

Making *magic*

Stephanie Alexander grew up in a home where family dinners were something special. She's still sharing that love, writes **Julie Hosking**.

There's something rather comforting in the knowledge that one of Australia's most loved cooks also did her sneaky best to avoid a certain green vegetable.

"I used to put a whole Brussels sprout in my mouth and when I thought no one was looking, I would put it in my napkin and then put it behind my chair with every intention of going back later to retrieve the little thing," Stephanie Alexander confesses. "Funnily enough, it was never there!"

Turns out her mum was on to her. "We had a family thing that you had to try it. Nobody would make a big speech about it and you wouldn't be smacked or told to sit there until you were finished, or any of those terrible punitive habits, but you were expected to have a taste."

It's fair to say that having a taste in Stephanie's childhood home in Victoria would have been far more interesting than in most postwar Australian families of the time. Her parents, Mary and Winston Burchett, loved to entertain.

"Mum and Dad were great friends with a lot of refugees after the war and I have amazing memories of the sort of suppers that these adults used to make," she says. "And there would be lots of laughter. We would have gone to bed but we would hear they were having an absolutely wonderful time."

So she has always associated food with joy then? "Yes, and with hospitality and sharing."

It helped that her mum, a frustrated painter, was a dab hand in the kitchen. "Cooking was her creative thing. She also had a great interest in food as an expression of culture. She collected books, and there

weren't many in those days, that talked about say the food of Czechoslovakia and she would avidly read it and go 'Oh, I could do that with that cabbage, I've got some sour cream, I could make it', and she would," Stephanie recalls. "As kids I'm sure there must have been times when we didn't like things but I don't remember there being battles about food as we grew up. She would often give a little talk. She would say 'This is a Czech dish and it's usually served with chicken but tonight we're serving it with lamb'."

The evening meal was also sacrosanct. "It was an important time. We had a big round table that my father made and we all sat around that table and argued, and laughed, all the things you do as family, and it was a really dynamic lovely family space."

These days, though she likes to cook a feast at home for "special people", the 76-year-old mother of two is usually setting a table for one – and it's still a very special time to her.

"I live by myself and I find increasingly that I like to eat quite simply. It's always beautiful and I always set the table and I always have a glass of wine and a glass of water, and a big green salad, and I think about what I'm going to eat; it is very important to me," she says. "I look forward to it and I feel really cheated if something happens and I don't get the chance to really sit down and relax and think about the day."

It's safe to say many thousands of families and friends around Australia have sat down to share a meal from one of Stephanie's bountiful books, the latest of which has just hit the shelves. *Kitchen Garden Companion: Cooking* is the partner to *Kitchen Garden Companion: Growing*, which was released last year, though they also work perfectly in isolation for those who like to cook but not garden (and vice versa). Updated versions of 2009's *Kitchen Garden Companion*, which was split in two for the paperback market, the gardening instalment features more anecdotes, while the cooking volume contains an extra 20 or so recipes.

"It's definitely family food, it's not meant to be culinary gymnastics," Stephanie says, "it's meant to be something that most people will find quite positive."

Like her bible *The Cook's Companion*, it's in an accessible alphabetical format: each fresh ingredient presented with different culinary options. Mint going crazy? Make the mint and tamarind chutney, or some mint and apple jelly. Too many carrots? Try the carrot, parsnip and sausage one-pot dinner or carrot fritters. Oregano overload? What about some Turkish bread "pizza" or oregano onions.

Chances are this very user-friendly book will soon be as covered with food splatters as my copy of *The Cook's Companion*, something that fills Stephanie with delight, as does hearing that her banana cake is a family staple. Not surprisingly, people tell her that sort of thing all the time.

"It is so lovely. I am truly humbled every time and so pleased," she says. "People come up to me and say shyly they call it their bible and use it once a week. There wouldn't be many cookbook writers, and I say this modestly, who can say so many people trust their work. I mean we've all seen beautiful cookery books, they're works of art, but you don't necessarily have that same feeling for it."

Not bad for a book published in October 1996 with a small print run that sold out in a few weeks, the publisher naturally nervous about spending big on a big cookbook without any pictures. "I felt that the world had ended because I thought 'that's it, we've missed the Christmas sale, we can't get any more', because it was printed in China and no more came into the country until February. I was convinced it was the end, that we'd never ever sell another copy."

She was, happily, wrong – to the tune of more than 500,000 copies. "I heard some marvellous stories about reps taking it into bookstores and them saying '\$75 and it's got no pictures! I'll take two'". It was definitely word of mouth."



Fluffy Buttermilk Pancakes with Strawberries and Blueberries

These pancakes are the sort often served with maple syrup, whipped butter or honey. I like to include plenty of berries in the batter, then warm extra berries in a pan with butter and maple syrup to spoon over as a delicious sauce.

Makes about 12

- 3-4 eggs (at room temperature), separated
- 60g butter, melted, plus extra for cooking
- 2 cups buttermilk
- 2 cups plain flour
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 tsp bicarbonate of soda
- 400g strawberries, hulled and sliced
- 300g blueberries
- maple syrup (optional), to serve

Berry Sauce

- 20g butter
- 1 tbsp maple syrup
- 1 cup mixed strawberries and blueberries, hulled and sliced

Preheat oven to 100C and put a baking dish inside to warm. Put egg yolks into a large mixing bowl. Add melted butter and buttermilk to yolks and whisk well. Sift flour, salt and bicarbonate of soda over egg yolk mixture and fold in with a large metal spoon. Stir in berries. The batter should be of a thick, dropping consistency. When ready to cook, whisk egg whites in clean bowl of an electric mixer to form soft peaks, then fold into the batter. Lightly grease a heavy-based non-stick frying pan with extra butter. Working in batches, ladle in 1/4 cup batter per pancake. Cook pancakes until bubbles form on the uncooked side. Flip and cook on the other side, adding a little extra butter if pan seems too dry. Transfer to warm baking dish until all pancakes are cooked. To make the berry sauce, heat butter and maple syrup in a small heavy-based saucepan over medium heat, then add berries. Cover and cook for 3-4 minutes or until the syrupy juices bubble but the berries still retain some shape. Spoon berry sauce over pancakes and serve at once with a jug of maple syrup, if desired.



Kitchen whiz
Stephanie loves sharing her passion for fresh food.
PICTURES
MARK CHEW

Stephanie puts the alphabetical ordering down to her initial career. “All that cross-referencing, it’s part and parcel of being a librarian,” she says with a laugh.

Thankfully for us, she left the library for the kitchen, running restaurants in Melbourne – most notably the award-winning Stephanie’s for 21 years – before she found an even bigger audience through her cookbooks. She’s now not only one of Australia’s most treasured cooks but a passionate advocate for growing and eating fresh food through her Kitchen Garden Foundation. Established in 2004, it has 800 schools under its umbrella, helping children to learn about real food through school-based gardens.

“I have strong feelings about influencing the next generation and trying to break this nexus of disconnect between the natural world and what we eat. To me it’s been a source of great joy all my life and to me it’s troubling that it’s just a source of anxiety,” she says. “I believe that’s a stronger reason for starting the kitchen garden work than almost anything else. It was primarily to encourage kids to see how important it is and how exciting it can be, and how delicious it can be.”

At an age when most are putting their feet up or travelling the world, Stephanie seems as busy as she was in those days she ran one of Australia’s most highly regarded restaurants. “It’s a different sort of busy, though, isn’t it? That was head down over a chopping board and you hardly knew the rest of the world existed,” she says. “Now it’s different but, yes, it’s still busy and it’s still the same sort of messages in a way which either shows that I’m either fixated or stuck in a rut.” Or that you were on to something? “That’s a nice way of putting it!”

Stephanie has ensured her visit to WA next month to promote her latest cookbook includes a training session for schools involved in the garden program. This one will be in Margaret River – where she’s also

attending the Margaret River Readers and Writers Festival – and will involve teachers from about 15 schools so she can get grassroots feedback.

“One of the first lessons that they definitely get is the idea of eating locally – if it will grow in your garden that’s the sort of local produce you should be preferencing,” she says. “And very quickly, of course, they come to understand that not everything grows all the time. You don’t have to make a speech about it because they can see it.”

Stephanie wasn’t that interested in gardening as a child but grew up with it; her mother and grandfather were great gardeners. She was always being sent to pick some parsley or grab a lemon from the tree. “It was just part of my life, so it didn’t in any way seem extraordinary to pick from the garden or from a tree, or get eggs from the ducks,” she says.

But she was far more fascinated by “the magic that happened in the kitchen, once you got the stuff inside”. She would sit and watch her mum at work, talking about the school day, and slowly began helping. “Mum would push an apple across the table and say ‘would you like to peel that’ or ‘I’m making bread rolls, would you like to roll some dough’,” she says. “As I got older I got to do more and I was encouraged. I was really a great help to my mother – there were three other kids and both my brothers had bad asthma so I think as the eldest child, she really valued that.”

When she’s not visiting schools or writing cookbooks, Stephanie still finds time to garden, though she has scaled back on the produce side of things since moving into a ground-floor apartment.

“I’ve let it be more of a wilderness garden. I’ve got huge rosemary plants, huge sage bushes, huge basil bushes, lavender and then I’ve got grasses and wavy things because I feel I’m really in the bush and it didn’t seem right to have a tamed garden,” she says. “And I’ve got a 1m by 1.5m vegetable bed where I wage war with the animals. Rabbits, what’s more!”

Like all gardeners she acknowledges it’s a constant battle – “one foot forward and half a one back” – but reckons even serial black thumbs should at least try growing their own herbs, if only for the sheer joy of picking something fresh to take dinner up a notch.

“I would encourage people to definitely grow some parsley and some chives, assuming these people like to cook. And a bit of mint to put in some prawns or jazz up a salad. And of course basil in the summer with the tomatoes.”

But not Brussels sprouts? “I actually do quite like them now,” she says with a laugh. “But they’re still not my favourite.”

Join Stephanie for morning tea at the Parmelia Hilton, Perth, on Wednesday, May 31, see trybooking.com/262437. For details call 9364 7687.

Kitchen Garden Companion: Cooking
Stephanie Alexander
(Lantern, \$50)



Broccoli Carbonara

The inclusion of broccoli is a “ring-in” addition to a classic way with spaghetti. I prefer to use penne for this variation as it seems to complement the weight of the broccoli pieces.

Serves 2

- salt
- 250g penne or pasta of choice
- 350g broccoli, cut into small florets, stems peeled and cut into thin rounds
- 3 free-range egg yolks
- 2 tbsp pouring cream
- 2 tbsp grated parmesan
- 2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 75g streaky bacon, cut into thin strips
- sea salt and freshly ground pepper

Preheat oven to 100C and put an ovenproof serving dish inside to warm. Fill two big heavy-based saucepans with lightly salted water and bring to the boil over high heat. Drop penne into one and boil for about 12 minutes or until al dente. Drop the broccoli into second pan. When water returns to the boil, cook for 2 minutes exactly, then scoop broccoli with a slotted spoon into a colander resting over a large mixing bowl. Put egg yolks, cream and parmesan in a bowl. Lightly whisk and set aside. When pasta has 3-4 minutes cooking time left, heat olive oil in a big heavy-based non-stick frying pan over medium heat and saute bacon until it starts to crisp. Tip in broccoli and toss. Drain pasta in a colander, reserving a spoonful of cooking water. Immediately add pasta to the broccoli and bacon mixture. Toss to mix. Add reserved pasta water to egg mixture. Remove frying pan from the heat, then tip in egg, cream and cheese mixture and shake to thicken. Transfer to the heated serving dish and season to taste. Serve at once.

