

Picnic Crumbs

A Gathering of Picnics, Packed Lunches
and Provisions at Home and Abroad



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Picnic Crumbs

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'I can recall in vivid detail the sense of freedom, the anticipation of meals that would be different, the feeling of summer heat as I stretched on the grass. Never has the whirr of a mowing-machine been so suggestive of holiday freedom. Going away for a youngster can be a crescendo of pleasures. They merge in a succession of joys. There is an unconscious retransfiguration of things both trite and commonplace. Somehow I always associate such reactions with picnic days. Picnic baskets have a spell of their own. Hard-boiled eggs are hardly a delicacy, yet they taste differently when eaten in the open air, particularly when the salt is produced in a screw of newspaper. Nobody wishes to devour sandwiches for ever, but it is remarkable how delectable two smeary pieces of bread encasing unappetizing cold beef can become. The meal has almost sacramental significance. As a connoisseur once remarked, the essential quality of a picnic is the doing of perfectly normal things in an abnormal place or manner. It is that quality that appeals so strongly to youth, the mental picture of adults squatting in a circle round baskets and glasses and bottles.'

(Louis T. Stanley, *The London Season*)



This book is for friends and family and especially for Heather, who taught me to make mayonnaise and made unsurpassable picnics; for Bobs, who took food very seriously, and for Mrs Macneil, who first allowed me to mess about in her kitchen.

I was inspired by two people who drew my attention to a contemporary gap in what I had thought to be an already crowded market. The first, a friend of my youngest daughter, eating her way through the home-made minced duck samosas, products of rather mixed Asian ancestry, that were part of a parents' day picnic last year, said: 'These are absolutely delicious, where did you get them?' The other, my eldest daughter's boyfriend, the artist Peter Haslam Fox, suggested a picnic book on the basis of my austerity family Christmas present, a small miscellany of Christmas snippets a la John Julius Norwich's *Christmas Cracker* and called 'Pudding Crumbs'. Fox thought that 'Picnic Crumbs' should be the next step and this latest effort is greatly improved by his whimsical and wonderful illustrations.



Introduction

“The war is no picnic”, someone will remark from time to time, and that phrase alone proves how high a place the picnic holds in man’s affection. It offers through the generations a quiet and rustic ideal, attainable only during spells of utter calm, snatched from the world’s restlessness and disillusion. Indeed a picnic resembles an essay in that its whole purpose is to afford pleasure; and it therefore seems appropriate that an essay, or part of one, should be dedicated to it... Yet nobody I think, would pretend that it was other than an ugly word, picnic, verging on chit-chat or snip-snap ... It is, in fact, a busy, self-assertive, mediocre word that has sacrificed all dignity, but without attaining any compensatory sense of ease. Imagine the loss to us had Manet, for example, name his famous picture *Le Pique-Nique* instead of *Déjeuner sur l’Herbe*. Again, to eat *al fresco* sounds much more delightful than to picnic – but then it does not possess quite the same significance; to eat out-of-doors is not enough, otherwise the every snack of every tramp would constitute a picnic ... No, it implies – though this shade of meaning is contained in no definition of the word to be found in a dictionary – that one has a home and eats out-of-doors by choice.’

(Osbert Sitwell, *Picnics and Pavilions*)



Introduction

A book of picnics and picnic food is nothing new. There are manuals, the ‘essential picnic recipes’ with lists of foods for every outdoor occasion; volumes on picnics in art and literature, glossy with photographs and spiked with visually delicious recipes; chapters of information on intelligent picnic baskets and inspiring locations. The doyennes of cookery writing, Constance Spry, Elizabeth David, Claudia Roden, and others less widely known to casual cooks today, have beguiled their readers for a century or more with stories of picnics, their own and other people’s, whetting appetites for outdoor eating, picnics and picnic foods from around the world. Using reminiscence as much as recipes they have created a sense of time and place, of convivial scenes, sunlight and unhurried pleasures to be treasured among other memories of busy lives. Their descriptions are punctuated with perfect recipes and the fruits of scholarly investigation into other and earlier food writers and those whom circumstances force to eat outdoors as well as true lovers of alfresco entertainments.

Picnic Crumbs too is a tally of memories, mostly other people’s and occasionally my own. It revisits the work of innumerable food writers and descriptions of food and eating in less kitchen-orientated books and accounts that fit into the broad picnic category and somewhat, occasionally quite far, beyond. The selection is based on nothing at all beyond my enjoyment of a scene or the possibilities of the food conjured by the written description. My picnic memories range from the warmth of an Indian evening to a miraculously perfect summer interval at Glyndebourne or even scarcer days on the Scottish West Coast, where, from the rocks overlooking a white sand beach, a view of purple hills and glittering water to break your heart, make it the only place in the world to be. More typical is the squashed car interior in a wet car park waiting for some soggy school event when a good ham sandwich provides some small solace and may bring a greater optimism to lighten a dreary afternoon.

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The Oxford Companion to Food summarises a broad selection of unsurprisingly unvarying definitions of the word 'picnic', mandatory to the introduction of any book on the subject. Preceded in the *Companion* by the mundane pickling onion, picnic is succeeded by piddock, an eatable of inspiring properties, capable of rendering luminous milk in which it is immersed, or breath if one is held in the mouth. Picnics can be as ordinary as the pickling onion or as magical as the luminescent piddock, a bacon sandwich on a suburban train or a perfect bento box, flower-viewing food, to be eaten as a pikunikku under the great cherry blossom canopies of the Japanese spring.

The late Alan Davidson, author of the *Companion*, writes: 'For many people, contemporary picnics involve an element of simplicity, where uncomplicated food such as hard-boiled eggs, sandwiches, pieces of cold chicken are eaten without ceremony.' True enough and this book has its fair share of hard-boiled eggs and sandwiches in humble settings besides more exotic and quixotic dishes eaten in less obvious situations.

Literary picnics and alfresco eating, whether fiction or fact, are inescapable, although the best known, such as Ratty's, do escape reiteration in these pages. Painted picnics appeal to the eye but there are difficulties in the successful identification of painted food that is only a small part of the composition or merely the titular excuse for a charming scene. Even at Tissot's beautifully painted picnics it hardly matters whether the cake is currant or sultana or the pie pork or game, the picnickers themselves are the point and likewise at a Brueghel peasant feast. I do, however, have an inherited painting of an Edwardian croquet game, with tea on the lawn, where the biscuits in the foreground are quite clearly Rich Tea; possible, as they were developed in Yorkshire as early as the 17th century.

Certain regional foods of the world are particularly transportable or otherwise suited to outdoor eating. Claudia Roden cites the dips, salads, filo pastries and pockets of Arab bread of the Middle East, as well as typical barbecues and whole roast lambs. In England an occasional hog roast will feed a whole community; Europe in late summer provides a constant feast of ripening grapes, figs and olives, with slices of garlicky, meaty

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salami in Italy; pizza bianca, hot from a village bakery; lasagne eaten from a cardboard dish sitting on Florentine steps, or a rough chunk of gritty parmesan with an apple, crunched between churches when sightseeing. In Spain, slices of jamón ibérico or manchego cheese with cubes of membrillo in the shade of a cork oak and in France the vast range of possible choices from a local market, *traiteur*, or even the stupendous supermarket where everything looks so much more desirable than at home.

In California the wealth of fruits and salads on show mean a picnic of free tastings before reaching the check out in a Napa Valley grocery store, or paying for a crowd-sized sandwich built at the deli counter of a Whole Foods supermarket in San Francisco. In Brazil a barbecue includes skewers of chicken hearts; quantities of meat top the bill for outdoor eating all over South America, supported by oceans of beans, bright salads and ubiquitous multicoloured corn on the cob. In South East Asia street eating starts at 5am in the markets of capital cities or small towns, with spicy dumplings, beef soup or chilli noodles, and Vietnamese street stalls sell instant picnics of fresh baguettes to eat with little pâtés wrapped in banana leaves.

Far to the North, whole salted herrings can be bought from hand carts in Dutch streets for eating on the spot; in Germany and Scandinavia, fat sausages with bread and a smear of strong mustard. In the Romanian Danube delta, a fisherman makes a *ciorba*, a fish soup of pike and catfish boiled outdoors over a fire, with vegetables and seasoning and in the Bulgarian mountain countryside where picnicking is popular, another soup, *kurban*, a meat stock coloured with peppers and tomatoes, is a traditional reminder of ancient animal sacrifices (Michael and Frances Field, *A Quintet of Cuisines*). Charcoal grilled corn on the cob is as much a staple street food in Eastern Europe as in South America or Africa where evening sales to hurrying pedestrians provide local women with a tiny income from surplus produce.

The nomadic peoples of Africa and Asia have nothing to learn about outdoor cooking and provisions, whether occasional feasts of meat and grains or the bare necessities for sustenance, a handful of dates in the

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desert; parched grain or *tsampa* in Tibet; the on the hoof meat larder of the Mongol herders, their long gone conquering hordes travelling ultra light, sustained mainly by drinking their horses' blood; the Masai and Nuer tribes, whose cattle provide their staples of milk and blood and only rarely meat. According to Reay Tannahill in *Food in History*, blood drinking or eating, has been common among pastoral peoples throughout history, the Arabs being particularly fond of a dish of mixed blood and camel hair and the Irish of a dish of blood boiled with milk, butter and herbs.

In the cities of North Africa and Turkey street sellers hawk their wares to peckish passersby and the streets are redolent of almond macaroons, oranges, frying doughnuts, sesame crusted bread and coffee. The Chinese are not obvious picnickers; one thinks instead of great formal dinners of perfectly balanced and presented courses, whether in the Forbidden City or the Great Hall of the People, but street stalls laden with soups, dumplings and orange coloured poultry offal offer scope for almost constant eating on the hoof. The focus of most Chinese festivals is on home and family and ancestral spirits need propitiation, their graves tended and their putative needs catered for; the Qingming Festival provides the best excuse for a family picnic in Chinese communities, when whole families and clans gather to sweep ancestors' graves and make offerings of wine and food to the dead followed by a grand graveside feast for the living.

The Victorians and Edwardians, at home and abroad may, aside from our own memories of picnics enjoyable or otherwise, be the inveterate picnickers at the centre of a picnic scene in our mind's eye although the use of the word picnic, in itself a Johnny-come-lately term for centuries of outdoor eating and packaged food, predates them by at least a century or so. Gilles Ménage's 1750 edition of the *Dictionnaire du Etymologique de la Langue Française* suggests that 'piqueunique' may be of Spanish origin, first appearing in a French translation in 1664, although the Spanish do not use the word in any translation today. The *OED* dates the English translation to a letter from Lord Chesterfield in 1748 describing a social gathering and picnic thereafter became an expression for a shared outdoor meal to which participants all brought a dish, a definition with which *Larousse* concurs.

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Paying due deference to Victorian empire builders as indefatigable outdoor eaters wherever they were in the world, this book attempts, through the writings and memories of other feasters, fasters and travellers, to repeat tales that go beyond cold chicken and egg sandwiches in however many countries, to more unusual inventions, essentials and oddities of food and eating, carried, collected, prepared or eaten out of doors and away from formal kitchens, dining rooms and halls. In the end, it hardly matters what we call our outdoor feasts although there is no doubt, as Osbert Sitwell points out, that picnic is not a pretty word and there is no doubt that some of the descriptions of outdoor eating included in this book were, like war, no picnic at all.



First Picnics

If we begin only with the first use of the term picnic in whichever century or language it may first have been coined, we would lose an entire history of outdoor eating of one sort or another. A recent book on picnics opens with a group of 8th century monks seated on the ground to eat their meagre and carefully eked out supplies of cheese and salted horse head. They were wandering the famine stricken country with the miraculous relics of St Cuthbert after the sacking of Lindisfarne by the Vikings. It doesn't sound like much of a picnic (Jane Pettigrew quoting Reginald of Durham, *The Picnic*). Until the Romantic Movement transformed nature into art for those with the leisure and wealth to afford it, eating outdoors was more necessity than treat. Whether for conquerors and kings, religious or peasants, cooking and eating in the open were parts of everyday life, as they remain in parts of the world today. The concept of alfresco eating as entertainment is an 18th century invention, excepting perhaps at temples and churches on festivals and holy days, or when ancestral tombs were the sites of family gatherings and outdoor feasts that included both the living and the dead.

The best chronicled, if variably enumerated, mass outdoor meal of early modern history is well known. Whatever the size of the crowd, the actual numbers of loaves and fishes and whether or however they were miraculously multiplied, we assume that this was impromptu alfresco catering on a large scale.

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From *Matthew, Chapter 15*:

And Jesus saith unto them, How many loaves have ye? And they said, Seven, and a few little fishes.

And he commanded the multitude to sit down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves and the fishes, and gave thanks, and brake them, and gave to his disciples, and the disciples to the multitude.

And they did all eat, and were filled: and they took up of the broken meat that was left seven baskets full.

And they that did eat were four thousand men, beside women and children.



Tinned kosher sardines from the Sea of Galilee can be bought on the internet. Their ancestors are the most likely candidates for the ‘two small fishes’ that, according to Matthew, Mark and John, with a loaves, barley or otherwise, fed the four, five, or even twelve thousand, not including unrecorded numbers of women and children. Morning caught sardines are at their best grilled outdoors on some southern beach where their smell is irresistibly inviting and a squeeze of lemon, bread and salt is all that is needed for a perfect lunch. However fresh, they never taste quite the same indoors in a restaurant.

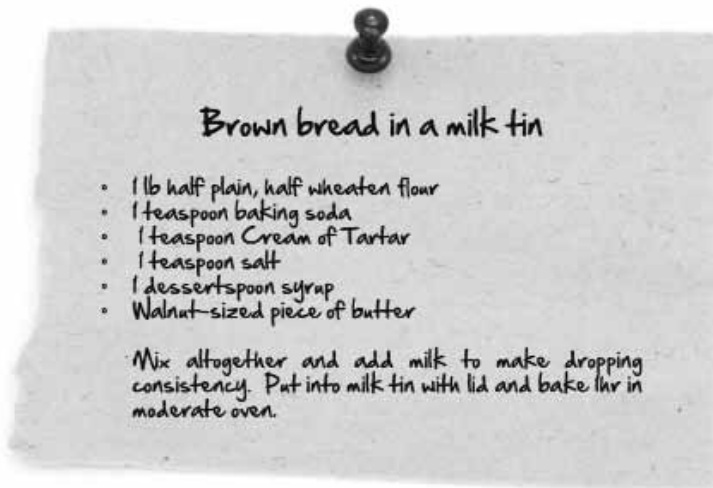
Tinned sardines loom large in English food; in the nursery; on toast, as a savoury in old-fashioned clubs and dining rooms; or as the easiest and least large-boned of the endless smoked fish pâté starters of cut price 1970s dinner parties. Elizabeth David wrote a typically well researched article, *Oules of Sardines*, in 1962, that raised the profile of a humble little fish into, at its best a product ‘of some delicacy, a treat rather than an everyday

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commodity'. In her day the French were, unsurprisingly, convinced of the pre-eminence of their sardines, fried in olive oil, over all others (*An Omelette and a Glass of Wine*). For French Foreign Legionnaires in Algeria in the 1960s, fighting on their stomachs meant lunches of bread, a tin of sardines and a raw onion eaten like an apple, washed down with a litre of rough wine.

Marika Hanbury Tenison, cookery editor of the *Sunday Telegraph* throughout the 1970s and wife of the explorer Robin, wrote in an article titled *First Catch Your Crocodile* that there were two 'basic requirements' for travelling with him, a tin of sardines and 'a large supply of celery salt, because jungle food is so tasteless...' The crocodile was 'really filthy' but the 'large red ants, fried to a crisp' were quite a successful addition to the essential sardines when dipped in the celery salt.

As children, sardine sandwiches were a teatime staple indoors and out, for tea on the lawn or the beach. In nursery days, while traditional battles waxed between nursery and kitchen, we ate what Nanny liked and by and large, excluding soft roes for breakfast, we liked what Nanny did. Her penchant for savoury over sweet resulted in shared picnics where our Marmite and lettuce, ham, or fishy sandwiches was occasionally unfavourably compared with our cousins' enviably sticky packages of sliced white bread filled with startlingly red jam. Our sardines were mashed into a rough paste with a little butter, not much less sophisticated than so-called sardine pâté and spread thinly on the strangely elongated rectangles of sliced white Scottish Mother's Pride. The delicious brown bread made in the kitchen by Mrs Mac Neil in old Cow & Gate milk tins was not apparently considered suitable for sandwich making.



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Mrs MacNeil cooked for us at our home on the Scottish West Coast island of Islay. I was only a few months old on my first visit and those early years of holidays and endless days with Nanny and my brother on a scrap of sand and rock, have blended into an undated memory of the gilded years of a peaceful and privileged childhood. I ate my first picnics on Islay and many more since, under the best or worst conditions. West Coast weather is not to be relied on; it can rain dismally for weeks on Islay or be transformed by days of bright sun, the hills and water shining in tweed colours making it the most beautiful place in the world.

As children we were dropped every morning at the beach with our buckets and spades and a good deal of Nanny's luggage. Mr MacNeil drove us down in the ancient, carefully nurtured LandRover, reappearing at lunch time with our picnic. If the rain came suddenly, gusting across the loch in grey sheets, we were reliant on him to drive back to the rescue, as we sheltered unsuccessfully in the lee of the rocks or paddled on happily, soaked to the skin, in the chilly rain-pocked shallows.

The best picnics were on Sundays when Mr and Mrs MacNeil took us on their day off expeditions to mysterious parts of the island and unfamiliar beaches. West Coast Scots, like their Irish near neighbours, have a taste for the macabre. Days out might include the graveyard and the ugly granite memorial, complete with ceramic photo plaque, to a recently dead baby, whose family was picked over like a chicken bone and whose image haunted me for weeks. The picnic itself was the high spot. Mrs MacNeil produced unexpected departures from our daily sandwiches and fruit; a flask of soup in addition to Nanny's usual tea; lamb rissoles or pieces of cold chicken; Mr MacNeil's tiny, matchless tomatoes, usually filched by us from the old conservatory attached to the house; an apple tart; buttered scones; or cakes of Mrs MacNeil's recent invention, the latest prize winners at the Womens' Institute, where she was the champion on an island full of good bakers.

When I was married in Wiltshire, Mrs MacNeil came south for the wedding and gave me as a wedding present a handwritten book of her recipes. None of them is very difficult or very exact. Their taste relies on

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good, fresh ingredients and, in the case of the apple tart, a lighter hand than I possess with pastry.

Creamy Carrot Soup

Coarsely grate 8oz carrots, 1 medium sized onion and a large potato; fry gently in 1oz of butter for 5 minutes, do not allow to brown.

Add $\frac{1}{4}$ pint of water and $\frac{1}{2}$ pint of milk; 1oz well-washed rice, a pinch of grated nutmeg, salt; bring to the boil, cover pan, lower heat and simmer very gently for $\frac{1}{4}$ - 1 hour.

Stir in 2 teaspoons lemon juice and 2-3 tablespoons fresh single cream. Reheat without boiling and sprinkle with chopped parsley before serving.

Apple Tart

For the short crust pastry: 6oz plain flour, $\frac{1}{2}$ oz castor sugar, $3\frac{1}{2}$ oz block margarine (Stork)

Cream margarine and sugar in Kenwood mixer; add flour in tablespoonfuls and mix till well blended; knead on floured board till smooth and free from cracks.

Line pyrex plate with pastry (a tin plate will do, not a pie dish); dust lightly with cornflour to keep juice from soaking into pastry. Stew apples and when cold put onto pastry and cover with pastry lid. Prick all over with fork; make a slit in centre to let steam escape and decorate edges. Bake $\frac{1}{4}$ - 1 hour in slow oven until pale brown.

It doesn't sound very exciting now, when children eat the same food as their parents and anticipate multi-national picnic menus that reflect both their well travelled palates and the shelves of the local supermarket. Unsophisticated country-bred sixties children lived lives much closer to

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the wartime childhoods of their parents' generation than to that of the last decades of the 20th century. In Islay the corn was still stacked in old-fashioned stooks to dry; our vegetables came from the garden; our butter, milk and cream, in large quantities, from the farm. Running around beaches in flowery pants and hateful itchy fairisle jerseys, the height of our cosmopolitan ambition was reached with German cocktail sausages eaten straight from their little jars of brine.

We were sent to Scotland from our home in the South of England at the beginning of the summer holidays. O the excitement of the night train from Euston to Glasgow Central station and breakfast in the Central Hotel, starting with tomato juice, then porridge, eggs, kippers, toast and tea. On another train to the port of Gourock, we caught our first delicious smell of the sea, then two successive ferries to Islay, with lunch in the white-clothed dining room on the second. Nanny suffered from travel sickness that necessitated the small and interesting medicinal flask of brandy in her handbag.

Our parents arrived later from warmer, more glamorous fortnights or so in the South of France or Italy. They brought housefuls of friends for a month or so of shooting, fishing, stalking and days of grown-up picnic lunches. My mother, who didn't much like Scotland or shooting, rebelled at the standard sponge-bagged shooting lunches of her in-laws neighbouring estate. These rubbery packages were dished out indiscriminately and democratically to guests including prime ministers and other political luminaries and contained a bap filled with cold venison like a piece of shoe sole and a slice of tomato. Fillings were sometimes varied with ham, beef, mutton, or a piece of breakfast bacon and cold scrambled egg, with a bottle of beer to wash things down; an opener was attached with string to every bag. There would be two shattered water biscuits or cream crackers, glued together with a slab of Islay cheese; a piece of cake or chocolate and perhaps an apple.

The cheese, a mild cheddar type, was made until very recently in the Islay Creamery. It was called Dunlop after the village in Ayrshire where it was originally manufactured by Barbara Gilmour from the milk of Ayrshire

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cattle and is regarded as the national cheese of Scotland (F. Marian McNeill, *The Scots Kitchen*).

My grandfather and his friends, many of them politicians like the then Sir Alec Douglas-Home, were all brought up on the same sort of food, the fruits of family estates cooked in old fashioned kitchens by old fashioned Scottish cooks, whose gifts were mainly in baking and breakfast. The packed lunches eaten sitting in the heather would not have invited comment, adverse or otherwise, during conversations about the day, the grouse and possibly the latest news from London. More meritocratic political guests like Ted Heath, a serious gourmet who did not enjoy shooting or probably relish the adult version of nursery food enjoyed by many of his contemporaries at home and in their clubs, must have had a depressing time at lunch in the dining room. The food cooked by old Katie was redeemed mainly by her unequalled ginger bread at tea time.

Mrs Thatcher, a later arrival and a guest not altogether to my grandmother's taste (because the legend is true, she never went to bed), may have gone on picnics, I don't remember. She certainly continued to wear high-heeled shoes although was, I believe, persuaded into borrowed gumboots on occasional occasions. One imagines that considerations of food, good, bad, packed or on royal gold-plate were never allowed to dent her armour plating.

The last Prime Minister in waiting to appear on an Islay beach so far as I know (David Cameron spends time on the next door island of Jura) was Tony Blair. He knows about Scotland of course and arrived with his family from their regular holiday sojourn with friends on the mainland suitably clad in a thick jersey, sensible boots and the denim mufti of the Cool Britannia politician. They were excellent and enthusiastic picnic guests, politely consuming less than thrilling tuna mayonnaise baps by a grey sea in the usual howling gale and providing a good deal of excellent red wine that improved the climate no end.

According to Claudia Roden, the late Sir Ian Mactaggart, also an Islay landlord, described a 'popular lunch when stalking deer' as fried egg and bacon sandwiches in toast thick enough to survive the exigencies of

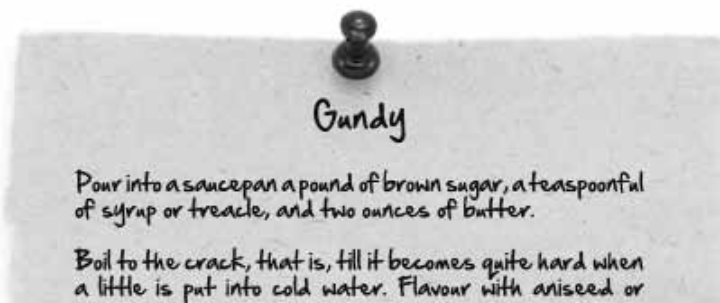
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a crawl. Those cold slabs of toast sound thoroughly unappetising but a bap or sandwich (untoasted) in the pocket remains the standard lunch when stalking on Islay although my family are far more demanding of individually crafted contents.

Agnes Jekyll writes about shooting luncheons when ‘the hardy sportsman would make his frugal luncheon from the remains of the ample breakfast table, filling a roll with strange combinations of “left-overs” (as our American friends neatly call them), wrapping up a buttered scone with a slice of ham and a hard-boiled egg, adding a biscuit and a wedge of cheese, or perhaps only a piece of cake and an apple bulging his ample pockets’. She believes herself that ‘the precious gifts of fresh air and exercise’, should not be ‘neutralized by over-elaborate feasting.’ ‘Good but simple’ should be the keynote.

For a while, when she took charge, my mother decreed a new regime of hot lunches to be brought out to the shooters in Thermoses like insulated tiffin carriers and logistically possible due to the vicinity of drivable roads and tracks crisscrossing my father’s land. I have never thought that boiled carrots and cauliflower went well with the outdoors or looked other than sad after an hour or two’s warm incarceration in a sealed container. On the other hand, a good beef or lamb stew eaten with a spoon is not a bad thing when followed by a hunk of Dunlop cheese and the Terry’s bitter chocolate that we only ever ate in Scotland. It came in dull gold and brown cardboard packets and snapped briskly into its large thin squares. In those early days before prep school and Mars bars, I don’t think that milk chocolate had ever passed my lips. Our other sweets were boiled and came out of Nanny’s pocket in a paper bag that she called a ‘poke’ in homage to her North of England background. Fudge and old-fashioned window pane toffee were made on the Baby Belling in the nursery.

This is the recipe for gundy, ‘An old-fashioned sweetmeat’ from the collection of traditional recipes gathered by F. Marian McNeill for *The Scots Kitchen* published in 1929.



Gundy

Pour into a saucepan a pound of brown sugar, a teaspoonful of syrup or treacle, and two ounces of butter.

Boil to the crack, that is, till it becomes quite hard when a little is put into cold water. Flavour with aniseed or