

The first lady of the TV Kitchen

Food historian Sue Bailey reveals how her interest in Fanny Cradock – the first TV celebrity chef – has led to a new career (and why the famously snooty chef's legacy lives on)

In my normal life I am a university lecturer, writer and food historian on television. But I have a guilty secret: in my spare time I forget academia and embrace my alter-ego. I shed my sensible work clothes, slip on diamanté shoes, a ginger wig and a blood-red ballgown and become the first female TV celebrity chef: Fanny Cradock.

Why do I do this? And why do I love Cradock even now, more than a century after she was born? She was a controversial character (not least for her personal life) and her recipes may seem outdated, given that she died more than 25 years ago at the end of 1994, but I still think she has a well-deserved place in our food history. Which is why I love dressing up, remembering what she achieved and how she is still inspiring people to this day – including me.

In her forties, Fanny wrote her first cookery book and became a newspaper columnist. But this was after surviving marriage and widowhood when she was pregnant and 17, then leaving behind her second marriage and younger son as she couldn't divorce her alcoholic Catholic husband. Taking her first son to London, she was too poor to look after him properly so when he was four his paternal grandparents took him over. After her third actually bigamous and short-lived marriage, she met the married Johnnie Cradock.

Fanny and Johnnie combined their love of food and wine to become a research, writing and presenting team. Fanny's forceful ambition and gift for reinvention enabled her to become a

journalist, radio and television presenter, writer and food celebrity, supported by Johnnie. Her exaggerated style and brightly coloured dishes made her memorable for many years on our TV screens. But her fall from grace came when she humiliated gentle Devon farmer's wife Gwen Troake by grimacing and gagging about her over-rich menu on Esther Rantzen's Big Time Cook of the Realm talent contest in 1976. Audiences were shocked and perhaps the tide was turning against Fanny's own brand of excess.

Just to be clear – I don't dress up for my husband (also called Johnnie), I recreate Fanny's wit, retro-food and dishes for food festivals around the country. As her, I resuscitate some well-loved dishes from her stage and television performances from the 1950s to the 1970s. Delights such as Liptauer cheese dip stabbed with salty pretzels, wobbly jelly bunnies, the famous 'no-crack' Swiss roll and upright banana 'party candles' with slivers of glacé cherry 'flames'.

Fanny provided a much-needed sparkle and an escape from post-Second World War rationing for the pre-baby boomer generation. In fact, food writer Marguerite Patten (who died aged 99 four years ago) praised her as 'the post-war saviour of British cookery'.

Even though it is more than 25 years since Fanny's death, everyone over a certain age knows of her. She appeared in cocktail dresses with Johnnie as her hen-pecked partner, never wearing an apron, because as



Sue Bailey in character as Fanny Cradock

she memorably once said: 'Only a slut gets in a mess in the kitchen.'

When I asked my mother if we used to watch Fanny together she said: 'I can still remember Fanny on the television screen – she was very didactic and she used to boss Johnnie around monstrously. He was often bumbling around in the background. She had a very posh voice, not disagreeably so, she just made you listen. She did know what she was talking about.'

My mother and I agree that although Delia Smith really taught you



Fanny promoting her TV show in 1967 and, above right, with her husband Johnnie



appearances online and she was suddenly very popular again.

To find the period-appropriate recipes I researched Fanny's early 1970s weekly part-work series and worked out how to demonstrate the most party-appropriate and slightly scary dishes, such as stuffed blue-egg canapés. But in this media-savvy age simply researching and reproducing recipes was never going to be enough. Then I had an epiphany – what if I resurrected not just Fanny's recipes, but also her character and her life?

My first challenge, however, was to perfect her unmistakable look – plaster-thick foundation, line-drawn eyebrows and bright red lips, plus a ginger wig. My daughter suggested using glue to flatten my eyebrows, rather than shaving them off, as Fanny possibly did. We then layered foundation over them and she carefully drew the highly arched eyebrows back on.

Hosting my first sell-out Christmas party for the Museum of Cambridge,

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how to cook, she never had the forcefulness of Fanny. Like Mary Berry early in her career, Fanny also did cookery demonstrations for the Gas Board. I remember being inspired at school after going along to the gas showroom where home economists did the demonstrations.

As a child growing up in the 1960s, my parents loved having drinks parties, with savoury cheesy footballs, vol-au-vents and my mother's brilliant smoked-mackerel pâté, all courtesy of the Cradock legacy. However, Fanny would have added choux pastry swans swimming on a mirror-glass lake and I should have offered to make them as, by then, I was studying home economics at school.

Fast-forward a few years and after training as a secondary school teacher specialising in nutrition and food technology and flirting with sixth form teaching and journalism, I moved into

lecturing in London while bringing up two daughters with my husband.

While lecturing full-time, I can say with certainty that Fanny did not feature largely in my life as I was working and bringing up our children – does anyone with a job and two young daughters have time to make latticed deep-fried potato baskets and aspic-topped cold ham soufflé?

But then, a few years ago, I faced redundancy. My husband and I wanted to move out of London, so we relocated to Cambridge. Although I was still running my university course, I wanted to stop commuting, so began to look at different options and started researching Fanny's life and work.

Retro food was making a comeback and I wondered why. Museums kept asking me about her and what she was really like. A BBC docudrama about her life had aired, videos of her performances were making regular

planning an eight-dish demonstration and preparing all the period food with limited facilities was more nerve-racking than performing as Fanny. Somehow, as soon as I started to talk about her life, I started to love resuscitating the recipes and showing how perfectly feasible they were. I found it very easy to bully my poor assistant and deal with a somewhat inebriated Johnnie – who performed his part to perfection.

Unlike Fanny, who was married four times, twice bigamously, I am still with my (first) husband who assists me in my performance as Major Johnnie, complete with glass of good red wine.

Johnnie and Fanny started by reviewing hotels and restaurants post war in a column titled Bon Viveur for the Daily Telegraph. Johnnie's knowledge of wine and Fanny's critical tongue to give them the exposure to launch into cookery exhibitions ▶

and then television work. Fanny and Johnnie didn't marry until she was 68, but to give her respectability she adopted his name by deed poll shortly after she met him. By the late 1980s their popularity had much waned when Johnnie died aged 82 of lung cancer, a few years before Fanny.

So why do people still have a fondness for Fanny? I think that people loved her ability to make cooking fun and I appreciate the way she encouraged people to be imaginative and focus on seasonal food. Although her dishes often looked extravagant she always had an eye on 'the purse'. She was fascinated by food, cooking techniques and elaborate presentation from an early age. Her natural flair for drama and entertainment, combined with her love for food and constant stream of new ideas led to her enduring success.

As the late Clarissa Dickson Wright, half of the television success story *Two Fat Ladies*, and a flamboyant personality herself, said: 'Fanny can be given credit for turning cookery into entertainment.'

Fanny and Johnnie performed their Kitchen Magic demonstrations around the country, including a famous one for 6,750 people in the Royal Albert Hall. She was on television for more than 30 years, produced more than 45 cookery books and highlighted food as an experience.

A large part of Cradock's motivation was to educate, particularly inexperienced and young cooks, but some criticised her for producing the worst possible mix of bastardised Cordon Bleu with posh ingredients. Arguably, her use of green food colouring for duchess potatoes was odd but others strongly insist that she knew what she was talking about regarding food. She advised going back to French basics and all of her recipes which I've tried - from her part-works, her books and her booklets to accompany her television series - work, so try them! On the right are two which have stood the test of time. ■



Fanny's famous no-crack Swiss roll

- ◆ 4 free-range medium eggs, fresh as a button
- ◆ 25g caster sugar, sifted – and heated to warm to give extra volume
- ◆ 125g self-raising flour, sifted
- ◆ 1 tbsp hot water
- ◆ Extra caster sugar for dusting
- ◆ Filling of your choice – half a jar of apricot jam combined with buttercream is delicious
- ◆ 125g unsalted butter
- ◆ 250g sifted icing sugar

1 Line a 25cm x 38cm Swiss roll tin with baking parchment. Preheat your oven to 180C/200C, 350F/400F, gas mark 4/5.

2 Place the eggs and sugar in a bowl and whisk until the batter is at the 'ribbon' stage (if you lift the whisk the mixture will fall slowly in a single ribbon that will hold its shape) and looks like a pale lemon cloud. I wrote Johnnie's initial in the top, so it's quite firm.

3 Make sure you have sieved the self-raising flour, otherwise you will need to beat the mixture for twice as long and there will not be enough air in to 'lift a single hair on poor old pussy's tail'. Gently add the flour to the batter and fold in a figure of eight motion. Or, as I do, with a large silver spoon cut around the sides and down the middle. Check that all the flour is well incorporated and do not overmix, as this will make the sponge heavy.

4 Pour the mixture evenly into the lined Swiss roll tin, holding the tray up to let the mixture run into the corners completely. To make sure it is nice and even, a firm tap of the tray on the work surface will remove any large air bubbles.

5 Bake for 6 to 8 minutes on the middle shelf. It should be springy to the touch, look like a golden feather bed and gently wrinkly, like my husband Johnnie.

6 Meanwhile, cut a



Fanny's slightly alarming blue egg barrels

piece of baking parchment slightly larger than the tin, place on a clean slightly damp tea towel, and sprinkle it with caster sugar to roll the sponge in.

7 Remove the sponge from the oven and allow to cool a little. While still warm, turn the sponge out upside-down onto the parchment, so that the tin's lining paper is uppermost and the sponge is lying on the caster sugar. Gently peel off the lining paper.

8 Roll up with the lining paper still in it then beat the sieved icing sugar with the butter to make a lovely light buttercream. Unroll the sponge and leave it until it is completely cold. Then spread the jam on first, followed by the buttercream. Carefully roll up the sponge, *et voilà* - a perfect, no-crack Swiss roll.

...and here are Fanny's egg barrels, or *ouefs à la Riga*

- ◆ Hard-boiled eggs
- ◆ Green food colouring
- ◆ Home-made mayonnaise
- ◆ Anchovy fillets
- ◆ Paprika

1 Plunge the chosen number of hard-boiled eggs into a large bowl of cold water which has been coloured fairly strongly with green vegetable food colouring. Leave for an hour or two and they will turn a fetching shade of turquoise.

2 Remove, wipe carefully and cut a small slice from the end of each egg to let them stand up. Then slice a lid from the top of each one.

3 Encircle the cut surface of each egg with a strip of anchovy fillet. Fill a piping bag with mayonnaise and using a rosette nozzle, pipe little peaks on top of each egg and perch the lids on the side. Dust with paprika to finish. Enjoy and admire!