chop it up and just do bowls of beautiful salads to go with it. Everyone always loves it because it's got those beautiful zingy Asian flavours.”

“Then there's a cauliflower couscous; that's one of the ones I always make and I throw kale or just about anything I can find into it. It's just a really good bulky salad for a large group of people. And it's a little bit interesting and slightly unexpected – people always go ‘So what is in this’ and they are surprised.”

This is the first cookbook bearing her name on the cover, and Michele was delighted to be able to indulge another passion: her own illustrations are scattered throughout. “I actually trained as an artist when I first left school, but Petrina (Tinslay) who shot the book was laughing because in the old days of *marie claire* I'd always go in and I would have drawn the book practically, and she'd always make these jokes like ‘I'm not quite sure what I'm there for, you've already drawn the book’. And they'd just be silly sketches,” she says. “Now, finally I have kind of drawn the book! I guess it's kind of my personal expression.”

But *A Simple Table* also has loads of mouthwatering images because visuals are very important to the experienced food stylist. “I think we do eat with our eyes. If something looks amazing you're sort of already halfway there,” Michele says. “I always get asked what tricks do you use as a food stylist. Well, the days of tricks have passed us by but what you really want is to tell the story of the recipe with the way you put the food on the plate. As soon as you look it, you can see that there is mango – I'm just thinking of one of the recipes in the book – and there's chicken and there's lot of fresh herbs, and there's little caramelised onions, so you almost read the recipes with your eyes. And it's probably not how most people put it into their bowl when they actually cook the dish but it's what sells them on making it in the first place.”

I'd be willing to bet that if this very user-friendly book finds its way into your Christmas stocking, you'll be sold on more than a few recipes quick smart. Ask Santa for some sticky notes, too. 



A Simple Table
Michele Cranston
(Murdoch Books, \$40)



San choy bau

Serves 4

- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 4 spring onions, white part only, thinly sliced
- 4 cloves garlic, crushed
- 60g finely grated fresh ginger
- 3 big red chillies, seeded and thinly sliced
- 500g minced pork
- 1 cup white wine
- 2 tbsp black bean and garlic sauce
- 2 tbsp Chinese black vinegar
- 1 tbsp light brown sugar
- 1 tbsp sesame oil
- 100g fresh shiitake mushrooms, sliced
- 100g tinned water chestnuts, diced
- iceberg lettuce cups, thinly sliced
- red capsicum, thinly sliced
- cucumber and mixed Asian herbs, to serve
- chilli sauce, to serve

Heat the olive oil in a wok or deep-sided frying pan over high heat. Add the spring onion, garlic, ginger and chilli and stir-fry for 2 minutes, or until fragrant. Add pork to the wok and stir-fry for 2-3 minutes, or until cooked through. Add the wine and cook over high heat until reduced by half. Add the black bean sauce, vinegar, brown sugar, sesame oil and sliced mushrooms. Simmer, uncovered, stirring occasionally, for 8-10 minutes, or until the mixture has thickened and the mushrooms have completely softened. When ready to serve, stir through the water chestnuts. Serve the pork with the lettuce cups, capsicum, cucumber and a handful of mixed Asian herbs. Serve with a side dish of chilli sauce.



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