

# Celebration time: LET'S EAT!

Historic moments should always be accompanied by a feast, says Sue Bailey



**T**he recent pictures of socially-distanced street parties for the VE Day celebrations made me both happy and sad. Back in January I was already planning my menu (and my outfit) for the day. However, it was not to be. We could not predict that current events would so mute our debt of gratitude.

For me, any celebration, whether personal or general, is always associated with food and feeding people – what I will cook for our wedding anniversary dinner; the cake I want to make for my daughter's birthday; Easter lunches and Christmas canapés and Burns Night haggis...

When I was leafing through my collection of vintage cookery books and leaflets for inspiration for my abandoned VE Day party – anyone remember the flour manufacturer Be-Ro's booklet – it struck me how much the make-do-and-mend attitude has spilled over into my baby-boom generation.

Among the recommended party fare for the celebrations was cold sliced breast of lamb. Any 30- or 40-year-old would now wonder what a rolled breast of lamb was. I remember stuffing and roasting one in my school home economics lessons in the late 1960s. Now, the descendant of this cheap but flavoursome roast would be a slow-cooked, garlic-basted lamb shank.

Post-war, thrifty cooks would make blanquette of chicken – a simple mix of chopped chicken coated with plain white sauce, plus parsley. To dress it up for a celebratory meal, housewives would turn this into a ring mould, chill it, and coat it with glossy gelatine. Then it would be filled with tinned mixed vegetables, and topped with the obligatory parsley sprig. Now this chicken chaud-froid is not to be seen – it would be far too plain.

It's odd to look back at what we had for our wedding more than 35 years ago. We went against tradition by having a fork buffet rather than a sit-down meal, but had some fancy gelatine-based salmon and trout mousses



covered with cucumber slices, which were classics at the time. In addition, of course, chicken and mushroom vol-au-vents and stuffed eggs and coronation chicken. In a Cambridge college setting this was the height of style.

Our daughter's wedding last summer was full sit-down, but their gourmet choices included smoked breast of duck and an amazing meringue-based confection as the wedding cake, with smaller meringues and raspberry coulis as dessert.

How trends change. Dessert for the VE Day masses, and a favourite choice for the street parties, was a celebration trifle made with eggless sponge, spread with jam and soaked with sweet sherry. Then a layer of tinned fruit, jelly made from a jelly tablet or homemade, and thick custard. Halved ruby-bright glacé cherries and angelica cut

in diamonds to look like little leaves decorated the top. I remember trifle still being my mother's favourite pudding 25 years after the war.

I wonder how many readers also have a sneaking liking for a good trifle. Why not rustle up one this summer when we hopefully can also celebrate our own lockdown liberation?

So what else will be on the menu for my post-lockdown celebration party, when I can finally meet my friends and family in person again, rather than via Zoom? I will make my favourite: a spicy and savoury filo pastry pheasant and almond-based pastilla. But I think that I will also revisit salmon mousse, using my fish-shaped mould from our wedding – it deserves an outing again, like me. ■

*'Dessert for  
VE Day was a  
celebration trifle'*