



Eva Crane Trust

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EVA CRANE

OPPORTUNIST COOKERY

'Opportunism in its wholesome sense is the art of adapting one's self to changing circumstances.'

J. E. C. BRADLEY: *France*, 1898.

THERE are people who thrive in adversity, to whom each obstacle provides an additional incentive; and there are those to whom difficulties produce only nostalgic memories of former easy times, and despair that life must be borne under such hard circumstances as the present. In so far as eating and drinking are concerned, the former certainly have had the happier time during the war years and still have in these post-war years.

I am not concerned in this article with shortages and 'going without', or even with substitutes: more than enough has been written about both these subjects during the last eight years. I am concerned with the happier, and to some people positively enjoyable, complement of scarcities, namely the use of temporary and often sudden surpluses.

Lemons provide an excellent example of this. When lemons could be bought all the year round there was not much incentive to explore all the possible ways of cooking and serving them. When, however, after years of absence, shop windows are suddenly full of lemons, and we know well enough that their stay will be short, those of us in the first category mentioned above greet this sudden visitation with wholehearted pleasure, and set out not only to serve lemons in as many ways as possible, but also to preserve them for the coming year. Down come the books, from Fannie Farmer's and Constance Spry's to Volume V of the Encyclopaedia; but we leave behind the wartime pamphlets which we know will acknowledge only 'lemon substitute'. Many enticing and previously unnoticed recipes are tried, and when the books are exhausted, and Aunt Annie's 1906 recipe for lemon jelly has been tried and approved, then we start the most exciting part of all—our own improvisations. We discover, for instance, a very pleasing mayonnaise, made by beating together half a tin of unsweetened evaporated milk, two teaspoons of mustard and one of salt, and adding gradually enough lemon juice first to thicken the mixture, and then to reduce it to the required consistency.

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with rye bread to the tune of mechanical music and the roll of the ball on the ski-ball board. There were heel clickings and stiff bows and I thought of Hamburg, pre-war, and a German family I had known in those dear days of peace, and I wondered what had become of them.

Baked Idaho potatoes in a Broadway 'joint'. The noise and clamour at the bar. The American accents, the mixed races mingled there. But I was away again in my mother's kitchen at home on a winter's night, just a lad of ten or twelve. My mother opened the oven door of the old-fashioned black enamelled stove, and I could see again the polished steel of the fender and rack above, such tribute to her busy hands. Mother placed before me baked potatoes in their jackets. There was butter aplenty and fine white bread sliced thickly from a Coburg loaf, and a cup of cocoa, more like chocolate in those days, I think. Simple fare it is true, but in our memories of elaborate feasts there will always remain the simple things, the crust of bread and cheese in the harvest fields on holiday, and draught cider sharp on the tongue like a nagging wife, but far more pleasant. Of pre-war pork sausages, dark brown and crisping where they had burst. Sprats toasted in salt in an open pan and eaten with the fingers on a frosty evening.

Fresh cooked prawns and brown bread and butter. Hot strong tea on a fishing smack homeward bound to Poole.

The leap of the flame, the beat of the whisk. The sizzling grill, the hiss of hot fat, the turn of the spit and the tiny cogs of memory revolve, and now my mind is awl with thoughts, following one another down a path of feasts that stand like flowering bushes on the way. Exotic blooms that represent the feasts of luxury, and tiny delicate flowers for the more discerning gourmet, and here and there the sturdy plants representing robust meals for simple men to satisfy their hunger.

The drab days in which we live are made less drab if we sometimes remember meals we have enjoyed in better times: they are well worth remembering for the happy associations which they help keep alive and also for the incentive they give us not to allow our sense of appreciation to grow dull in these gastronomically dull days.

What a lot they miss, these other people, whose pleasure in the reappearance of lemons is marred by their knowledge of the uncertain stay of such transitory visitors! For them, no pickled lemons with mackerel next April; no bottled lemons to mix with the next arrival of Seville oranges; and no crystallized lemon peel at the next Christmas party.

Besides the ephemeral presence in shops of usually absent commodities, there are two other occasions when our imagination can be given full scope. The first, which is less exciting, is the discovery of stores which will not keep much longer, onions sprouting in spring, or jam starting to ferment owing to a misdirected zeal in saving sugar in its manufacture. The solution here seems to be chutney, and a few pounds of jam used instead of sugar in chutney can give it a new and interesting flavour. Some of the best chutney I have ever made had as its basis several pounds of tomato jam which no one would eat as such. Unfortunately, I kept no record of the other ingredients and have never managed to repeat it.

I give my onion chutney recipe for others whose residue of winter onions starts sprouting incontinently in March. Needless to say, its ingredients may be varied widely.

6 lb. onions (mixed)	1 level teaspoon coriander
1½ lb. apples or apple pulp	1 „ „ cardamon seeds
1 lb. plum jam	1 „ „ ground ginger
½ lb. chopped dates	1 „ „ ground cloves
3 oz. salt	1 „ „ ground mace
2 pts. vinegar	1 „ „ ground allspice
	4 „ „ teaspoons cut chillies.

Simmer all together until tender. (1 hour.)

I should like to take this opportunity of registering a protest against the 'tablespoon of mixed spice' school. Most spices are available now, and a selection should be made for each purpose. I can still remember my pleasure when I first smelt and tasted cardamom seeds: I do not think that they enter into many mixed spices.

Apples present a problem in many homes; not the large keeping apples, but those which are either too small to peel, or those which are damaged and will not keep. My solution here is to cut the apples up roughly and cook them slowly in very little water, and then to sieve the mixture. (I have a Bing triturator with a rotating roller which is ideal for the purpose.)

The pulp may be used within a week or so, or bottled in the usual way and used later. Apart from apple sauce, tarts, etc., there are several sweets based on this pulp which are guaranteed to set your guests guessing as to their origin. The pulp is either thickened with cornflour, in which case it is served cold as a flummery and decorated with (mock) cream, or it is mixed with moist breadcrumbs and baked in a shallow dish with Demerara sugar and knobs of margarine scattered over the top. In either case the flavouring is the subtle point. It may be a fruit vinegar, such as raspberry or blackberry, or even better, muscatel syrup. To make this, boil a few sprays of elder flowers with several pounds of gooseberries (there is no need to snuff these) in sufficient water to cover them. Strain the pulp, and add one pound of sugar to each pint of juice; reboil and bottle. These vinegars and syrups keep for years, and they sweeten as well as flavour the apple, so that no sugar need be added to it.

There is a season in every summer when the salad crops, particularly lettuce and radish, suddenly bolt and run to seed. These plants usually end up on the compost heap, and while they will help to fertilize next year's crop they are wasted as far as the present year goes. Overgrown lettuces are well worth salvaging, so that the leaves may be cooked and eaten as spinach. Radishes may be dealt with in two ways. If they are not too far gone and you have no young ones ready, use them *grated* in salads and sandwiches, or cook and curry them. There is a large black Spanish radish which is usually treated in these ways. If the radishes are too coarse to eat, leave the plants to flower and seed, then pickle the seed pods. This pickle is an old one, but it is rarely made nowadays. It is not everyone's favourite, but worth making for those who do like it. Many old cookery books give methods for it.

The other occasion upon which our imagination may be given full scope is perhaps the best of all because the products of our ingenuity carry with them such pleasant memories: when the natural resources of the garden, fields or sea present us with a sudden rich harvest in which we gastronomic opportunists so delight. We have been presented with some of our knottiest problems at Wringapeak, in Devonshire. Here, for instance, we picked nearly a hundredweight of mushrooms one September. This really put us on our mettle! Drying on the rack above the Esse cooker dealt with a good many of them, and for nearly a year we enjoyed mushroom soup and mushroom pancakes. These consist of the usual pancakes filled with a cooked,

seasoned mixture of chopped onions, butter (or dripping) and chopped mushrooms, for which the dried ones proved quite suitable. Mushroom ketchup proved another source of pleasure for several years.

Another happily remembered occasion, when food which is usually unobtainable was available for a short time in plenty, was a Whitsun camping trip near the Bempton cliffs in Yorkshire. We had come here to watch the seabirds—puffins, razorbills, guillemots and kittiwakes—which nest in thousands on ledges in the cliff face. Each year eggs are collected by several teams of men who make the descent by rope from the top of the 400 feet cliffs. On this occasion the food we had sent by post (almost our whole supply for a long week-end) did not arrive, and guillemots' and razorbills' eggs of necessity formed the major part of our food for several days. And how we enjoyed them, in spite of the very limited culinary operations possible with a primus, one pan, bread, butter and endless sea-birds' eggs!

It may be claimed that those who share my attitude to scarcity and its rare occasions of plenty are making a virtue of necessity, or, upon occasion, even inventing the necessity. Perhaps we are.

'Sweet are the uses of adversity;
Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head'.

In our enthusiasm for exploring the facets of the jewel, we forget the reputed ugliness and venom of the toad, and he becomes an animal which, if an uninvited companion, is not entirely unwelcome.