

winter food

matthew evans

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On moving to Tasmania five years ago Matthew Evans was struck by how often people would warn him, in a low whisper and as a matter of course, of the winter to come. 'Oh, it gets so cold', they'd say – and then nothing, end of conversation. This led him, like them, to dread winter. But as it turned out his fears were never realised. Once he'd settled into his farm near Huonville the romance of winter took hold, and he got caught up in the whole anticipation of it. 'Is there snow on the mountain yet?' locals would ask each other, as if snow on the mountain was a sure sign that winter was here. Or, 'Why isn't there snow on the mountain?' with a clear note of disappointment.

'In June you think it's winter', Matthew tells me. 'But no, there's another month to wait. Not until July does it truly arrive' - this year complete with snow in places where it hasn't fallen since 2007. His eyes light up when describing the low golden light of morning, the fog hugging the valley, and the light crunch of ice underfoot. Once winter does come - especially in places like Cygnet where the locals are good at seasonal rituals like the Lantern Parade - for Matthew it's cause for celebration, not a flight to Queensland. This romantic side of winter isn't, he suggests, as easy to enjoy in big cities like Melbourne, where the logistics of getting from A to B under a grey sky outweighs the warm cosiness of being indoors as the thermometer drops.

Winter on the Farm is Matthew's hymn to the food that keeps friends and family sitting round the table on long frosty nights. Packed with recipes, of course, none of them wildly difficult but all of them considered and artful, Matthew writes with genuine gratitude for the life he finds himself living on a small farm, with access to nearly all the ingredients that makes good cooking possible – a far cry from the Sydney apartment life he's left behind.

Whereas it was once his job to get people to eat out at restaurants through his reviews for The Sydney Morning Herald, these days his mission is to get people cooking well at home. 'If I can get someone to tear up some herbs, and to fry an onion on low for longer than they usually do, until it's clear but not burnt, then I'll have succeeded in getting them to cook better'. 'Cooking', he adds, 'isn't about heating up frozen food. That's just assembling. People don't realise that learning to cook a few basic dishes is a transferable skill. If you learn to cook a good asparagus risotto, say, then you can use those skills to cook a great mushroom risotto. If you can boil water for pasta, and if you have the right ingredients in the house – a can of tuna and a lemon for zest – then you have what it takes to cook pasta creatively from scratch. It really doesn't have to be anything more than this.'

'There is', he explains, 'a mental thing about cooking that puts off a lot of people, especially women. They think it's going to be a chore. But', as he points out, 'even with just a couple of quality ingredients in the house you can make a simple dish yummiier than it might otherwise be'. By buying good olive oil and pasta you become a better cook because they then allow you to make everything you cook that much more quickly and easily.

Attitudes to cooking have changed a lot, he thinks, since the days when women felt they were chained to the stove, and domesticity was considered subservient. 'It's like knitting', he suggests. 'In Sydney there are now knitting cafes – it's cool to knit in a way that a generation ago it wasn't'. Like knitting, cooking has turned a corner and is considered by most people an interesting thing to do.

Also cooking needn't be hugely expensive. 'The great thing is that it's possible to eat well three times a day with proper ingredients – as long as, that is, you have a few basic skills.' He's particularly pleased about the kitchen garden schemes which are getting off the ground in many schools across the State. Equally farmers' markets are a boon to good eating – offering places where real people can meet other real people who've grown food that they're willing to pass on knowledge about - tips that make cooking taste better with less fuss.

On the other hand he sympathises with the effort that many people associate cooking with. 'For me it's that way with Chinese food', he explains. 'I find that I can't slip into cooking it when I'm tired and hungry and have just walked into the house. Besides', he adds, 'as soon as you refer to a recipe in a book you're leaving your comfort zone.' Once it's lying open on the kitchen counter you have to think consciously about something that is otherwise intuitive, even automatic.

Ideally he'd like readers who pick up *Winter on the Farm* to use the recipes not as gospel to be followed to the letter, but as road maps which assume that there are number of ways to arrive at the same endpoint. Besides, he says, the great tragedy with recipes is that because no two ovens hold the same temperature, it's impossible to predict how certain dishes will turn out.

In any case, no two people cook the same dish. If Matthew's wife cooks his beef shin pie it will taste slightly different than if he'd cooked it. 'Cooking is always slightly intuitive. We bring our personalities to bear on whatever we cook - which is', he thinks, 'a really nice thing. It's hard to break your own rules and to roast

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the spices to a darker colour, say, or to brown garlic just that little bit more – details which change the whole character of a dish and make it one's own.'

And what, I ask him, is his quintessential winter dish? 'Oh,' he replies after a slight pause, 'I think it would have to be 'Cottage pie with mustard cheese topping'. What he likes about it is that the mince doesn't rely on tomato paste -which he suspects lazy cooks rely on too much. Instead by cooking the onions slowly, for up to half an hour on a low heat 'with the odd stir as you wander past', the onions will take on a flavour that forms the basis of the dish. It's also really important not to use lean beef, because it's the fat in it that carries a lot of the flavour and makes the whole dish satisfying. And then the potato topping, with its 'ridiculous amount of cheese'. 'This is cottage pie that isn't afraid of tasting of itself' – which is rich enough 'to tell me that I need to eat salad with it'.

Cooking is a skill that, sadly, some people miss out on as they grow up. Even though Italian men, he points out, don't do much cooking while growing up, once they're let loose in the kitchen they surprise themselves by knowing what to do - because they've watched their mothers' cook while growing up.

Now that Matthew Evans has a two-year-old son who refuses to eat spinach in his risotto, he's sensitive to some of the trials of family cooking. The beauty of Stephanie Alexander's approach, he says, in her roll out of school gardens and cooking classes, is that it gets 'Little Johnny' to try foods that he'd otherwise be blinkered to. Little Johnny, who hates spinach on principle, may find himself tucking in to pasta with spinach if he's picked and cooked it with classmates. In a similar vein he tells the story of his son, who used to refuse to eat broccoli, until Matthew's photographer spent some time with the family, and scoffed broccoli so quickly and noisily that his son immediately wanted some too.

Shopping for quality, stocking up in the pantry, enjoying the seasons, simmering hearty soups, sharing the cooking, sourcing good meat, and persisting with fussy children - all this adds up to good winter cooking. And if you're anywhere near Salamanca in Hobart, you'll find Matthew's and Nick Haddow's new shop A Common Ground, piled proudly high with Tasmanian food, is a feast.

tasmanian style ■

