

Labour of Love

This teacher and cook believes there are many lessons to learn in the kitchen, writes **Julie Hosking**.

Haruki Nishimura is one lucky boy. Mum Julia Busuttill Nishimura is an Australian of Maltese heritage with a passion for Italian cooking while Dad Nori specialises in the cuisine of his native Japan.

Of course being two, Haruki doesn't truly appreciate the delights of his dinner table just yet. "He's so fussy, it's typical," Julia says with a laugh. "Although when we were in Japan recently he ate everything, even things I wouldn't eat, like slimy pickles. But of course when we got back to Melbourne it was straight back to normal!"

But the fact that the toddler is in the kitchen, getting a feel for ingredients – even if that means just smearing his little fingers through the flour – and absorbing the process is important for this teacher and cook.

"Even seeing the kids in primary school are so happy, and even some of the kids who don't engage in other subjects, they just love being in the kitchen," Julia says. "It's mindfulness all the way and also you create something and have immediate satisfaction, it's really special."

The Italian teacher hasn't had as much time for the classroom of late. She's been on the event circuit promoting her first cookbook. Named after her popular blog, it's a generous serving of fresh ingredients, simply cooked, made to be shared. "Ostro", she writes in the introduction, "is the Italian name for the southerly Mediterranean wind and the word also shares roots with the etymology of the name Australia. To me it represents my Maltese heritage, my other home in Italy, as well as the here and now in Australia."



Family time Julia, Nori and Haruki. PICTURES ARMELE HABIB



Lemon olive oil cake

The secret to this wonderfully simple cake is rubbing the lemon zest into the sugar. The citrus flavour intensifies and permeates through the whole cake, which stands impressively tall.

Makes one 20cm cake

Ingredients

- finely grated zest and juice of 2 lemons
- 300g caster sugar
- 3 eggs
- 300ml full cream milk
- 300ml extra virgin olive oil
- 300g self-raising flour, plus extra if needed

Preheat the oven to 180C. Grease a 20cm round cake tin with butter and line with baking paper. In a large bowl, rub the lemon zest and sugar together until the sugar is fragrant and damp. Add the eggs and whisk until pale and thick. Add the milk, olive oil and lemon juice and whisk well to combine. Sift the flour into a separate bowl and make a well in the centre. Slowly pour in the wet ingredients, mixing until just incorporated. The batter should be quite wet – the consistency of a thick pouring cream. If the batter is runnier than that, mix in a little more flour. Bake for 45-50 minutes until golden and a skewer inserted into the middle comes out clean. Leave to cool in the tin for a few minutes, then turn out on to a rack to cool completely.

It was in Italy, where she regularly went to brush up on her language skills, that Julia really unlocked her passion. While she was always cooking – “my family is huge with food” – a year as a nanny in southern Tuscany seven years ago took it to the next level.

“It was really life changing. That’s when it really hit me that this is something that I could do all the time,” she recalls. “The girl I looked after was 13 so she was at school all day so I would just stay with the nonna, who lived next door, and we would just cook together.

“I really learnt how to make pasta properly. And everything really. We lived next door to a pecorino farm and down the road we’d go get our fresh ricotta. We had a tap with olive oil in the kitchen, with a presser for the olives from the farm. I was probably 22 and I was like ‘woo-hoo, this is amazing’.”

Although she’s quick to point out her parents had a similar philosophy growing up. “I just didn’t really appreciate it then,” she says, laughing. “I’d be like ‘can’t we go to Hungry Jacks’, when we’d be podding broad beans in the backyard or something.”

When she came back to Australia, Julia began putting some order to her myriad notebooks packed with tips and recipes, mostly from her adventures in Italy. As more friends begged her for recipes, she started her blog.

“I’ve been writing there for about four years now, which is not long, but then (influential blog) The Design Files really championed me,” she says. “I made a cake for a rooftop screening, it was actually for Julia and Julia, and I kind of became known as the cake person. I was baking cakes for people’s events and shops.”

And there are lots of delicious cake recipes in the book. As well as the kind of rib-sticking dishes that lazy Sundays are made for. But one of the most inspiring chapters is devoted to pasta, which Julia is adamant you don’t need fancy equipment or special skills to master.

“Pasta somehow can be really intimidating,” she says. “But really it’s just food and you don’t want it to look like it’s just come out of a packet. If it’s a bit bumpy and rustic, that’s totally OK. I feel a bit sad when people say they can’t make pasta because you totally can, it’s like play dough!”

In the book, she tells of a visit to Japan where friends in the countryside wanted her to cook some fresh pasta. “I set off to the local supermarket to see what I could find. I settled on my favourite pasta orecchiette – which needs only flour and water – and managed to find some herbs that I could use in a sauce. I didn’t need any specific equipment and instead, we all sat around the dinner table drinking sake and making the pasta by hand. The pasta not only tasted wonderful but cost very little too.”

This is the heart of Julia’s philosophy: that cooking

should be as much a joyful, sharing process as eating. She loves making pasta by hand, dipping her fingers into the mortar to test for taste when making oil, and the feeling of warmth a hands-on approach brings.

While Julia has started to cook a lot more Japanese, she describes Italian as her go-to food. “I can see what’s in the fridge and easily make something really delicious,” she says. “I don’t want people to think they have to make fresh pasta during the week, when you’ve got half an hour, because that just turns it into something really stressful. If I had to make pasta at 6 o’clock with my two-year-old when he’s having a meltdown, no way.”

So while she promotes the joy of leisurely cooking at the weekend, there are lots of simple, midweek dishes – such as roasted cauliflower and wheat salad and tray-roasted chicken with grapes, olives and walnuts – to whip up in no time.

The cookbook has been a long time in the making, not least because Julia was also juggling motherhood and teaching.

“I was actually approached a few years earlier,” she recalls. “I was at the farmers’ market in Carlton and the publisher came up to me and said I know who you are – which is really funny – and let’s chat, but I was like eight months pregnant so it was bad timing. I never thought I would write a book but it really planted a seed and I started working a little bit more methodically.”

The end result is even better than she could have hoped for. “I’m beyond happy to be honest. When I received it, I cried. We shot it at home and our home isn’t fancy. I don’t have any fancy linen at all, but I kind of wanted people to see it,” she explains. “For me food is so much a part of my everyday life I really don’t think twice about it.”

While she’s still coming to grips with her first cookbook, I suggest the next one could be a real family affair. “Nori is such an amazing cook,” she says. “I’d love to do more with Japanese food too because that’s another area where people think it’s really difficult to cook but I’ve learnt from Nori that it’s like a handful of ingredients and just technique.”

But it’s those Italian lessons from her Tuscan hosts for which she remains forever grateful.

“They really influenced it so much, they were so nurturing,” she says, though they weren’t shy with their criticism, either. “I was always in charge of making pasta for lunch and there were all these critics at the table. They would comment it’s a bit dry or not enough salt in the water. Even the 13-year-old was like ‘well you could have done this better!’” She laughs again. “But I appreciated it. I couldn’t have learnt from better people.” **WW**



Roasted onion and bread salad

This is a hearty salad and a great way to use up stale bread. The onions really are the star of this dish, thanks to a long, slow roast in the oven.

Serves 4 as a side

- 2 large red onions, each cut into 8 segments
- 2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil, plus extra if needed
- 1 tbsp balsamic vinegar, plus extra if needed
- 3 thyme sprigs
- sea salt
- 2–3 slices of day-old sourdough or crusty bread (about 150g), torn into 3 pieces
- 30g walnuts
- handful flat-leaf parsley leaves, roughly chopped
- 50g wild rocket

Preheat the oven to 170C. Place the onion in a small bowl with the olive oil, balsamic vinegar and thyme. Season with salt and toss the onion so it is well coated. Arrange in a small baking dish or tray and bake for 1-1½ hours until golden and caramelised, stirring every so often to ensure it doesn’t burn. Set aside to cool. Arrange the bread on a baking tray. Bake for 10–15 minutes until toasted and golden. Meanwhile, lightly toast the walnuts in a dry frying pan over a low-medium heat for 1-2 minutes until just coloured. Combine the onion and bread in a large bowl and toss so the bread soaks up some of the dressing. Add the parsley and rocket and mix well. Check the balance between the oil and vinegar in the dressing and drizzle with a little extra olive oil and vinegar as needed. Season to taste with salt and serve.

Ostro
Julia Busuttli
Nishimura
(Pan
Macmillan,
\$45)

