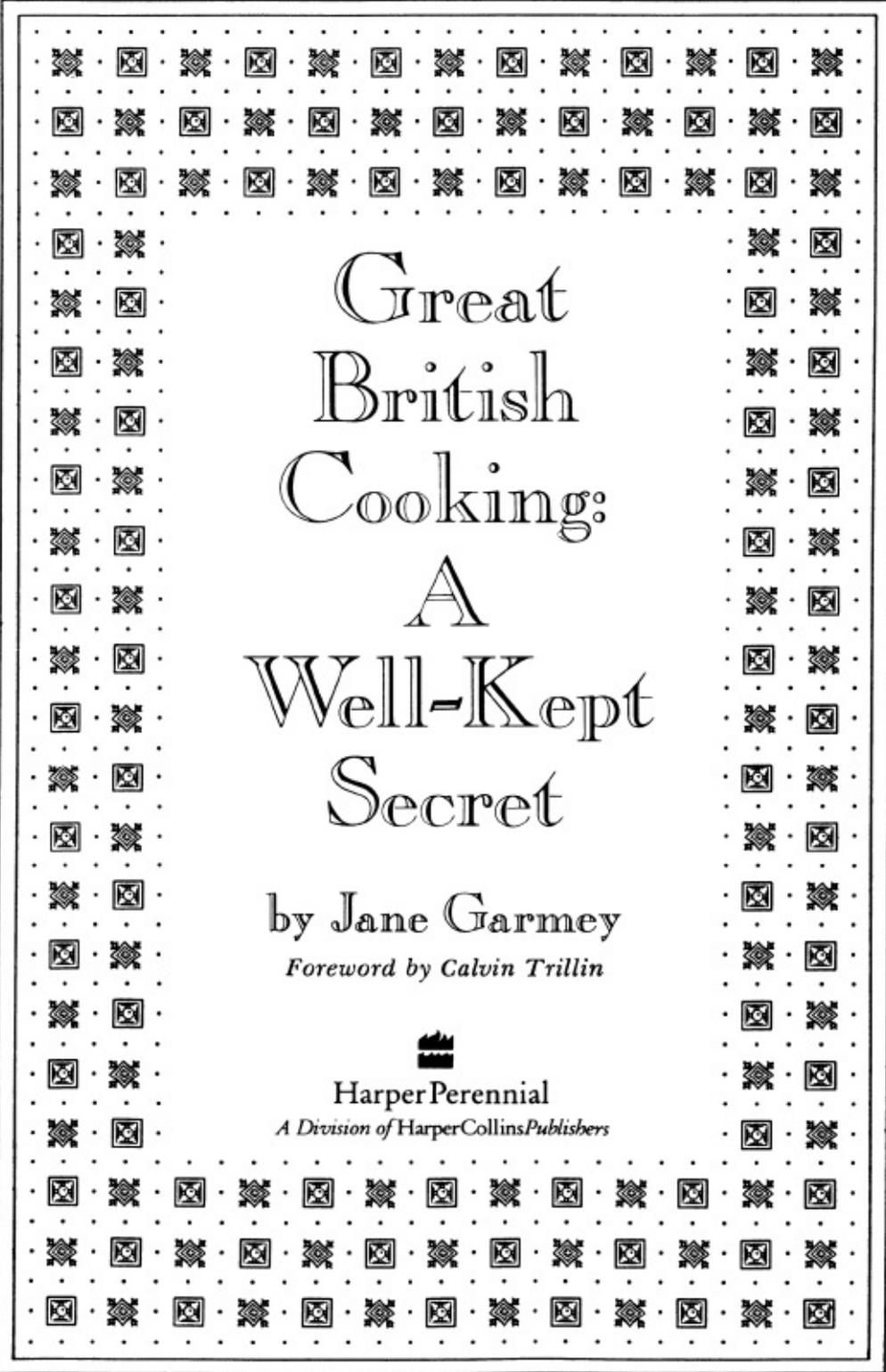


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Great British Cooking

A Well-Kept Secret

Jane Garmey



Great
British
Cooking:
A
Well-Kept
Secret

by Jane Garmey

Foreword by Calvin Trillin



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Dedication

FOR STEPHEN AND EDWARD

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Dedication

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Foreword BY CALVIN TRILLIN

“It’s certainly unfair to say that the English lack both a cuisine and a sense of humor,” I said, as we were about to leave for Jane Garmey’s house to try an authentic English meal. “Their cooking is a joke in itself.”

“I suppose you’ve prepared for this dinner party by polishing remarks like that all day,” my wife, Alice, said, using the voice she employs to indicate that she is resigned to being embarrassed by my behavior yet again.

“Only partly,” I said. “I have also taken the precaution of eating dinner. Do you think they’ll have a crane?”

“A crane?” Alice said. “I’ve never heard of anybody eating crane.”

“Not that sort of crane,” I said. “A hydraulic crane for lifting the dessert. Haven’t you ever seen them serve one of those ‘trifles’ at an English café? ‘A little to the left, Alfie. That’s it. Lower away. Steady as she goes.’ Why do you think I try to avoid restaurants in London where the waiters are wearing hard hats?”

“I’m sure this meal is going to be a lot better than you expect,” Alice said.

“Well, I was definitely encouraged by the fact that the date was agreed upon only two weeks in advance,” I said. “Jane really hasn’t had time to give the vegetables a proper English boil. Well brought up English girls are taught by their mothers to boil all veggies for at least a month and a half, just in case one of the dinner guests turns up without his teeth.”

“You know very well that Jane is a marvelous cook,” Alice said. “She’s planning to publish an English cookbook.”

“Has she exhibited other self-destructive tendencies in the past?”

“The kind of food you hate so much in England is not really English food,” Alice said.

It’s true that I find the English version of “continental cuisine” particularly loathsome. It consists of stuffing something with something else and covering the resulting atrocity with a viscous goo. I call it Stuff Stuff with Heavy. I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that someone in the Stuff Stuff with Heavy crowd had at some point stuffed a crane with something else or even stuffed something else with a crane. “I always say that with their own food the English are at least fair-minded enough to label the crime,” I said. “In a way, anybody who eats something called Toad in the Hole or Bosworth Jumbles deserves what he gets.”

“Yes, you always do say that,” Alice said. “Maybe you could avoid saying it just for this evening, and then begin saying it again early tomorrow morning.”

“Well, at least we might find out from Jane what Priddy Oggy with Scrumpy Sauce is,” I said, trying to look on the bright side. Once, while driving through Somerset, we found ourselves within a few miles of a restaurant that was identified in the guidebook as specializing in something called Priddy Oggy with Scrumpy Sauce. Hurrying in that

direction, I was tormented with thoughts of how we might be denied the opportunity of at least seeing what Priddy Oggy with Scrumpy Sauce looked like on the plate (I was not committed to eating any). The waiter, I feared, might say “The Oggy’s finished” or “We no longer do Priddy Oggy” or “The only Scrumpy Sauce we’ve got is the tinned.” We arrived to find the restaurant closed—meaning that we seemed fated never to know even whether Priddy Oggy is a main course or something requiring a hydraulic delivery system.

“You love Cornish pasties,” Alice said. “You love scones. You love the hog’s pudding we buy at the Barnstaple market. You love those huge English breakfasts.”

I do cherish breakfast in England. In fact, I have always assumed that the English seem so down in the mouth all the time because they have to go through life realizing every morning before nine that breakfast is over and the rest of the day is bound to be downhill. “You don’t think Jane might serve breakfast, do you?” I asked Alice. “I mean with the time difference and all.”

“There’s something wrong here,” I whispered to Alice when we were halfway through the meal. The main course did indeed have one of those English names—something like Aunt Becky’s Kneecap—but it was delicious. Although I was loath to accuse Jane of not having an English sense of history, the vegetables did not, in fact, taste as if they had been cooking since the Wars of the Roses. The hostess herself, a mere slip of a thing, easily carried dessert to the table with one hand.

“Maybe it’s not really English,” I whispered, as we were eating dessert. Was it possible that Jane Garmey had simply given real food an English name—the way someone might fit out a Rumanian with a regimental blazer and call him Nigel? In the weeks following our dinner, that suspicion faded as reports came in from others who had sampled and loved dishes with names like Cullen Skink and Soles in Their Coffins. I have finally been forced to face the possibility that Jane Garmey knows how to make English food that tastes good. If hidden away in some cupboard in the Garmey household is a French cookbook that has a recipe for something called *La Rotule de Tante Becky*, I’ve been had. Otherwise, my conclusion about Jane Garmey and English cooking is this: She doesn’t really know what Priddy Oggy with Scrumpy Sauce¹ is, but she knows everything else.

Introduction

It is widely held that British cuisine is a dubious affair. As Mrs. Ramsay said, in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*,

“What passes for cookery in England is an abomination. ... It is putting cabbages in water. It is roasting meat till it is like leather. It is cutting off the delicious skins of vegetables.”

“In which,” said Mr. Bankes, “all the virtue of the vegetable is contained.”

“And the waste,” said Mrs. Ramsay. “A whole French family could live on what an English cook throws away.”

This view, while not entirely unwarranted, is nevertheless a caricature. British food like British weather has, in fact, been much maligned. Most visitors to Britain do manage to regard the weather with a kind of benign tolerance, believing, despite the rain, in those famous “bright periods” forever scheduled for some other part of the country. The same visitors, on the other hand, become quite vitriolic about British food, reporting it to be generally inedible, turning it into the helpless target of their scorn and the butt of endless jokes. British cooking has acquired what might be termed a serious image problem. This is particularly unfortunate because it is often quite superb. What presents the real problem for the foreign visitor is that it is hard to find.

British cooking is a phenomenon of the home, not generally available in hotels and restaurants, and the British home, be it castle or cottage, is definitely more impregnable than its American counterpart.

The British, for the most part, are not quick to make new friends; they distrust strangers, feel more at ease with formal introductions and prefer to “break the ice gently.” This makes it difficult for most foreign tourists ever to gain entrance to an actual home and discover that there is more to British cooking than frozen cod steaks, stodge and overcooked cabbage.

Few visitors have ever tasted the delights of a Bakewell Tart, of Cornish Pasties, Marbled Veal or Angels on Horseback. The British, for their part, have now taken so much abuse for what passes as their native cuisine that they have become defensive and self-conscious on the subject, and many have even come to believe that enjoyment of their own cooking is an ethnic eccentricity. In addition, having what is generally regarded as the world's most sophisticated cuisine at their doorstep—the coast of France is less than twenty miles from the cliffs of Dover —has done nothing to help the matter.

It goes almost without saying that in this century the French have established preeminence in the art of cooking, but this was not always so. A spirited rivalry between the cooks of England and France dates back to the Middle Ages. At a banquet

dinner given by Cardinal Wolsey in 1527, George Cavendish, who was his usher and later his biographer, wrote in his diary: “I suspect the French never saw the like.” And while the French influence on the British kitchen was particularly strong in the seventeenth century after Charles II and his court returned from exile across the channel, by the middle of the following century a prominent English cookery text warned its readers that “if gentlemen will have French cooks, they must pay for French tricks... so much is the blind folly of this age that they would rather be imposed on by a French booby than give encouragement to a good English cook.”

In the nineteenth century, the great French chef Carême trained at the Royal Pavilion, Brighton, under the shade of those famous metal palm trees that support its kitchen ceiling. Indeed, a number of other prominent French cooks such as Soyer and Escoffier worked in England and many recipes that people assume to be French have their British counterparts, if not originals. For instance, Crème Brûlée appears quite early as Burnt Cream, and Poor Knights of Windsor is very similar to the French recipe Pain Perdu. However, since cooks are notorious borrowers and thieves, all that this really proves is that no cuisine belongs exclusively to one country. What each country does is to lend food a national character.

British cookery comes from a tradition of domestic cooking. (Incidentally, throughout the book when I refer to “British” food, I am implying food that is served anywhere in the British Isles; “English” pertains to that which predominates only in England.) Not surprisingly, the great cookery writers have all been women: Hannah Glasse, Elizabeth Raffald, Maria Rundell, Eliza Acton and, of course, the incomparable Isabella Beeton, whose *Book of Household Management*, published in 1861, presents an unparalleled guide to the manners, economies and eating habits of the Victorian household. When one realizes that she was the oldest of twenty-one children and died at the age of twenty-eight, following the birth of her fourth child, her achievement seems even more remarkable.

The British cuisine is substantial, for the British are large eaters and believe in four meals a day. At its best, it is a cuisine that is simple, plain and wholesome. Traditional recipes are usually neither subtle nor elaborate; they tend to be practical and uncomplicated and require good raw materials: tender meat, fresh fish and vegetables in season. Rosa Lewis, the proprietress of the Cavendish Hotel and the model for Louisa Trotter in the television series *The Duchess of Duke Street*, expressed this very succinctly in a letter written to the *Times* in 1950:

Good plain cooking is really the best and the best requires no trimmings. My idea of plain cooking is that whenever possible, the article should be cooked when in season and should not be cut up. Let the potato or the truffle stand on its own and be eaten whole.

British cooking has naturally been affected by traditions and tastes from different parts of the British empire: teas from Ceylon and Chutney, Kedgeree and Mulligatawny soup from India. It has also been influenced by that formidable institution, the British nanny. Her nursery favorites such as Bread and Butter Pudding, Spotted Dick and Treacle Tart all hold their place in the domain of British cooking.

Since real British cooking exists primarily within the home and restaurants rarely

dare to compete, the British have developed a strange affinity for dining out in foreign restaurants. Unable, for the most part, to judge the merits and subtleties of an unfamiliar cuisine, they naively assume that the food must be good even when it tastes quite appalling. Meanwhile, in the kitchen at home, the native cuisine remains a well-kept secret, practiced and passed on to successive generations with little or no fanfare. Like many an ethnic cuisine, its livelihood has at times seemed threatened, but in recent years there has been a renewed interest in the art of traditional cooking. Old recipes are being rediscovered and restaurants are even beginning to sneak onto their menus such dishes as Sussex Pond Pudding, Hindle Wakes, Cockie Leekie and Syllabub. British cooking may even be in danger of becoming fashionable.

Most British recipes are easily adapted to the American kitchen. Regrettably omitted from this book are those with ingredients not readily available here, dishes such as Fidget Pie, which calls for two larks, Partridges in their Nightshirts and Jugged Hare.

The collection of recipes I have assembled is in no way comprehensive or complete; it is a personal collection that draws on a number of early cookery books, on my own subjective taste and on the suggestions and ideas of friends. Without their help and in many cases their generous offers of favorite recipes, the book could not have been written. In particular, I would like to thank Robert Abel, Rosemary Bett, Diana Bourdrez, Penelope Burns, Juliet Crump, Esther de Waal, Mary Jane Drummond, Peter French Hodges, Kay Heymann, Joan and Peg Jackson, Susan Newall, Frances O'Malley, Patrick Ranee, Rachel Ryan, Willard Taylor and Hugh Van Dusen. Special thanks are also due to Charlotte Sheedy, who first encouraged me with this venture.

Breakfast

Many visitors to Britain find breakfast a meal of astonishing dimensions. Actually, however, it has been in somewhat of a decline for the past sixty-five years and is nowhere near the size and variety it used to be in Victorian and Edwardian times.

In those days, it was not uncommon to come downstairs and find the sideboard laden with an array of chafing dishes containing such offerings as deviled kidneys, scrambled eggs, kedgeree, potted meat, cold grouse and kippers, as well as porridge, toast, rolls, two or three different kinds of marmalade, jams, jellies, fruit and, of course, tea.

In the eighteenth century big breakfasts were a rural phenomenon and essentially a masculine affair, being consumed in the late morning by the gentlemen of the household after their return from several hours of riding, shooting or fishing. Scottish breakfasts were reputed to be even more elaborate and gargantuan than their English counterparts and Dr. Johnson is credited with saying, "The way to eat well in Scotland is to eat breakfast three times a day."

The Victorians transformed it into a family meal and began to eat it earlier. (Empire builders couldn't dally all morning at their food.) Even in those days, when there was an abundance of servants, it was always the custom at breakfast to serve yourself directly from the sideboard. Possibly this was because people arrived at different times or because the servants were eating their own breakfast at the same time, but it is more likely that it was because the task of bringing at least eight dishes to the table for each person would have been exceedingly cumbersome. The Edwardians continued the tradition of the large, social breakfast. It was not until the First World War that the meal, along with parlormaid and footmen, suffered a decline.

By the time of the Second World War, breakfast as the Edwardians knew it had almost completely vanished. Today, the standard British breakfast is limited to cereal, followed by some combination of eggs, bacon, sausages, tomatoes and fried bread and finishing up with toast, marmalade and tea. Still a not inconsiderable meal, but hardly what it once was!

The secret of the English breakfast is the combination of tastes and flavors. A grilled tomato on its own is good, but served in conjunction with bacon and fried bread, it can become extraordinary. Eggs and bacon is probably the most popular breakfast combination, but especially on weekends, when there is time to read the papers and linger over one's food, it is worth recovering some of the dishes that so delighted the Edwardians.

Porridge

Porridge is Scotland's immortal contribution to the British breakfast. The Scots take their porridge very seriously and many Scottish cooks insist that it must be made with fresh spring water, served in a wooden bowl and eaten with a horn spoon. Whether or not you go to these extremes, Porridge should be served with a little cream or milk and a sprinkling of sugar. *Serves 4.*

4½ cups water

¾ cup oatmeal

¼ teaspoon salt

Bring the water to a rapid boil in a saucepan and then sprinkle in the oatmeal. Stir with a spoon until the oatmeal has been absorbed and the mixture returns to a boil.

Cover and simmer gently for about 30 minutes, stirring from time to time. If it seems too stiff, add a little more hot water.

Add the salt and serve hot.

Kippers

Kippers were first made in Scotland and have become something of a national industry. However, Canadian kippers, which are easier to find in the United States, are usually excellent, too. Canned kippers are suitable for a recipe like Kipper Pâté,² but I would not recommend them on their own for breakfast.

Allow one kipper per person and trim off the heads and tails. Kippers can either be grilled or cooked by the “jug” method.

To grill: Brush the kipper with melted butter and place it under the broiler for about 3 minutes on each side. Remove and serve with a pat of butter on top.

To prepare by the jug method: Fill a large pitcher with boiling water and immerse the kipper in the water for 5 minutes. Drain and serve with a pat of butter. The advantage of this method is that it reduces the strong kipper smell, which tends to linger. On the other hand, there is nothing that quite compares with a grilled kipper.

Creamed Finnan Haddie

This dish takes its name from the fishing village of Findon in Kincardineshire, Scotland, where the fishermen's wives originated the now-famous method of smoking haddock by hanging it salted in their chimneys over a peat fire. While Finnan Haddie is delicious for breakfast, it also makes a good light supper dish. *Serves 6.*

2 pounds smoked haddock
1 small onion, finely chopped
8 peppercorns
3 cups milk
Juice of half a lemon
1 sprig parsley
3 cups Parsley Sauce

Wash the fish and cut it into smallish pieces. Place these in a shallow, heavy pan. Sprinkle the onion and peppercorns over the fish and add the milk, lemon juice and parsley. Cover with a close-fitting lid and poach the fish very slowly until it is just cooked (approximately 10 minutes).

Remove the fish from the liquor and skin and bone it. Arrange it in a serving dish, cover and keep warm.

Follow the instructions for making Parsley Sauce, substituting for Chicken Stock the liquor in which the haddock has been cooked.

Pour the sauce over the haddock and serve with toast.

Kedgeree

Kedgeree is one of the best known of all Anglo-Indian recipes. Although it is traditionally served for breakfast, there is no reason not to have it for lunch or dinner. Serves 4-6.

1 pound smoked haddock fillets
2 tablespoons oil
1 large onion, finely chopped
1 cup long-grain rice
1 teaspoon curry powder
2 ounces butter
3 hard-boiled eggs, chopped into small pieces
½ cup chopped parsley
1 lemon, cut into thin round slices

Place the haddock in a shallow heavy pan and cover it with boiling water. Simmer over low heat for about 10 minutes, or until the flesh is soft. Do not let the water come to a boil again; it should only simmer.

Remove the haddock and reserve the cooking water. Discard any skin or bones and flake the fish into pieces no larger than 1 inch.

Pour the oil into a saucepan and gently sauté the onion for a couple of minutes. Add the rice, and as soon as it becomes transparent, stir in the curry powder. Take 2½ cups water in which the fish was cooked and pour it over the onion and curry mixture. Cook gently until the rice is tender and the water has been absorbed (approximately 15 minutes). Check the rice from time to time to make sure that it does not stick; it may be necessary to add a few more tablespoons of water if it seems to be getting too dry.

When the rice is cooked, add the fish and the butter. Turn into a hot serving dish. Mix in the eggs and the parsley.

Decorate with the lemon slices before serving.

Bacon, Tomatoes and Fried Bread

This is my favorite of all breakfast dishes, provided you can get real, ripe tomatoes. I could happily eat it at any time of the day. *Serves 4*

4 medium-sized, fresh tomatoes, cut in half

1 ounce butter

8 bacon slices

4 thick slices bread, crusts removed

Place the tomatoes in a pan, dot them with butter and cook them under the broiler until they are tender but not soggy (about 5 minutes).

In the meantime, cook the bacon in a frying pan and when it is done, transfer it to a serving dish and keep warm. Turn up the heat and place the bread in the same frying pan. Fry the bread until it is golden on both sides and serve immediately with the tomatoes and the bacon.