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How Nigella got her groove back

THE CULINARY QUEEN SERVES UP CHRISTMAS CAKE AND DISHES ON LIFE POST-DIVORCE

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KYLIE KWONG
SETS HER
ULTIMATE TABLE

FESTIVE FARE
FROM DONNA
HAY, SILVIA
COLLOCA,
SARAH WILSON
& VALLI LITTLE

YUMMY GIFTS
FOR FOODIES

sunday

Style

AUSTRALIA'S BIGGEST GLOSSY

OUT OF THE FIRE

New book, new series, new life chapter: Elaine Lipworth chats to Nigella Lawson about living in the present, how food brings her serenity and why she'll never pass up Christmas pud

I'm happy with as many Christmas lunches as I can get under my belt," concedes the world's reigning culinary queen and original domestic goddess, Nigella Lawson. "I love Christmas lunch." It's still a few weeks away from the start of the festive season but in London, where I'm talking to Lawson about her new cookbook, *Simply Nigella: Feel Good Food*, there's a frosty bite in the air. The shops are already glittering

with wintry decorations and Lawson is swept up in the yuletide spirit. The cookery writer and TV chef is planning more than one celebratory dinner this year, but reveals the main get-together – with her children, Cosima, 21, and Bruno, 19, plus her sister Horatia's family – won't take place on December 25 "because of the difficulty of getting all the family together in one place, so it might be an early Christmas". Nor will Nigella be ►



playing hostess at her new West London home, which she bought following her acrimonious divorce from art dealer Charles Saatchi. "I did all the cooking last year, so my sister is doing it this time in her house," she explains.

The pressure may be less, but Lawson isn't off the hook entirely. "I'll definitely be doing a bit of the cooking," she says excitedly. "I'm very trad! We always do turkey, although I'm bringing my black-treacle ham. My sister loves it so much, so I shall be crossing London with a roast ham on my lap." So, does that mean Christmas will be an exclusively family affair? "Well, it depends, because lots of people go away at this time of year, so I like to 'hoover up' and invite seasonal strays," Lawson says. "At Christmas, it doesn't matter where people sit. The year before last, I had 35 over – and believe me, I don't have 35 chairs, so some people had to bring chairs and I rented two trestle tables." One thing is for certain, however: Lawson will be on dessert duty. "I always do my Christmas pud," she continues. "But [Horatia] is putting in a request for my Christmas puddini bonbons and I'm also going to do a Bundt cake of some description."

While bonbons and Bundt cake may be on the festive menu, the 55-year-old doesn't look like she's been indulging lately. Beautiful, with luminous skin, and dressed in a black Gap top over black Topshop jeans ("black is an easy uniform and I like it"), she's looking very slim. Yet while Lawson has been practising Iyengar yoga regularly, she assures me her svelte figure isn't the result of dieting. "I'm my children's only parent, I'm getting older and being healthy is important to me," she explains. "Feeling that I should be in a smaller dress size would involve going against my nature in the sense of what my physique is. I would have to undereat and I think that's incredibly bad for you."

Lawson's image has also undergone a transformation. The trademark plunging necklines have been replaced by checked shirts from the Japanese chain Uniqlo, and on her book's cover she's dressed in a crisp, white shirt. "It's not a deliberate change," she says. "I know a shirt isn't exactly



A FULL LIFE (clockwise from above) Lawson (left) in 1965 with her father, mother and sister Thomasina; in 2014 with her children Cosima and Bruno; with ex-husband Charles Saatchi in January 2012; her new London home; at a book signing in Toronto this month; sporting a trademark plunging neckline, circa 2000.



flattering but, when I'm wandering about the house, that's the sort of thing I wear. And I thought, I'm not going to dress up."

With a wholehearted enthusiasm for her recipes that's guaranteed to propel even the most reluctant cooks into the kitchen, Lawson's voice is deliciously rich, like a slab of very dark chocolate, which makes all her culinary explanations sound mouth-watering (for lunch, she cooked "cauliflower and chickpeas with pomegranate seeds"). I ask the cooking icon if she's aware that among her legion of admirers is Oscar-winning actor Helen Mirren, who once told me she's a huge fan

of "the goddess Nigella". Lawson lights up. "I didn't know that. That's wonderful. I idolise Queen Helen! She's extraordinary."

Mirren, and many others, have been rooting for Lawson during her tumultuous recent years. She split from Saatchi after shocking photos of him grabbing her around the throat while sitting outside at a London restaurant made headlines around the world in 2013. More drama followed when their personal life was played out in court during the fraud trial of the former couple's assistants, who were subsequently cleared. Lawson won't discuss her ordeal and questions pertaining to her personal life are off-limits, but it's clear she's emerged in a positive state of mind. In the introduction to her (as always) chatty book, she says her hopefulness and playfulness have been restored; *Simply Nigella: Feel Good Food* seems like a metaphor for her new life.

"I stumbled on the crux of the book when I was making my apricot almond cake with rosewater and cardamom," she explains. "I was thinking how ushering forth this cake induced in me a feeling of cosiness and serenity, and I felt I'd got to the stage in my life that what I was creating in my new home and my new

kitchen... it's about feeling an enormous sense of light. The food is uplifting and the comfort you get from it makes me feel restored and full of vitality."

She says her book is partly influenced by Australian cuisine, most notably the "vibrant flavours". Lawson, who is visiting Australia in the New Year to promote her book and to film *MasterChef*, is a fan of our food and our landscapes. "I absolutely love the big skies and the amount of light there," she says. "The cooking has such a wonderful mix of old civilisation, but also a feeling of freshness. There's a lot of Asian and Greek influences in Australian food; it's something entirely new that's its own entity and I find that exciting."

It may surprise many to learn that Lawson wasn't always a food-lover. She grew up as one of four children to British Conservative politician Nigel Lawson and society queen Vanessa Salmon, alongside brother Dominic and sisters Horatia and Thomasina (who died of breast cancer in 1993 aged 31). "I hated food as a small child; I loathed mealtimes and that was the only time you ate," she says. In fact, the only enjoyable meals Lawson recalls as a child were cooked by her grandmother. "It would be high summer, 30 degrees and, being a granny and not a parent, she'd let me eat whatever I wanted. I'd always say, 'I'd like a bowl of buttered spinach and a hot chocolate.'"

Cooking, however, was always in her DNA and, over time, Lawson learned to love it. "My mother [who died of liver cancer in 1985 at the age of 48] was an incredibly good cook. She made us cook. Every time I cook a chicken with lemon, I think of her." Lawson was equally inspired by traditions she created with her late sister. "There are a lot of DIY meals in *Simply Nigella*. We always used to make what we thought of as indoor picnics. We used a lot of condiments, relishes with bread and bits that you add things to – that was very much our culinary currency together."

Lawson is obviously a resilient woman. She says food makes her "feel connected to life in a positive way", so it makes sense that it's helped her bounce back from her recent troubles and the previous tragedies of her

life, including the loss of her mother and sister, and the death of her first husband, John Diamond, also from cancer, in 2001. For Lawson, cooking is therapeutic. She frequently uses words like "calm" and "cosiness" and, rather poetically, describes, "the serenity that baking induces; a transformational feeling".

As we return to the ubiquitous subject of dieting and how futile it is, Lawson expresses her concern about "the fixation our culture has with thinness". Speaking from personal observation, she remarks: "When people come to my house for supper, I would never expect anyone to eat something sweet if they didn't want to, but I've noticed how all the people who say, 'Oh no, nothing for me' – and, sadly, this is nearly always women – get a fork out and start picking at the cake. In the end, they've eaten much more than everyone else! So, the thing is, if I feel like chocolate cake, I'll have a slice." Lawson pauses for a moment. "You know, my mother had an eating disorder, so I felt very strongly that I was not going to be tyrannised in that way. Also, if you've known three people you love very much die of cancer, you do not equate extreme thinness with healthiness.

"I have an emotional relationship to food, but I don't use food as emotional ballast," she continues. "If something isn't

But she also adds, "I don't feel like me when I don't cook. I find it such a great way of decompressing from the day."

She says cooking doesn't have to be complicated, either. "So many people think it means restaurant cooking, but it doesn't. It means throwing a few things together, putting it in the oven or stirring something in a pan. I'm not referring to something that has split-second timing and requires enormous concentration and dexterity."

Do Lawson's family and friends get intimidated when cooking for her? "No, my friends who I've had for so long mock me because they know who I am!" she laughs. "If one of them has a new boyfriend or girlfriend and they're coming over for supper, I always feel they're going to be rather disappointed, because people think they're going to have a restaurant meal and then there's a chicken tray bake. There are no culinary masterpieces. It's home food and it's supposed to make people welcome."

Life, says Lawson, "is a bit full-on at the moment, but that's a good thing". She seems fulfilled and talks about living in the present ("A good life is a full life, don't waste your time"). Getting older doesn't concern her, either. On the contrary. "I never lie about my age," she says. "My mother died at 48, my sister died at 31, my first husband

"I DON'T FEEL LIKE ME WHEN I DON'T COOK. IT'S A GREAT WAY OF DECOMPRESSING FROM THE DAY"

right, you can't make it right with food, but certainly it improves the quality of my life to eat well. And that, for me, is an intrinsic part of living well."

Lawson also has no time for what she calls the contemporary mantra of 'clean eating'. "I don't like the term because I hate the implication that the other food is dirty and therefore something to be ashamed of," she says.

Even though food and cooking comprise a large part of Lawson's life, she maintains it isn't *who* she is – life revolves around motherhood, her family, friends and books ("I read as greedily as I eat").

died at 47. So, when people can't get old, that's the tragedy. The notion that somehow getting older is a bad thing is really strange to me, because the alternative is worse."

Wise words from an inspiring woman who's making the most of every minute. **S** *Simply Nigella* airs on Foxtel's *LifeStyle FOOD*, Wednesdays at 8.30pm from December 2. *Simply Nigella: Feel Good Food* (Random House, \$59.99) is out now. Thanks to delicious magazine, you have the chance to meet Nigella over lunch at Supernormal in Melbourne, on Monday, January 18, 2016, at 12.30pm (\$140pp for five courses with wine). To book your place, call (03) 9650 8688.

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DATE AND MARMALADE CHRISTMAS CAKE

THE TASTE OF A TRADITIONAL PUD, MINUS ALL THE WORK

This cake tastes like Christmas pudding – a very, very good Christmas pudding. It's rich, damp, treacly and so heady, it doesn't even need the traditional alcohol in it. It also happens to be gluten- and dairy-free, and is a last-minute cake, so very useful if you haven't got round to making that traditional recipe that needs to be baked ahead and fed with brandy for six months.

I like to use a wonderful homemade marmalade, which is bitter and rather soft set – it's a miracle I can keep it long enough to use in this cake. But there are many good marmalades out there in the shops. Just bear in mind that the dates have their own rich and fudgy sweetness (on top of all the other dried fruit), so don't go for anything too jammy; in other words, choose a marmalade with treacly depth, and one that provides that frisson of bitterness.

And while I adore the deep caramelly taste of medjool dates, if you wish you can use dried dates – the sort styled “ready to eat” – in their stead.

One last thing: the finely chopped almonds came, as did the ground almonds, from a packet – any chopped nuts would do, but that nubby texture, among all the plump-soaked fruit, is most desirable.

250ml strong black tea
500g medjool dates
150g natural colour glacé cherries
150g dried cranberries
150g sultanas
175g dark muscovado sugar
175g coconut oil
2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
2 teaspoons ground ginger
½ teaspoon ground cloves

200g good-quality marmalade,
plus extra to brush on the cake
200g ground almonds
100g chopped almonds
3 large eggs, beaten

Preheat the oven to 150°C. Using a 20cm springform cake tin as a template, cut out a circle from baking paper for the bottom, and then make a lining for the sides of the tin that is about 6cm higher than the height of the tin itself. Do this by making a very long rectangular strip of baking paper, then fold the long bottom edge in by about 2cm, as if turning up a hem, then take a pair of scissors and snip into this hem at intervals as if to make a rough frill. Curl this around the inside of the tin, with the frilly edge flat on the bottom, and then sit your baking paper circle on top of the frilled bit to hold it in place.

Make your tea: I just pour 250ml boiling water over a tea bag, let it steep, and make sure I take out the bag before adding the tea to the pan. Remove the stones from the dates, and snip each date into 4 pieces, using scissors. Halve the glacé cherries, also using scissors. Of course, you can use a knife if you prefer.

Get out a saucepan that will take all the ingredients, including the tea, and put everything in it except for the almonds and eggs. Place on the heat, stirring to mix, and stir every now and again until it comes to a bubble. Then turn down the heat and let it simmer for 10 minutes, stirring frequently. The stirring not only helps the dates break up and “dissolve”, but it also keeps the

heat even and stops the mixture catching on the bottom of the pan. After 10 minutes, take the pan off the heat and let the batter stand for 30 minutes; an hour wouldn't matter.

Stir in the ground and chopped almonds, followed by the beaten eggs, and when it's all combined – though frankly I could eat the batter just like this – pour it into the prepared tin and even out the top with a spatula, then bake for 1½–1¾ hours. The sides will be coming away from the tin, and the cake, while squidgy, should leave only a slight stickiness (rather than any actual batter) on a cake tester.

Remove to a wire rack, brush with about 3 tablespoons of marmalade and let the cake cool in its tin (if your marmalade is firm, you may need to warm it a bit first to make it brushable – 20–30 seconds in the microwave, or warmed through in a small saucepan, should do). Leave for a day before eating. I like to brush a little more bitter marmalade on top again before slicing and serving. Obviously, feel free to decorate further and more seasonally if you wish. Serves approximately 14.

TIPS

– The cake can be made one week ahead. Wrap the cooled cake in a double layer of baking paper or greaseproof paper and a layer of foil. Store in an airtight container in a cool place.

– Once cut, store the cake – still wrapped in baking paper and foil – in an airtight container for up to one month.



SWEETEST FEELING
This recipe is from Nigella Lawson's new book, *Simply Nigella: Feel Good Food*.