



Chicken soup for the soul

The rest of the world may laugh, but shepherd's pie, steak-and-kidney pudding and treacle sponge remain on our menus like old friends, lifting spirits in times of need.

Flora Watkins dives into the best of British comfort food

Illustrations by Annabelle King

IN victory, I deserve it, in defeat, I need it,' said Sir Winston Churchill of his favourite tippie, Champagne. When the chips are down, however, most of us need a bit more ballast than a bottle of Pol Roger can provide. Chips, in fact, will do nicely—preferably with ketchup as well as mayonnaise—as will most variations on the tuber. On those days when the world feels an unfriendly place, where better to retreat than beneath a fluffy, 15-tog duvet of mashed potato, melded blissfully with lots of butter and cream?

'Nothing like mashed potatoes when you're feeling blue,' declares Rachel in *Heartburn*, Nora Ephron's thinly disguised novel about the breakdown of her marriage to the Watergate journalist Carl Bernstein. As Rachel, a food writer, picks over the bones of the relationship, her ruminations are interspersed with some of her favourite recipes. Potatoes (three ways), bacon hash (bacon, egg, yet more potatoes), pot roast and bread pudding, dishes she describes as 'nursery food'.

Our notions of comfort food are 'bound up in nostalgia and childhood memories,' says food writer and historian Angela Clutton.

They're dishes that 'take us back to a supposedly simpler and happier time'. In times of stress or turmoil, she will turn to 'roast chicken, shepherd's pie, rhubarb sponge—the foods of my childhood, which still give me so much pleasure to cook and eat now'.

Comfort food is unpretentious fare, the antithesis of molecular gastronomy or the Nordic foraged-food thing. It's the culinary equivalent of a big, bosomy hug from a beloved grandmother, transporting you straight back to her kitchen. Pastry scraps rolled out on a flour-speckled farmhouse table, dogs dozing in their baskets, the warm fug of cinnamon emanating from the Aga.

Comfort food is about dishes such as Nigel Slater's roast-chicken risotto, using the leftovers from Sunday lunch. A little meditative chopping of shallots, followed by 20 minutes of mindful stirring—accompanied, of course, by a glass of the wine you've sloshed over the rice. The result, says Mr Slater in his book *Real Food*, is 'as soothing as sucking a thumb'.

The secret is how these foods make us feel, whether it's the starchy embrace of rice, potatoes or pasta or the pleasurable hit of chocolate. On a physical level, they are uplifting. About 20 years ago, there was a book called *Potatoes Not Prozac*, which advised people with low mood to eat carbohydrates because they boost serotonin and aid sleep.

Then, the low-carb and 'clean-eating' movements came along and one can only wonder if there's a link between this and the modern malaise—anxiety. After all, no one with a broken heart ever sought solace in a bowl of cauliflower rice.

In her book *Nigella Bites* (2001), Nigella Lawson offers a whole chapter on comfort food. It opens with—what else?—a recipe

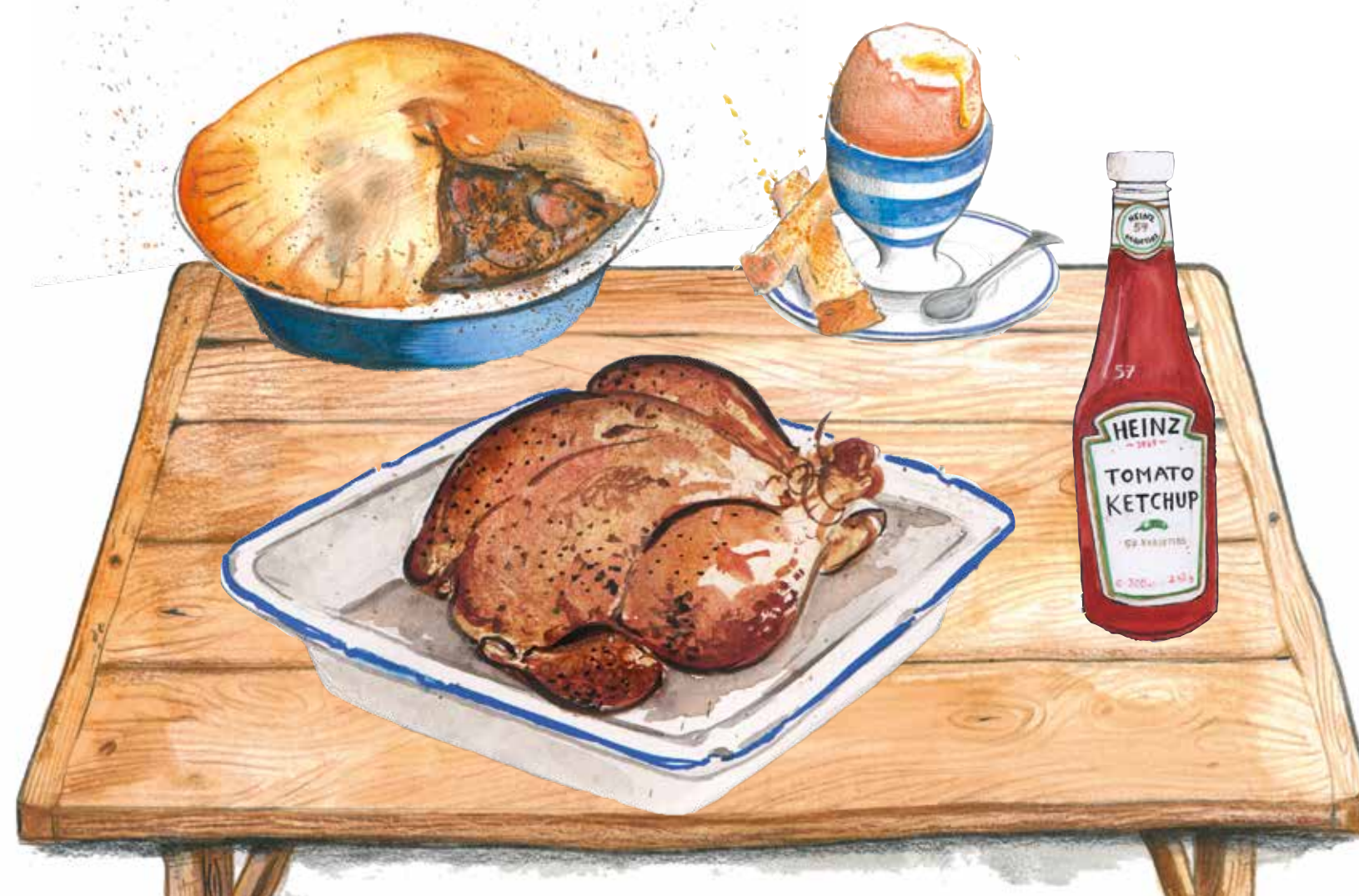


for mashed potato and includes such nursery stalwarts as fishcakes and rice pudding, plus a divine chocolate fudge cake, which 'Serves 10. Or one with a broken heart'. There's also a recipe for one of the most soothing, restorative things there is to eat: chicken soup.

The inspiration for a bestselling series of American self-help books, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and known as 'Jewish penicillin', recent studies have found the broth to contain anti-inflammatory and antibacterial properties. As with the stirring of risotto or ricing of potatoes, it's doubly soothing—once in the making and again in the eating. There's something deeply satisfying in boiling up the carcass and giblets of the Sunday roast with carrots, onion, celery and some odd fronds of parsley, ensuring that nothing is wasted.

I like to savour my soup slowly on a Monday evening, to recover from the hectic start to the week. Strictly speaking, the stodge component (non-negotiable when it comes to comfort food) should be *knaidlach* (little dumplings made with *matzo* meal and *schmaltz*, or chicken fat), but, for >

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ease, I throw in a handful of basmati rice or orzo soup pasta at the end.

Fat and carbs, together with a heady dose of nostalgia, are the essential components of comfort food, feels Ysenda Maxtone Graham, author of *Terms and Conditions: Life in Girls' Boarding Schools 1939–1979*: 'It has to be stodge; anyone who's been to a girls' boarding school has to eat comfort food on a Sunday evening. It's about smothering emotions! Something really simple and easy to eat—pasta or mashed potato—that slips down easily.'

Women, she believes, are more likely than men to seek refuge in comfort food. 'My husband, when he's stressed, starves himself—he'll have a comfort cigarette.' By contrast, many women 'do slightly associate food with guilt; an illicit treat'.

Our notion of comfort food, of quality time with a baked Camembert or a packet of Jaffa Cakes, is 'relatively recent,' explains Miss Clutton. 'For centuries, the food on our tables was dictated by wealth, food, supply, the seasons. "Mood" was far less of a factor,' she continues. 'As we moved into having more choice of what we eat, then we began to factor in how food makes us feel.'

Those feel-good dishes we turn to—such as steak-and-kidney pie, treacle sponge, macaroni cheese—haven't been venerated by the rest of the world. More fool them.

The Ivy's shepherd's pie has long been one of the most-requested items on its menu and Holborn Dining Room, London WC1, has become a destination on account of chef Calum Franklin's pies (*COUNTRY LIFE*, *March 20, 2019*). Bite through the sūet pastry of his

Ultimate comfort: The Ivy's shepherd's pie

(Serves 8)

Ingredients

- 1kg each of good-quality lamb and beef mince
- Vegetable oil, for frying
- Three large onions, peeled and finely chopped
- Two cloves garlic, crushed
- A good handful of thyme
- 25g flour
- 50g tomato purée
- 150ml red wine
- 50ml Worcester sauce
- 1 litre dark-meat stock
- 8 servings of firm mashed potato with butter, but no cream added

Method

- Season the meat. Heat the oil in a frying pan until it is very hot and brown the meat in small batches. Drain in a colander to remove the fat.
- Heat more oil in a cast-iron pan and gently fry the onion, garlic and thyme until they are very soft (10–15 minutes), but not coloured.
- Add the meat, dust with flour. Add tomato purée. Cook for a few minutes, stirring.
- Add the wine, Worcester sauce and stock and bring to the boil. Simmer for 40 minutes.
- At this stage, strain off about 200ml of the sauce to serve with the pie.



- Continue to simmer the meat until the liquid has almost evaporated.
- Check the seasoning; transfer to a large ovenproof serving dish and allow to cool.
- Top with the mashed potato. Furrow with a fork. A little Parmesan can be grated over with a microplane, if wished.
- Bake at 200°C/400°F/gas mark 6 for 35–40 minutes, until the top is brown and crispy.

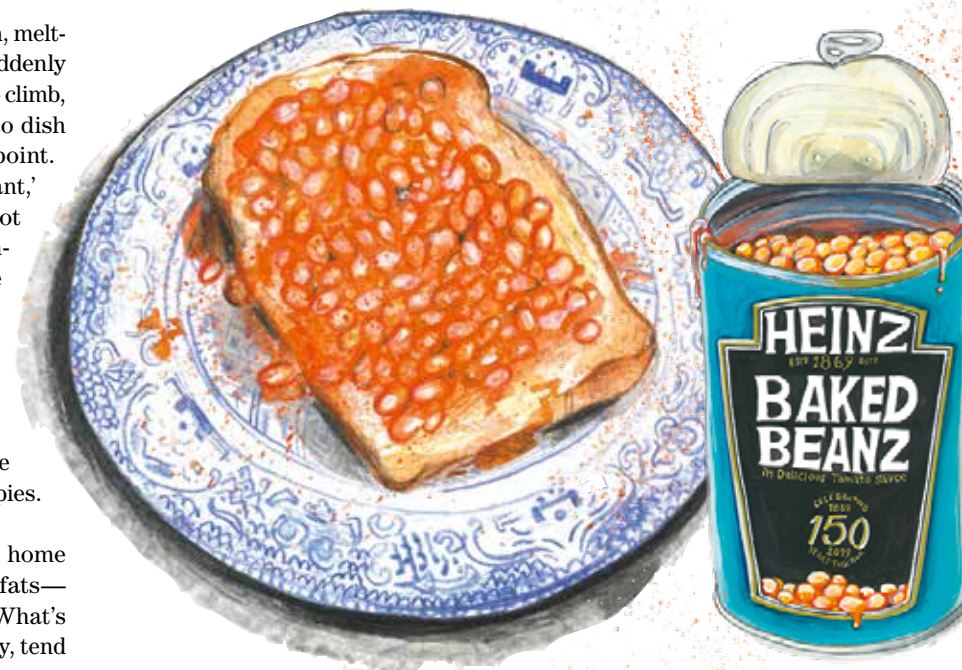


steak-and-kidney pudding into the rich, melting steak and kidney beneath and suddenly you're eight years old again, with trees to climb, *The Beano* to read and Mum about to dish up a delicious lunch—and that's the point.

'We play on that here at the restaurant,' Mr Franklin reveals. 'There are a lot of guests who've been doing million-pound deals all morning. When they're having lunch, it's nice for them to have something that can subconsciously transport them to the family table.' His cooking is heavily influenced by the food his mother made for her three sons. 'It was simple, homely fare,' he recalls. 'She'd make chicken pies, fish pies. Really good, unfussy cooking.'

Food with such a palpable feel of home isn't light on the carbs or animal fats—whoever heard of diet comfort food? What's heavy on nostalgia does, unfortunately, tend to sit heavily on the hips.

Luckily, when you're stressed, sad or lonely, it's not the time to worry about what the Germans call *kummerspeck* (literally, 'grief



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bacon': the weight gained by someone who overeats following a trauma). However, even during the most testing times, one doesn't need to overindulge. Just as Mark Twain could 'live for two months on a good compliment', one hit of creamy mash slathered over tender, slow-cooked meat has the clout to buck us up for days.

It's hardly scientific, but, for me, the formula of (buttery carbs) + (rich, soupy meat) x (thoughts of somewhere safe and comforting) = shepherd's pie, every time. Ideally, the furrows of mash will be crisp

and brown on top, the mince, in its deep bath of thyme, beef stock and red wine, as unctuous as one of Trollope's clergymen. I always use a recipe I was given for The Ivy's aforementioned pie (*see box*), its combination of lamb and beef mince making it particularly tasty.

For those occasions when a quick hit is what's needed, a boiled egg and soldiers, crumpets and Marmite, or even beans on toast, will suffice. And for pudding? If you have room left for spotted dick, I salute you. Otherwise, a few squares of Green & Black's or a post-prandial hot chocolate can go a long way to putting the world to rights.

'What a pity we can't make a cup of Ovaltine,' muses Dulcie in Barbara Pym's *No Fond Return of Love*. 'Life's problems are often eased by hot, milky drinks.'

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