

# Heed the wisdom of MOTHER

We can learn from the wartime generation when it comes to cooking in difficult times, says Sue Bailey



**W**e now have to adjust to the new normal. My mother says that living through the pandemic feels like when she was little at the end of the war. She wondered why the adults were still so worried – remember that rationing and shortages carried on until the mid-1950s.

So, with a war spirit in mind, how did people survive? I chatted to friends and looked at my collection of wartime recipe books. Some obvious points stood out. They coped by being economical, keeping things simple but flavoursome, and did not waste food. People planned meals and ate traditional British greens and root vegetables. When possible they used pearl barley, oatmeal, oily fish and pulses. It was important to grow and eat salad as suggested by the then Ministry of Food.

When I was at teacher-training college I met Marguerite Patten, who was a home economist in the Ministry of Food tasked with improving the nation's diet. I remember her saying that it was illegal to hoard more than four weeks un-rationed store cupboard supplies because it imposed an unnecessary strain on the supply system.

We still have access to a very wide variety of foods. However, perhaps we need to go back to appreciating basic cooking skills such as how to make bread, stock, soups and casseroles. Don't forget the equipment that might be lurking in cupboards – bread-makers, pressure cookers and slow cookers. All three are good ways of getting into batch cookery. Add pulses for extra protein or in place of meat and remember that the wise use of long-life, preserved and tinned foods will also help. Use the freezer to store batch cooking for later use.

Be positive and harness people's generosity and initiative by seeing what you can learn from older friends. We can support, talk, and share dishes to help each other. Once you get a feel for being confident with cooking from scratch, then the fear of not being able to get the exact ingredients as suggested by a recipe allows for artistic creativity.

With children, cooking can be a fun part of everyday life. Try sprouting seeds. With an increasing number of people



*'They coped by keeping things simple'*

self-isolating, beware the comfort carbs and snacking. Audit your store cupboard, monitor best-by dates and use up your ancient spices. Recipe books – take time to read and check out those recipes to use the odd ingredients lurking in the larder - I am going to make dried-lime Persian vegetables.

Although we are living in difficult times, this will not last and it is a fantastic opportunity to develop new skills and resilience. So take advantage of recipes that also stretch ingredients, and perhaps do a bit of careful foraging. Above all, keep calm and carry on!

What I have read: Jack Monroe's book *Tin Can Cook*. She came to fame with her blog about cooking on a budget and now writes for *The Guardian*. I have also dug out a copy of my favourite book by Elisabeth Luard about cooking from the larder.

What I've foraged: wild garlic leaves picked from a secret spot to make pesto – always leaving the patch to look as if no one has taken anything.

Where I have shopped recently: lovely outside markets in Ely, St Ives, and Cambridge for safe, seasonal produce, plus it supports independent suppliers as much as possible. Farm shops are also good.

Of course, these options are going to be denied to us in the days of total lockdown, but I will dream of them from my living room and make a point of supporting small businesses when we are allowed to return to the outside world. ■