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DON'T SWEAT THE AUBERGINE

What works in the kitchen and why

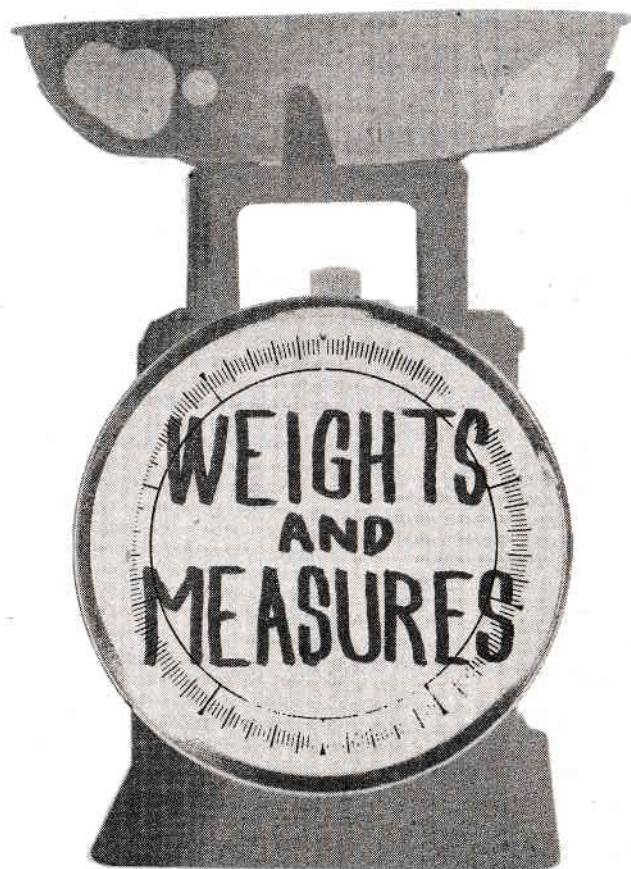
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BLACK SWAN

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Weights and Measures

Metric	Imperial	Fl oz (UK)
142ml	1/4 pint	5fl oz
284ml	1/2 pint	10fl oz
568ml	1 pint	20fl oz
1.1 litres	2 pints	40fl oz
2.3 litres	4 pints	80fl oz

Metric	Imperial
28g	1oz
57g	2oz
113g	4oz
227g	8oz
454g	1lb
1kg	2lb 3oz
1.5kg	3lb 5oz
2kg	4lb 7oz

Pan and cake tin measurements

20cm = c8in

23cm = c9in

28cm = c11in

1 tbsp = 2 dstsp = 4 tsp

1 heaped tbsp flour = c28g

Until I came to write this book, I had no idea how much Parmesan I put into a spaghetti carbonara. About 25g for two, I discovered (p118). It seems to be in excess of what most recipes recommend. Perhaps I should be more restrained: my quantity probably unbalances the dish. But I continue to grate the cheese self-indulgently, because I like strong flavours, and I worry that only a couple of tablespoons of Parmesan will fail to make much impression.

'Yes – oh dear, yes – the novel tells a story,' E.M. Forster wrote. Oh dear yes, a cookery book must have recipes. You'd be right to complain if I simply told you to use as much Parmesan in your carbonara as you liked. But the precise measurement is a necessary convention of the cookery genre. You need to interpret it – just as, Forster thought, you should look beyond the narrative surface for the most important stuff of a novel. With an outline of what works, you can decide on your own preferences. You might prefer less Parmesan. You might prefer Pecorino. Or Cheddar.

Quantities in recipes fall into three categories: guides to how much people will eat; guides to appropriate flavourings; guides to the chemical behaviour of the dish. The first two tend to be open to interpretation; the last usually has to be followed accurately. To generalize, the instructions in the savoury section of this book – with the exception of the Sauces chapter – mostly fall into the first two categories; in the Cakes and Puddings chapter, the third category is more prominent.

Imperial measurements, officially discarded, linger in the compositions of many standard recipes. You'll notice, for example, that the quantities in the béchamel sauce (p46) correspond with more memorable imperial equivalents: 1oz of butter, 1oz of flour, 1/2 pint of milk. The batter (p225): 1/2 pint of milk, 4oz of flour, one egg. Sorry: the metric versions just aren't so neat.

TEMPERATURES



Temperatures

Gas mark	Celsius	Fahrenheit
1/4	110	230
1/2	120	250
1	140	285
2	150	300
3	160	320
4	180	355
5	190	375
6	200	390
7	220	430
8	230	445
9	240	465

An oven thermometer won't cost you very much. If the reading it gives you from the central shelf of your oven corresponds with the reading on your oven dial, you have a rare cooker. A publisher friend, wanting her colleagues to try out recipes in one of the company's books, got them to test their ovens first: there was a 50°C variation between ovens at the same setting. My own oven is hotter than the dial tells me it should be.

If a recipe tells you to cook a soufflé, say, at gas mark 5/190°C, you need to be cautious if your oven will generate a heat of 220°C at that setting.

Different sources give different gas mark/celsius conversions. Some say that gas mark 4 is not 180°C, as I have asserted, but 175°C; some, that gas mark 7 should be 210°C;

and so on. I must admit that I don't know what the correct readings are. I don't trust my own oven to give them.

Put your thermometer on an oven rack and check the temperature. Now put a pan of steaming water below it. You'll find that the reading goes down. But the steam will not cause the thermometer in a 200°C oven to descend to the temperature of boiling water (100°C). In my experience, the pointer will drop to about 160°C. I cannot expect steam in the oven significantly to slow the cooking of, say, a joint of meat; indeed, it might speed up the process, because it cooks more efficiently than does radiant heat. For this reason, steam does not, as many cookery writers imply, help to keep meat moist.

Another popular way of trying to keep meat moist is by wrapping it in foil. Steam builds up inside the foil; again, the meat may emerge drier than it would have done if left uncovered.

According to Harold McGee (*McGee on Food and Cooking*), foil deflects a good deal of heat energy that radiates from the oven walls, ceiling and floor. When I put a loose tent of foil around my thermometer, left it for half an hour, and took a reading, the reading was just as high in the foil as it had been outside it; but perhaps we're talking about the kind of heat rather than the temperature. Foil does give protection to certain foods. Whole garlic cloves, for example, go dry and bitter very easily if placed naked in an oven; surrounded by foil, they become mild and tender (see p158).

Cookery books use such formulae as: 'Put in a gas mark 3/160°C oven for an hour and a half.' That's because writers don't have enough room to give, every time, instructions along these lines: 'Put in a gas mark 3/160°C oven, but keep checking to see if the liquid is bubbling too fast or too slowly; if it's bubbling too fast, and the liquid is reducing faster than

the potatoes are cooking, turn down the heat; if there's little activity in the dish, turn up the heat; you want a very gentle simmer to allow the potatoes to cook while the liquid slowly reduces and thickens' (see *Gratin dauphinois*, p188); and, even if they did have the room, they think, with justification, that readers would find such qualifications offputting. Just give us an instruction that will work!

I am sorry to tell you that there are very few dishes that you can just put in the oven and forget about, confident that they will take care of themselves in the time the recipe specifies. Please bear this warning in mind when you read the recipes in this book, or in any other books. My oven may be hotter or cooler than yours. My roasting pan or casserole or gratin dish may be thicker or wider, or made of a different material. The meat in my stew may take longer to tenderize than the meat your butcher sold you. These factors mean that oven settings and times that work for me may not work when you try them.

It's worse than that: settings and timings that work for me one week let me down the next. I put a gratin dauphinois into the oven at 190°C, leave it for an hour, and come back to find it still swimming in milky liquid. Next time, the same settings and utensils produce a dried-out concoction sitting underneath a burned crust. I have to turn down a stew to the lowest oven setting because it's bubbling too vigorously; the next stew, in a 150°C oven, declines to show any activity at all.

You haven't failed if your food doesn't behave in the way the recipe writer tells you it should. Everyone has to improvise. The oven setting is not the point; the point is the result you want to achieve. Don't approach roasting with the notion that you have to start cooking your meat in a 200°C oven for 25 minutes; think about the browning reactions you want to

generate. If 25 minutes in a 200°C oven achieves them for you, good. Don't take it as a rule that you should cook a stew in a 140°C oven; the rule is that you want the stew just to blip a little as it simmers. Turn the oven up or down until you get the effect you want. Even then, you need to be watchful. A stew that blips gently after 30 minutes may be boiling furiously an hour later.

Then, to add another layer of complication, there are fan ovens. I don't have one, so I'll quote Jenny Webb, who, as author of *The Fan Oven Book*, should be authoritative. Fan oven owners can set their ovens at 10 to 20 degrees Celsius lower than recipes advise, she told readers in a *Guardian* piece on the subject, and can expect cooking times to be reduced by 10 minutes in the hour. My advice (p217) about roasting belly pork on the floor of an oven is redundant if your oven has a fan, which in theory will make the bottom of the oven just as hot as the top.

On the hob

Here, too, you have to do a certain amount of fussing. Some foods need fast-boiling or steaming: pasta, rice, green vegetables (see the relevant chapters). Meat that you're cooking quickly (a steak, for example), or that you're browning before stewing, also needs cooking at a high heat; but be watchful. A frying pan with oil can get hotter and hotter, and the heat under it needs to be regulated if the food is not to end up blackened rather than browned.

Stews (see p227) should cook at a very gentle simmer, with only a few bubbles blipping at the surface: subjected to a pummelling from fiercely boiling liquid, meat dries up in protest. This low heat can be difficult to maintain on a hob,

especially in a casserole with the lid on, because the build-up of steam will raise the pressure in the dish, causing the liquid to bubble more vigorously and at a higher boiling point. A heat disperser will help, as will leaving off the lid. But the liquid in an open pan will evaporate.

Sometimes, you want evaporation: to thicken a sauce, or to concentrate its flavour. You have to adjust the heat under a pan in order to get the rate of evaporation you want; and remember, if you want less or thicker liquid in a stew, and if the gentle simmer is evaporating the liquid too slowly for your liking, you'll have to take out the meat before you turn up the flame. If the meat endures rapid boiling, it will go tough.

In preparing recipes that involve sauces, the trick is to have the sauce at just the right consistency at the moment you want to serve it. Good luck. If you get it wrong (if, say, your tomato sauce is as thick as you want it before you've started cooking the pasta), you cannot put the lid on the pan to arrest the evaporation, because the sauce will start bubbling more vigorously and will most likely stick to the pan base. You'll just have to turn it off and warm it up again later; or, if the pasta will be ready quite soon, put the pan of sauce (or the sauce decanted into another container), covered, into the bottom of a very low oven.

EQUIPMENT

This is not a comprehensive list. I don't have very much to say about cheese graters, lemon squeezers or sharp knives, except that if you want to grate cheese, squeeze lemons or cut things up, they are, you know, just the job.

Heat disperser

A metal disc – they used to be made of asbestos – for inserting between a pan and the ring on a hob; it tempers the heat, and spreads it more evenly. Cost: £5 each, or less. Buy a couple.

Of course, it's nice to have decent, thick-bottomed saucepans. But for many jobs – boiling or steaming vegetables, boiling pasta – rubbish pans will do. If you need the pans for more delicate tasks, such as warming through mashed potatoes or other cooked vegetables, use a disperser to imitate the task – of imparting heat evenly – that a thick bottom would perform. Making a flour-thickened sauce such as béchamel in a cheap pan can be disastrous, because the pan's base gets too hot, rapidly thickening the liquid in contact with it, and causing that liquid to stick and scorch. With the aid of a heat disperser, the pan imitates a far more expensive item.

Hobs on cookers usually generate more heat, even in solid, expensive pans and casserole dishes, than the simmering of sauces, stocks and stews requires. Use a heat disperser.