

editor

Kirsten Lawson

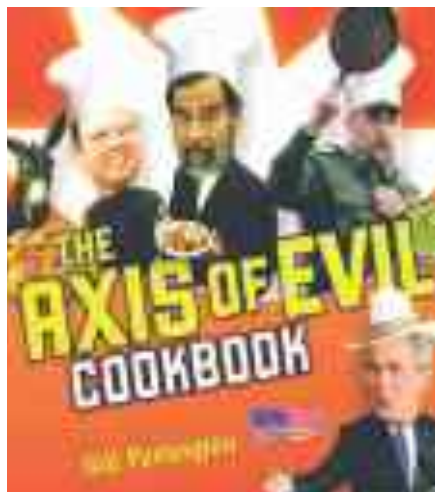


I'm a novice at kids' birthday cakes. They're tough. It gives you a headache, like tying shoelaces when you're five. Or doing mental arithmetic when you're 40. Kids' birthday cakes require you to think a couple of steps ahead. You need a vision, and planning to work out how your cake is going to be cut then stuck together again to resemble, in our house, a shark, a dinosaur, a lizard, and a fairy (none of them did, except metaphysically perhaps).

One of the problems is that the cakes never come out of the oven in nice, even, cuttable shapes, making it hard to match the fairy's arms, say, to a body that's several inches higher. And we have no room for error, because we're always making them at the last minute so they're nice to eat.

Now we discover this is our fundamental mistake – trying to make them edible. Birthday cakes, it seems, aren't about the eating. They're about the looking. This gem comes to us from the *Australian Women's Weekly*, whose new tome (and tome it is, you could use it to weigh down your paskha for Russian Easter) is the subject of our cover story. Its section on kids' cakes has beautiful photographs of quite stunningly exciting cakes. But the cake recipes from the bastions of home cooking at the *Weekly* use a pack of bought cake mix. The making is not in the baking (simply mix according to manufacturer's instructions and throw in the oven), but in the decorating. This is both a revelation for us, and a deep disappointment. We've always made the cakes with Callebaut chocolate and organic eggs. More fools us. Because the end result have been cakes that neither the kids, nor the adults want to eat. They're always anatomically correct – the decorator in our family won't make a shark without the correct dorsal and pectoral fins, plus gills. But they usually look like they've fallen off the bench halfway through the assembly. And when it comes to eating, for the kids, they're too rich; and for the adults, they're ruined by the Smarties used to decorate the top and the smotherings of icing used to stick bits of arms or body together. Delia would be delighted with the cake-mix approach. The recipes in her latest cookbook don't seem designed for eating either. Check out our story on page 12.

If you're in autumn baking mode, consider an apple-cake tasting line-up. Diana Lampe offered a delicious recipe last week, and in the same edition, we published a recipe for Normandy apple cake, which a reader says produced a lovely cake (very butter-rich – it uses 250g; Lampe's cake uses half a cup of extra-virgin olive oil instead). This week, in Susan Parsons' column on page 4, Bungendore gardener Mike Kimberlee offers a Nigella Lawson apple cake, this one with walnut oil.



Dining with the enemy

We're not sure whether this is a cookbook or polemic, but either way it tackles the important issues, like what do the world's dictators like to eat? From the *Axis of Evil Cookbook* (Saqi Books), we learn that Saddam Hussein's favourite food as leader was gazelle; as prisoner, a nicely American burger and fries. The book provides recipes from Iraq among the anecdotes, including bigilla (pita bread, poached egg and broad beans) and "um ali", quite probably named for "Chemical Ali" (crumbed pastry, lemon juice, cream, sugar, milk, egg and cinnamon). Likewise for Iran, North Korea (Kim Jong-Il likes roast donkey, and flies in Japanese sushi chefs, we learn), Cuba (Castro was a hands-on gourmet, making his own foie gras), Libya and Syria.

I started with a shot glass of insemination-temperature cauliflower soup, with a cappuccino top and a grey, slimy nose-blow of truffle oil as a garnish ... Liquidised cauliflower tastes like fat boy's farts. Effluent cauliflower with truffle oil tastes like corpse bloat.



AA Gill reviewing Launceston Place for the *Sunday Times*

Life to Manuka terrace

On the bringing-the-mountain-to-Mohammed theory, the Mecca Bah has turned the Manuka terrace from an empty zone into a food hub. It's opened the cosy Bah bar and now the rather lovely Wine and Cheese Providore. Mecca Bah owner Cath Claringbold lives in Melbourne, but has moved here for the year to get the Providore right. So far, so good. We had great poached fruits, made in-house, last week. She makes chocolate and banana bread, and chutneys, and designs the small menu around the produce for sale. The cheese, from importer Will Studd, includes Roquefort and Stilton, as well as Italian hard cheeses like piave mezzano. The wine is fascinating, with unusual French and New Zealand labels. Top service is a rare thing, but we found it here.



Food for a cause

While we're on the Mecca Bah, it was the only restaurant in Canberra to take part in the Streetsmart fundraiser in the weeks before Christmas, but singlehandedly raised \$4730. This program is run by Melburnian Adam Robinson, who raises money each year for the homeless through restaurants in Melbourne, Sydney and now Canberra and Brisbane, where diners are invited to give \$2 a table. The money raised in each city stays in the city, and in Canberra has gone to the Early Morning Centre choir and Oz Harvest, a new food charity. Nationally, Streetsmart (whose patron is Tim Costello) raised \$224,000. Robinson wants more restaurants on board in Canberra (and someone to help his campaign here), and is expanding his fundraising to hotels.



Going nutty

This weekend may be your last chance to pick chestnuts, as the season nears an end. We picked some buckets at Nuts About Bungendore last weekend, and when we got home, were reminded of last year's hours in the kitchen, slicing the skins, then boiling, then painstakingly peeling the little brains, most of which come out in bits. Which matters not when they're becoming soup. The soup is heavenly, its pleasure multiplied by the pain before. Having accidentally bought pecan nuts also (a worrying brain-association thing; saw 'pecan', read 'pistachio'), we searched our cookbooks in vain for pecan pie, before miraculously, *Women's Weekly's Bake* arrived, with the recipe we needed. Good, too. Very sticky and caramelly. The encyclopedic nature of this book will be its strength.

Canberra's top baristas

Patrick Connolly, from Psychedeli, won the Canberra barista championships at the weekend, and will now head to Melbourne for the nationals. Showing a huge improvement on last year, 14 baristas extracted their way through 12 coffees each. Sassa Sestic, from Ona Coffee, and Joseph-Pierre Sluzalek from Gus's came second; and Matthew Davis, from As You Like It, third. Organiser Bill Maloney is impressed at the standard. For the first time, the Canberrans are good enough to rival baristas in Sydney or Melbourne. One problem though: Maloney says several baristas served ristrettos, at 20ml, instead of espressos, at 30ml over a 25-second pour. A ristretto can mask poor beans. You get the initial sweetness, but not the full flavour of the bean.

Contact Editorial Kirsten Lawson (02) 6280 2411 food.wine@canberratimes.com.au Advertising Maree Neale (02) 6280 2187 Cover Fairy princess cake from the *Australian Women's Weekly* cookbook, *Bake*. Picture: Sarah DeNardi, John Paul Urizar

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