

Wine and dine: Carla Powell follows the 'one for the pot, one for the cook' principle

MY COOKING is spontaneous and undisciplined, which some friends claim reflects my character. I rarely plan dishes and menus in advance. I can never remember the precise quantities and measurements that the writers of cookery books insist upon. So I end up following my instincts — and usually it works.

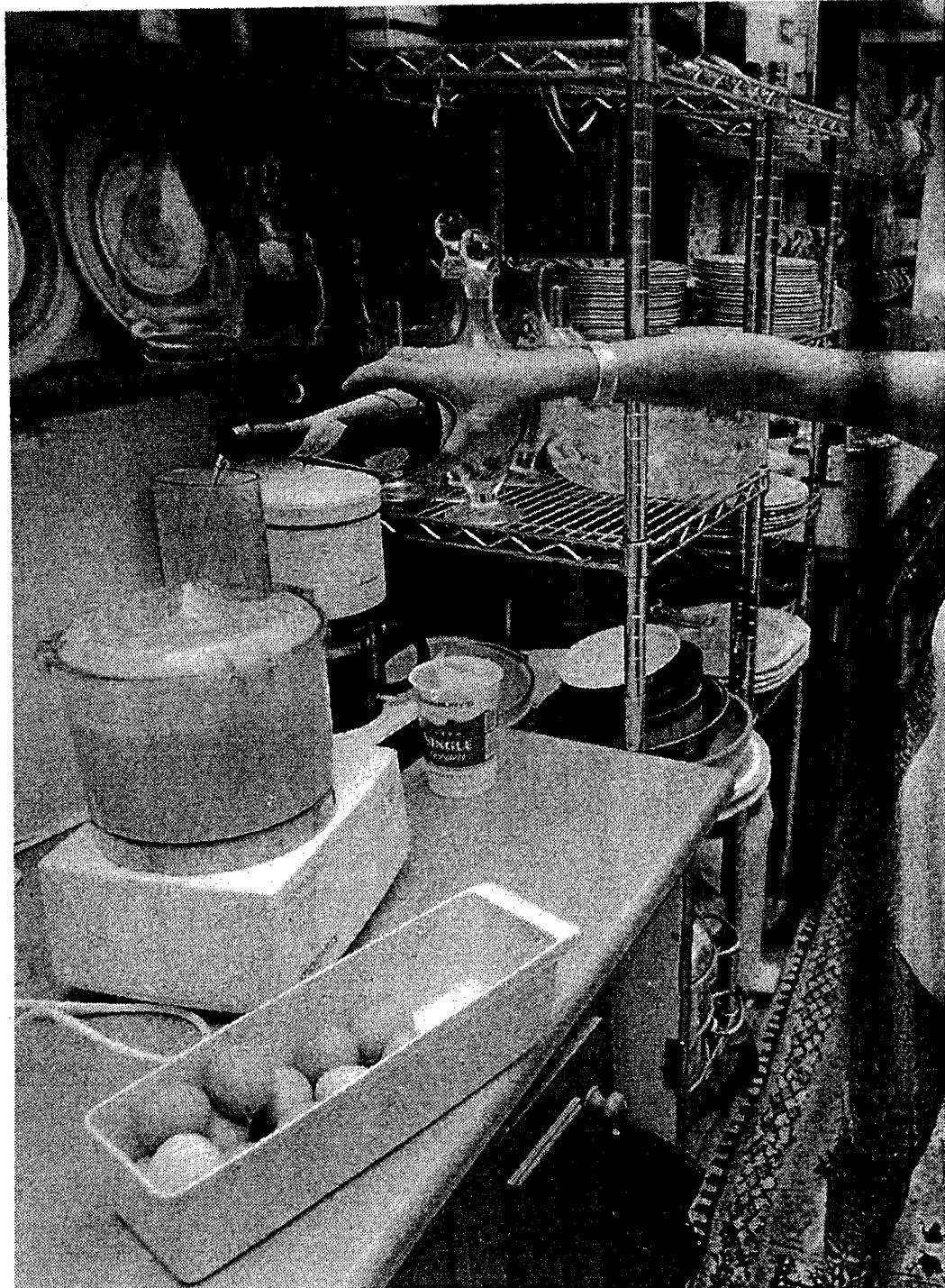
People used to agonise about sex education or the lack of it. In my case, lack of cooking education was the problem. My husband, Charles, claims that on the morning after our wedding he found me with an egg in one hand and a frying-pan in the other, and no idea what to do with either. Although we ate only omelettes for the next six months, I was a quick learner.

There have been three decisive events in my culinary education. First, as a child walking with my peasant nanny in the mountains and forests of northern Italy where I was born. Not only did she teach me to love garlic but, through her, I learnt to recognise all the edible plants, berries, mushrooms and herbs.

I knew what was good for tummy ache and hair loss, what would cure anything from toothache to warts. Knowing how *not* to poison your family and guests is an advantage. I also learnt as a child to be greedy and that is the most important step in becoming a good cook.

The second influence was the wife of the first ambassador for whom we worked, in Finland, where my husband was a young diplomat. She took pity on his unremitting diet of omelettes and set about teaching me the rudiments of plain English cooking. My husband still classes her with the saints and martyrs, because she taught me dishes that he regards as essential to the preservation of life on this planet, such as hot spotted dick and baked jam roll.

Third, was the *New York Times'* star political journalist and gourmand, Johnny Apple. It took an American to teach an Italian girl how to prepare Italian food. His



Political hostess and self-taught Italian cook **Carla Powell**

basic lesson was to find out what fresh ingredients were available locally and in season wherever you happened to be, and only then decide what to cook. Using the best of local fresh produce is the key to good cooking.

On trips to Italy, I stock up on everything — basil, rosemary, peperoncino, salami, tomatoes, Parmesan cheese and, most importantly, extra virgin olive oil — to the point where my husband refuses to sit near me on the plane on the grounds that I am a cross between a Sicilian immigrant and a bag lady. Whenever I visit my father in Italy,

I always fill my luggage with smoked salmon, cured cod and bacon on the journey out and return with it crammed full of parsley from his garden.

For formal dinners these days I am fortunate enough to have a brilliant and adorably handsome young French chef: I just sit in the kitchen and ogle him.

But then I do still cook for spontaneous, short-notice lunches and weekend meals at the kitchen table for whichever friends happen to be around. For these, I favour simple Italian dishes such as minestrone and

risotto, or pasta with fresh tomatoes and basil. I am a great user of markets — Smithfield, Billingsgate and Covent Garden — to get fresh ingredients.

CASUAL lunches and dinners put a premium on speed in the kitchen, so I usually prepare a stock of broths and sauces in advance — tomato sauce for pasta and meat dishes, and a mix of Italian parsley, garlic and extra virgin olive oil for soups — and store them in coffee jars for the week ahead. And I love spices. I keep a huge pot of...

that for I; fres and nent; the pot, is al am; that cool. A; are and but abo; pres; illeg



Powell dishes out her secrets

that I had specially blended for me in the souk in Syria.

I also have plenty of grated fresh Parmesan in reserve and a bottle of wine permanently at the ready, following the principle of one for the pot, one for the cook. My bin is always full of bottles, but I am never really sure whether that is a sign of good or bad cooking.

All my favourite saucepans are pre-Second World War and completely disgusting, but I don't think cooking is about elegance. My Fifties pressure cooker is probably illegal it is so old, with so much aluminium, but it still

does very well for me when I am preparing broths and minestrone.

So my advice can be boiled down to three words: simple, fresh and quick. This kind of cooking is real Italian cooking, otherwise you spend all day in the kitchen. And I bet even the best Italian restaurants cut corners, but, of course, they would never tell you about it.

My recipes serve four and I have tried to include measurements. However, please feel free to improvise.

● *Thane Prince returns next week.*

The recipes

Ten-minute sabaglione

The key to this is to use fresh eggs. I am lucky enough to have good friends who deliver them from the country, although I constantly pester Charles to let me keep chickens in the garden. He thinks they smell, but surely it is worth it for those gorgeous yellow yolks.

4 eggs (yolks only)
4 tbsp caster sugar
250ml/½ pint white wine
4 tbsp Amaretto di Saronno

BLEND the egg yolks and the sugar. In a separate jug, mix the wine and the Amaretto di Saronno. Have a double saucepan of water simmering, so that you can bring it quickly to the boil when you get up from the table. Set the microwave to two minutes to warm the wine and simultaneously revive the blender.

While the blending is in progress, pour in the wine gently. Then transfer the mixture to the double saucepan and stir for three to four minutes with a wooden spoon. As soon as the mixture is fluffy, it is ready. All done in four minutes, barely missing your guests' conversation.

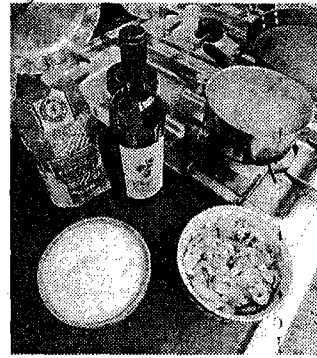
(Don't worry if you don't have Amaretto di Saronno — improvise. The other day I used something called La Vieille Prune, which I had brought back from my son's wedding in the Dordogne — delicious and potent. Really, though, people worry too much about these details, it is like all that snobbery with fizzy or still water — it is all water. The same thing with alcohol, so long as it is alcohol just shove it in.)

Serve with panettone.

Risotto de frutta di mare

I have used frozen mussels and fresh shrimps because I know they are good at my local supermarket.

400g/14oz mussels
255g/9oz small squid
140g/5oz uncooked prawns, unshelled
310g/11oz Italian rice
2 cloves of garlic, finely chopped
1 medium onion, chopped
1 shallot
4 good-size handfuls of grated Parmesan
3 tbsp olive oil
300ml/12 fl oz fish stock
300ml/12 fl oz white wine
Black pepper
Salt
Rosemary (I grow this in the



garden and use a lot of it)
125ml/¼ pint single cream,
1 carrot
1 stick of celery

FIRST prepare the stock. In a large saucepan boil 1 litre/2 pints of water, with a shallot, a carrot and the stick of celery, plus all the prawn shells. Add salt and pepper and leave to bubble away.

Next, in a large, heavy-bottomed pan, heat the olive oil so that it covers the bottom of the pan and in it sauté the chopped onion and garlic. Add the uncooked rice and stir it into the oil until it is shiny all over, taking care not to let it stick to the pan. Throw in all the fish stock and the wine if one go (ignoring all those people who insist you should add cupfuls of liquid little by little and stand there stirring constantly). It is terribly important that you use a lot of wine and, if need be, you may have to add more later. I haven't a clue how long rice takes to cook — I just keep tasting until I feel it is about to go on the turn. When the rice is just soft enough, add the mussels, prawns and squid and let them get hot. Throw in the single cream, the Parmesan and the parsley sauce (see below) and put the flame up very high for about one minute. Serve immediately.

Parsley sauce

I prepare this whenever I get a free moment and keep bags of it in the freezer. Then I pull it out randomly and use it in the same way other cooks season with salt and pepper, in risottos and pasta dishes.

4 healthy bunches of parsley
1 bulb of garlic
300ml/12 fl oz extra virgin olive oil

PEEL the garlic cloves and chop finely. Chop the parsley, stalks and all. Purée the garlic, parsley and oil in a blender. Cool and freeze.