



Roberta Muir and her mother, Joan Muir



Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in Anglo-Saxon Sydney suburbia, home-cooked meals were the norm, take-away (confined to the local Chinese restaurant) was rare, and dining out in restaurants unheard of. Dad worked night shift, and so wasn't often home for meals, but Mum made sure that we four children sat to the table every night for a balanced meat and three veg. Salads were popular in summer, platters of cold meat, tomato, cucumber, iceberg lettuce, grated carrot and hard-boiled eggs (no dressing), and Sunday evening was always a baked dinner (which I've never mastered), usually leg of lamb, shoulder of pork or large chicken with mounds of baked potatoes, pumpkin and carrot, mashed potato, boiled peas and beans and broccoli and cauliflower in cheese sauce. This was the most festive meal of the week and a time when Nanna or our school friends would often join us.

Crumbed Pan-fried Whiting with Baked Chips and Herb Mayonnaise



Fish featured heavily in our diet as Dad was a keen fisherman, always coming home from a day on the Hawkesbury River with bags of whiting, leatherjacket and bream.

½ cup extra virgin olive oil	salt flakes and freshly ground
4 potatoes, peeled and cut into bite-sized chunks	black pepper, to taste
8 × 75 g whiting fillets, skin off	3 eggs, lightly beaten
	3 cups fine breadcrumbs

HERB MAYONNAISE

2 tbsp chopped gherkins	2 tbsp finely chopped chervil
2 tbsp salted capers, rinsed and dried	salt flakes and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
2 tbsp finely chopped dill	1 cup whole-egg mayonnaise
2 tbsp finely chopped flat-leaf parsley	

Preheat the oven to 200°C. For the baked chips, pour half the olive oil into a baking dish and place in the oven. Dry the potatoes well on absorbent paper. When the oil is hot, remove the dish, add the potatoes, stir well to coat and return to the oven for 45–60 minutes, until crisp and brown, stirring occasionally.

To make the mayonnaise, combine all the ingredients and set aside in the fridge.

To cook the fish, sprinkle each whiting fillet generously with salt and pepper on both sides. Dip fish in egg, then in breadcrumbs, gently pressing the crumbs onto the fish. Repeat egg and breadcrumb process then cover and refrigerate until ready to cook.

Heat the remaining oil in a large frying pan over medium heat when the potatoes are nearly ready. When hot, add the fish and cook the fillets for about 1 minute each side, until golden, then drain on paper towel. Rather than crowding the pan, cook the fish in batches if need be.

Remove the potatoes from oven, drain on paper towel, place in a warmed serving bowl and salt well. Serve the fish with the mayonnaise, the potatoes and a green salad.

Serves 4

Mum's Chocolate, Cherry and Almond Cake



Once we all went to school, Mum went back to work and time was at a premium. During these years, packet cake mixes became a necessary evil, but I never thought the insubstantial creations they produced were a patch on the cakes Mum used to make. Thankfully, since she's retired, she's gone back to the old ways and also started experimenting with new cakes such as her now famous Chocolate, Cherry and Almond Cake. It's become such a hit with everyone who tries it that she often spends days baking batches of them to distribute to family and friends. The almond meal makes it very moist so it keeps well—though it rarely lasts that long.

750 g preserved sour cherries	100 g dark chocolate, grated
200 g salted butter, softened	2 tbsp rum
1 cup caster sugar	1 cup self-raising flour, sifted
4 eggs	1 tsp ground cinnamon
100 g almond meal	1/3 cup flaked almonds

Preheat the oven to 160°C. Grease a deep, 25-cm round spring pan and line the base with baking paper.

Drain the cherries on absorbent paper or, even better, overnight in a colander.

Beat the butter and sugar in a large bowl with an electric mixer until light and fluffy. Add the eggs, one at the time, beating on low speed between additions so the eggs are just combined.

Using a wooden spoon, stir in the almond meal, chocolate, rum, flour, cinnamon and half the flaked almonds, then add the cherries.

Pour the mixture into the prepared pan, sprinkle the remaining flaked almonds on top and bake for about 1 hour and 10 minutes, until a wooden skewer comes out dry when inserted into the centre. If the top of the cake browns too much while cooking, cover the pan loosely with foil. Stand for 5 minutes before turning out onto a wire rack. Serve warm or cold.



Home-made treats



The table was a noisy place and friends from smaller families, not used to talking over the top of someone else in order to have their say, were often quite perplexed by the cacophony. We weren't big dessert eaters, but Sunday was the exception when my Nanna's clove-studded apple pie reigned supreme, with home-made custard or shop-bought ice-cream—usually both.

While we didn't eat a lot of desserts, there were always home-baked cakes, biscuits and slices for our lunch boxes and to have with a cup of tea. My earliest food memory is watching Mum cream butter and sugar with a wooden spoon to make a simple butter cake and whisk egg whites with an old rotary hand-beater for the super-light sponges that were filled with strawberry jam and whipped cream as birthday cakes.