

My Grandmother's Wartime Recipes

Rationing began to trickle in during 1940, and by 1941, when the U boats were sinking any merchant ships coming anywhere close, there was a feeling that the Nazis were trying to starve everyone out.

My grandmother, ready to battle any culinary challenge, created her own handwritten recipe book, and here are a few of the more intriguing dishes that came out of the Second World War.

Toad in the Hole

Author's note: My DC writing group had a highly entertaining time guessing what on earth this could be when it appeared in one of my manuscripts. Naturally, they wondered if perhaps their British friends were eating frogs, but I quickly assured them that frog-eating is most definitely the reserve of the French. In reality, the dish consists of sausages in a pancake- or Yorkshire-pudding-style batter, baked in the oven.

A spot of research later revealed that the recipe was probably named as such because of the sausages (originally it was pieces of left-over meat) poking out resembled toads sticking their heads out of holes. Why this name presented itself as the best of all options is anybody's guess.

Even today, it remains a common dish, and I remember it fondly as a school dinner with sausages (two per serving) and sometimes gravy. During the war—especially after Spam was imported en masse from the US beginning in 1942—Spam in the Hole became de rigueur.

Ingredients

1 lb sausages (or Spam)
1 oz of butter, margarine, or dripping
5 oz flour
Salt and pepper
1 egg (or 1 tbsp dried egg powder)
2 tbsp water
1/2 pint milk or milk and water

Method

1. Pre-heat the oven to 400 F, 200 C, or Gas Mark 6
2. Place a cooking dish or tin, with the butter or margarine in it, into the oven for 5 minutes
3. Add the sausages, prick and cover in the cooking oils, and cook for 5-10 minutes
4. Increase the temperature to 425 F, 220 C, or Gas Mark 7
5. Make the batter by mixing first the dry ingredients and then slowly adding in the water and milk
6. Pour the batter over the sausages and bake for 30 minutes, or until the batter is risen and golden brown

Lord Woolton Pie, Grandmother-style!

Author's note: This famous World War II dish was invented by a Savoy Hotel chef for Lord Woolton to entice the British public to eat meat-free during the heavy rationing—for the latter part of the war it was reduced to around one pound of meat per week. It is essentially vegetable pie, and even a desperate people very often found it wanting.

My grandmother's recipe, however, added some extra flavor in the form of chopped liver. Offal, which wasn't rationed until 1942, played an impressive part in her cooking. Heart stuffed with vegetables was a favorite, as was liver pate.

She was also notoriously fond of using wild mushrooms, collecting them from various local haunts, even if it took stealing into a neighbor's garden at night.

Ingredients

1 lb potatoes
1 lb carrots
1 lb cauliflower
1 lb swede (rutabaga)
1 leek
1 onion
1/2 lb mushrooms
Chopped, fried liver (or sausage)
Fresh parsley
1 or 2 teaspoons of marmite (yeast extract) or stock
1 heaped tablespoon of oats
Salt and pepper
4 oz flour
2 oz margarine

Method

1. Chop and fry the onion, leek, mushrooms, and bacon in margarine
2. Chop all the other vegetables, put them in a big saucepan, and just cover with water, add stock (or marmite) and oats, stir well, bring to the boil and simmer for 15 mins
3. Drain, mix in the onions and bacon mixture with plenty of salt and pepper and a teaspoon of margarine, then place in a pie dish
4. Make the pastry by chopping margarine into small pieces and rubbing it into flour until it resembles bread crumbs, then add a little water and make a dough
5. Roll out the dough and place over the pie dish, making a few holes with a sharp knife
6. Glaze with a little milk or water, and cook at 180 C for 20-30 minutes until the pastry is golden brown

Nothing Patties

Author's note: My grandmother's mother spent her early life in colonial India, and as a result, my grandmother was brought up on curry. She made exquisite Indian food throughout her life, all based on her mother's recipes from India. Her "patties" were especially popular at parties, and here is one of my personal favorites, which she called "nothing patties" as they didn't contain any meat.

Ingredients

A large onion

Three or four potatoes

Cooked and chopped vegetables (carrots, cabbage, parsnip, swede, beans, peas, green lentils)

1 tsp turmeric powder

1 tsp cumin powder

1 tsp coriander powder

1 tsp chili powder

A few cloves

1 egg (or powdered egg during the war)

Salt and pepper

Butter, margarine or vegetable oil for mashing and frying

Method

1. Chop and fry the onion in butter or margarine, add the spices and salt and pepper
2. Peel, chop, and boil potatoes, then mash with a little butter or margarine
3. Put all the ingredients in a bowl and blend
4. Make patties with your hands
5. Place in a hot frying pan and fry until browned on each side

Homity Pie

Author's note: This delicious pie was supposedly created by land girls—the young women who went to work in the farms after all the men had left for war. They'd bake it during the evening to take out to the fields for the next day. Delicious!

My grandmother's parents lived next door and had a good vegetable garden that kept them well stocked for these veggie favorites. They also had chickens, which provided extra eggs and an occasional chicken to roast. My uncle, who was six or seven, helped out on a milk round and was presented with an extra pint of milk every day, and also admits to stealing brambly apples, illegally fishing, and even poaching rabbits. But the family's real luck lay in having an uncle with a farm, where frequent visits could mean a brace of pheasants, or even a duck or two.

Ingredients

4 large potatoes
2 large leeks
Handful of spinach, chopped
1 egg
butter or margarine
4 oz mature cheddar
Parsley and thyme
Salt and pepper
Pastry made with 6 oz flour and 3 oz margarine, butter, or lard

Method

1. Make the pastry by rubbing fat into flour to make breadcrumbs and then binding together with a little water
2. Roll and fit the pastry into a greased 8" pie dish, and half-bake it in a 200 C oven for 10 minutes
3. Cube potatoes and boil until cooked through, drain
4. Chop leeks and fry in butter or margarine, adding parsley and thyme
5. Add potatoes to pan of leeks with a whisked egg, 2 oz of the grated cheese, and salt and pepper
6. Put mixture into the pie dish on top of the pastry, then top with 4 oz of cheese (or more if you have more available in your cheese ration as it completes the pie beautifully), a sprinkle more of thyme and pepper
7. Cook in oven at 220 C until the top is browned

Mock Banana

Author's note: There were a lot of “mock” recipes during the war, most of them hardly resembling what they were supposed to—“mock apricot tarts” made with carrots, “mock cream” made with butter and sugar, “mock goose” with breadcrumbs, sage, vegetables, and potatoes. But here, my grandmother made every party a success with “mock banana” sandwiches. Who would have been able to tell the difference?

Ingredients

2 parsnips
4 tsp sugar
1/2 tsp banana essence

Method

1. Peel and dice the parsnip and boil for 15 minutes, or until soft
2. Drain and add the caster sugar and banana essence
3. Mash until smooth

Pink Gin

Author's note: My grandmother's favorite tippie, the Pink Gin, is a traditionally Naval concoction that makes the consumption of Angostura bitters—used for seasickness—more convivial. Since my grandfather was a Naval Commander, she probably concluded that drinking Pink Gin showed support for his role, I suspect. However, by the time I was old enough to ask, she told me that everyone drank it throughout the war as Angostura bitters were easy to come by, unlike tonic water. In any case, it looked rather fancy, didn't it!

Ingredients

A measure of Plymouth Gin (Plymouth Gin being sweeter and less dry than London Gin)
A dash of Angostura bitters
Water and ice to taste