

# Cherry Season Cake

It's cherry season and the lovely ruby red fruits are a beautiful festive reminder that Christmas is not far off. A big bowl of cherries makes a wonderful addition to the Christmas lunch table that is particularly enjoyed by children and anyone not up to tackling the Christmas pudding but cherries can also take centre stage in many ways. A simple compote of pitted fresh cherries can be chilled overnight and served with ice cream as a great dessert for a hot Christmas day or the compote can be folded into mascarpone for a trifle or whipped cream for a filled sponge cake. I thought a cake would be nice to try out. For my seasonal cherry sponge I decided on a white chocolate ganache marbled with a little of the reduced cherry juices obtained after poaching and some fresh cherries with stems attached to complete the decoration. The red and white of this fresh cherry cake really says Christmas to me.

## Cherry Season Sponge Cake

serves 12

For The Cherry Compote

- 4-5 cups of pitted cherries (make sure you check that the pips are removed as you pit them)
- 1/2 cup sugar

Heat the pitted cherries and sugar gently, stirring occasionally until the sugar dissolves.

Cook gently for 10 minutes and then pour the cherries into a sieve, draining the liquid into a bowl. Return the liquid to the saucepan and reduce over the heat by about half, cool and place in a separate container to the cherries and refrigerate both overnight.

## For The Sponge Cake

- 12 eggs, separated
- pinch salt
- 12 tbs sugar
- 1 tsp vanilla essence
- 12 tbs
- cake flour \*

Butter and line two 28 cm sponge pans with baking paper

Preheat the fan forced oven to 150°C.

Using an electric beater beat the egg whites with a pinch of salt. When the eggs start to foam, slowly add the sugar and beat until the peaks are firm but the very top still droops. Add the egg yolks and vanilla with a slow speed until mixed through. Fold in the sifted flour with a large spatula with a cutting motion to maintain air in the batter. Divide the batter over the two sponge pans and bake for 15-18 minutes.

Cool in the pan for 5 minutes and then remove to a wire rack to cool completely.

## For The Ganache

- 170 g white chocolate couverture buttons
- 150 ml thickened cream
- 100 ml approximately reduced cherry juices

Place the white chocolate button in a mixing bowl. Heat the cream in a small saucepan until bubble start to form around the edges. Pour the hot cream over the white chocolate buttons. Stir until melted.

## To Assemble The Cake

- 450 ml thickened cream
- cherry compote
- whole cherries with stems for decoration

Whip the cream until stiff. Fold in the chilled cherry compote and spread over the base of one sponge cake. Top with the remaining sponge cake. When the ganache has cooled but still fluid dribble on some reduced cherry juices and pour over the cake. Top with whole cherries. Refrigerate until ready to serve.

\*Cake Flour: remove 2 tbs from 1 cup of plain flour and replace it with 2 tbs cornflour. Sift to mix well.

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## Winter Warming Pea and Ham Soup

Pea and ham soup is another old fashioned recipe that is still popular with young and old and is a great winter warmer. The two essential ingredients are not frozen peas and sandwich ham as the name suggests but dried, green, split peas and smoked ham hock or pork knuckle. Split peas are a nutritious source of fibre, protein and carbohydrate and when slow cooked with the ham hock the dried peas break down to a lovely creamy texture and a less jaw exercising way to consume dietary fibre. [McKenzies green split peas](#) are available in all supermarkets and even has the recipe on the pack of the bag, although I do like to use two bags for each ham hock for an extra thick soup and for some to freeze away. Most recipes add a chopped brown onion, carrot, celery, parsley and bay leaves to the mix for some aromatics but it is not crucial, an onion

would suffice. Don't add salt to the pot as the hock will be salty enough and pre-packaged supermarket brands will be quite salty. To reduce the salt a bit you can cover the hock in cold water, bring it to the boil and then discard the water and start with fresh water but I would recommend buying the ham hock at a quality butcher that does the curing and smoking themselves. I love Donati's (402 Lygon St., Carlton) smoked hocks as they are not too salty, have plenty of meat and a pleasant smoky flavour. Try also [Cannings](#) (Kew, Hawthorn, Malvern, Ivanhoe), [Hagens](#) (Richmond, Sth. Yarra), [Obelix and Co](#) (Fitzroy Nth) and my other favorite place, [Walmas](#) (Bayswater).

Ask the butcher the cut through the hock bone once, this will aid the cooking process, accommodate the hock if you only have a smallish stock pot and also help when you come to pull it all apart to remove the meaty bits for the soup. Yes, once you have bunged everything in a large stock pot, covered it with water and simmered for 2 to 2 1/2 hours, you will have to remove the hock, let it cool a little and then remove the thick skin, bone and fatty bits with a small knife. You will be discarding quite a bit but there will still be ample delicious meaty chunks to cut up into bite-sized pieces for the soup. Blend the soup while the hock is cooling on the bench with a stick blender and then add the meat back. Season with freshly ground black pepper and enjoy.



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## Poached Pears A Timeless Classic

It's well and truly pear season now and a nice way to enjoy them when they are still a bit firm and crisp is sliced in salads or with cheese. Once ripe, pears do not travel well but you can still enjoy a juicy pear at work if you wrap it in paper and transport it a small plastic container. Pears are luscious in sweet pies, tarts and tea cakes and can be quite a classy dessert when poached in red or white wine. Poached pears are perhaps viewed as an old fashioned dessert but I think of them as the little black dress of desserts; a

timeless classic, simple yet elegant. I particularly enjoy the aroma of sweet spices that fills the house when poaching. I like to use star anise as well as cinnamon and cloves but you can use other spices or include some fresh or ground ginger for a bit of warmth. Serve the poached pears with thick cream or the best vanilla bean ice cream you can find.



To Poach pears:

you will need enough small Josephine pears to fill a deep saucepan so that they all remain standing upright once the wine is added. You can use other varieties but they are often quite large and not as neatly compact as the Josephine pear. Choose pears that are still slightly firm to the touch.

- 1 bottle of light, fruity red wine
- 250 g caster sugar
- 2 star anise
- 1 cinnamon quill

- 6 whole cloves
- lemon or orange peel (optional)

Combine the wine, sugar and spices and bring to boil, stirring until the sugar is dissolved. Peel the pears, leaving the stem intact and once peeled gently rub the outside with the flesh side of half a lemon to stop browning. Reduce to the heat on the spiced wine and add the pears. Poach with a very gently simmer, at the lowest heat setting. You should just see small bubbles rising, no obvious bubbling of the liquid. Add a little water if the wine does not quite cover the pears. Poach for approximately 30-40 minutes, checking for tenderness with a fine skewer. Remove the pears with a slotted spoon to cool. Raise the heat on the spiced wine and reduce the liquid by about half, until it is thick and syrupy. Poached pears can be prepared a day in advance. Serve whole with the wine syrup or halve and segment the pears, fanning out the slices on top of the sauce on a plate. Serve with thick cream or vanilla ice cream.

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## **Agnolotti Del Plin**

I really enjoy making fresh pasta and gnocchi and over the years I have become pretty good at whipping these up without any fuss but filled pasta, like ravioli, I've been less successful with. My attempts at ravioli have been plagued with filling leakages and size variations that would make most Nonnas weep. Invited to take a class at Enoteca Sileno recently I discovered that with a little professional instruction I was able to master it. In particular, I was thrilled to come away with a fool-proof and fast technique for

one particular style of filled pasta. Usually making very petite anything is fiddly and time consuming but agnolotti del plin from the Piedmont region of Italy is anything but. While we mostly know agnolotti as large pockets, plin, meaning pinched, are tiny rectangular pillows. Essentially once you roll out the pasta sheets you simply squeeze the filling out as a long, thin sausage (less than the width of your little finger) using a piping bag, moistening your little finger in water run it along the pasta next to the filling and then fold over the dough, pressing down the edge. Next, using the thumb and forefinger of each hand, pinch the long sausage starting at one end to create a little puffed up pillow and continue doing this at thumb nail intervals. The pinched length of pasta is then cut swiftly with a crinkle cut roller cutter into tiny rectangular shapes that look as beautiful as any made by a veteran of the Italian kitchen. The little pinched pasta pockets don't leak, are quick to make and look so dainty. To speed up any filled pasta making process it is a good idea to make your filling in advance, especially if it is a slow cooked meat filling. It will need time to cook and cool down, so the day before is ideal. Advanced preparation will make the filling process more pleasurable as you won't have already been on your feet for hours. Fillings can be meat or vegetable based. Sautéed silverbeet mixed with ricotta cheese and an egg is a good mix but remember to dry the leaves before cooking to reduce the water content. For my agnolotti del plin I cooked and puréed some sweet potato (red-skinned kumara) and added a little Béchamel to give a creamy texture and then flavoured it with chopped parsley and a little truffle and porcini mushroom paste. Slow cooked ox tail meat can be blended similarly to a consistency for piping through a piping bag. To cook the agnolotti del plin, toss them in a large pot of boiling water and remove them once they have risen to the surface. Toss the drained pasta with butter and fried sage leaves and/or sautéed wild mushrooms (pines and slippery jacks). Finish with some grated Parmesan cheese. □



[Enoteca Sileno](#) run a variety of cooking classes throughout the year. Run by professional chefs imparting their extensive knowledge in a small group setting, it is a great way to get some hands-on experience in a relaxed, social environment. Classes conclude with a pleasant lunch of food prepared.



making the pinch



cutting the filled length of pasta



cutting between the pinches

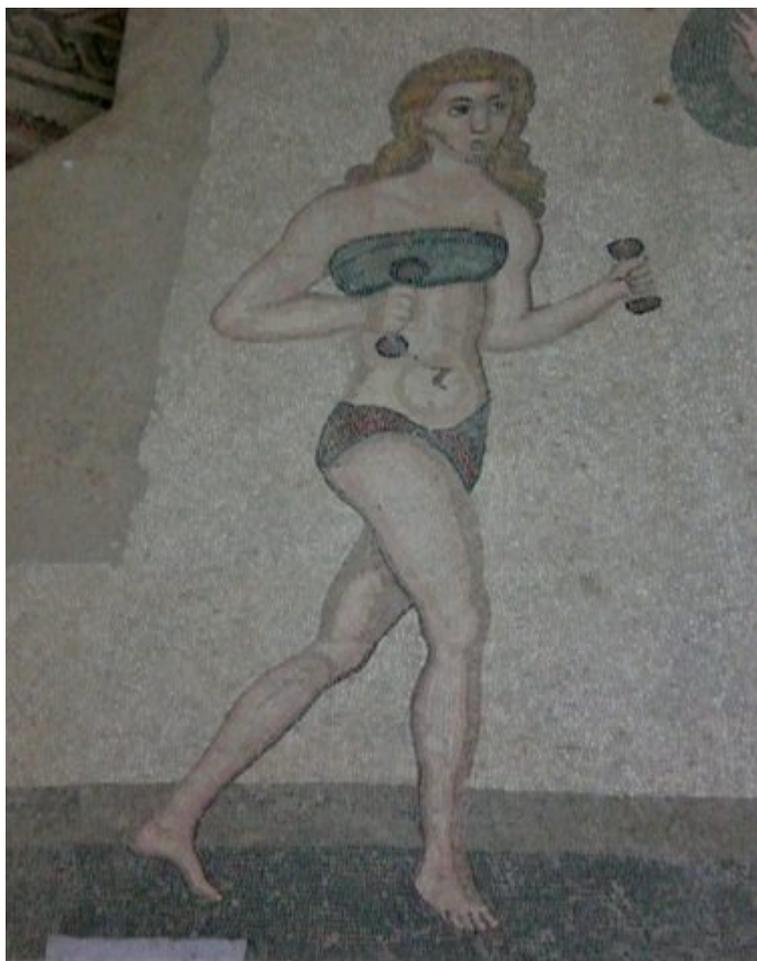
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## A Roman Villa And Cucina Povera

*Cucina povera*, Italian for poor kitchen, is not so much poor as imaginative as it involves creating something really tasty out of a few simple ingredients. The ability to conjure something out of foraged or left over ingredients that is thoughtful and heartwarming always inspires me and it was on a trip to Sicily that I found an example of cucina povera that was truly inspirational.

While aimlessly roaming around by car we happened on a Roman villa, a UNESCO world heritage site, off the main road that

traverses the hilly centre of the island of Sicily. The remains of the 4th century AD [Villa Romana del Casale](#) turned out to be fascinating, with magnificently preserved floor mosaics in each room, one depicting hunting scenes and another showing women in bikinis exercising with dumbbells. An early Roman aerobic class perhaps.



Before we knew it, it was closing time, and being the last to leave we found ourselves driving out into the darkness, not entirely sure where we were and without accommodation planned. This was pre-GPS days. Seeing a sign for the town of Piazza Armerina, we headed there and once we secured a sparsely furnished room in the local convent we ventured out in search of dinner. We walked for what seemed like an hour, not finding a single place open, virtually no one on the street and a bitterly cold wind blowing. One can never be sure in Italy if one is too early or too late for dinner; it depends on the region and the climate. We eventually stumbled on a friendly,

warmly lit place that seemed to have just opened (obviously we were too early). It was here that I had the most delicious pasta simply flavoured with sautéed onion, breadcrumbs, anchovy and just a touch of saffron. In regions of Southern Italy breadcrumbs can substitute for expensive grated Parmesan and, while this pasta may seem simple, it was cooked with such care to bring out the sweet onion flavour and the lovely crunch of breadcrumbs that it needed nothing else. This was a great example of cucina povera and I told the waitress how much I loved it. An elegant woman on a neighboring table seemed to be complaining of something and later our waitress told us she didn't like that pasta specialty and being from Rome perhaps she didn't understand the nature of the dish, at which point the waitress and I gave each other a knowing nod. Romans, what did they ever do for us? I know, the list is long, not to mention 4th century villas with hot running water and the food of the capital is regarded by some as the best in Italy. But there is a lot to love about the food of the poor South and a lot it can teach us about how to cook, how to interpret flavour, how to build on it or not. In deference to both I have taken the essence of that Sicilian pasta and added a touch of Roman excess by adding chopped green prawns, fresh peas and a little more saffron. I think you will really like this dish for its simplicity, exotic flavour and enjoyable crunch.

### **Spaghettoni with Prawns, Peas, Saffron and Breadcrumbs**

For Two

- 3 tbs olive oil
- 2 brown shallots, finely diced
- pinch of salt
- generous pinch of saffron
- 1/3 cup dried breadcrumbs
- 300 g spaghettoni (slightly thicker than normal spaghetti) or any other quality dried pasta
- generous pinch of salt for the pasta water

- a handful fresh peas
- 6 green prawns, cleaned and sliced into 3 or 4 pieces

Saute the shallots in the olive oil very gently until translucent. Meanwhile place a large pot of water on the stove for the pasta and bring to the boil. Slightly grind the saffron in a mortar and pestle, leaving some threads intact for effect. Add 1 tbs warm water from the kettle to the saffron to dissolve it and add it immediately to the shallots. Cook on low heat for a minute. Do not cook on high heat for or for a long time as the saffron will become bitter. Add the breadcrumbs and stir until they absorb all the oil and become a little toasted. Turn off the heat. Add the salt to the rapidly boiling water, then the pasta and the peas and cook until *al dente*. When the pasta is nearly ready return the saffron flavoured shallots and crumbs to the heat and add the sliced prawns, stir until they just turn opaque. Drain the pasta well, toss with the prawns, onions and crumbs, and enjoy.