



Nigella Lawson isn't a trained cook. She creates recipes but thinks as an eater and writes profoundly on the emotional significance of food. Her first book, *How to Eat*, became the most valuable food guide of the 90s. Now she's published *Cook, Eat, Repeat*, which has changed the way I think about cooking again.

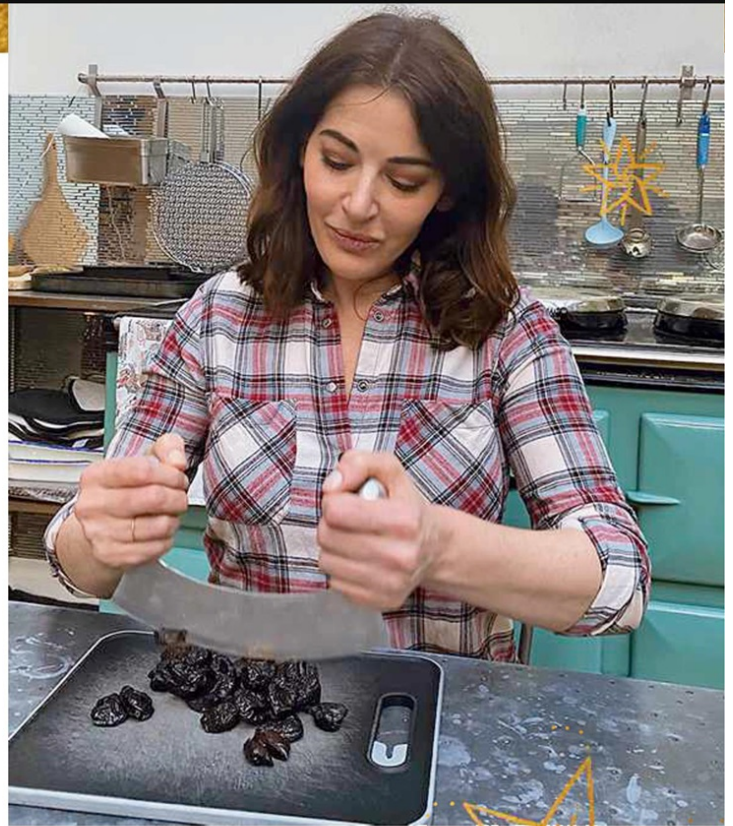
Her vegan gingerbread recipe on page 136 is, according to my son's college flatmate, the greatest gingerbread of all time. Due to covid restrictions, Nigella has also taken the photos for this feature.

E: Your twelfth cookbook! Why did you write this one?

N: The question 'why?' can be such an instant drainer of confidence, as there are so many cookbooks out there, and it's so easy to think of the many reasons why *not* to. But, after accidentally becoming a food writer 22 years ago, I think I've only just now felt absolutely sure that it's what I'm meant to be doing. I wanted – partly out of gratitude – to reflect on what I've learnt about food, what it means, what recipes can do, what cooking is.

E: After all these years, do you still love encouraging people to eat?

N: I love feeding people, and I have an evangelical need to share my enthusiasms and convey the deep pleasure I get from food. You know how when you're eating something wonderful, you want to press a forkful into someone's mouth so they can taste it too? That's what I insistently felt writing this. It felt like the right book for me, and that's a delicious pleasure.



Emma Freud meets Nigella Lawson

Nigella talks to Emma about her food philosophy, her zeal for leftovers, the joy of camp cocktail ingredients and her newest cookbook, *Cook, Eat, Repeat*



E: Did you start the book with a particular mission?

N: I don't think I have anything as highfalutin as a 'mission', but I certainly wanted to encourage people to investigate food and think about flavour, and to show how the practical and emotional reside together. I'm not sure it's something that can necessarily be taught, but in showing the deep joy I get from cooking, I hope readers are led to some delicious wallowing of their own. I also felt a need to show how the fabulous poetry of the kitchen comes out of so many repeated mundane tasks.

E: 'No waste' has always been a big thing with you. Why is that?

N: My inability to tolerate waste has nothing to do with general virtue, I'm afraid. My mother had been a child in the war, and I was brought up never to throw food away, but to use up every last scrap. But, it's also because piecing supper together out of the bits and pieces lying forlornly in the fridge is where the cook's true pleasure lies. I think, if you love cooking, you really only feel your creativity being unleashed when you have to make something out of what's in front of you. Using the water you've cooked potatoes or pasta in to make bread, or my banana skin curry

– these are two such fond favourites. As I said in *How to Eat*, cooking, like the sonnet form, is defined by its constraints. And, in many ways, although *Cook, Eat, Repeat* is a culmination of 22 years of writing about food, it's also a companion piece to *How to Eat*.

E: There are so many unexpected combinations – marzipan cake, advocaat ice cream, and cooking fennel in martini, then smothering it in gruyère. How do these new ideas happen?

N: I don't have an ice-cream machine, but the idea of a no-churn ice cream that tastes of cheesecake had been dancing on the edges of my mind for a while. I couldn't get it right until I reached into my cupboard of camp cocktail ingredients and brought out the advocaat. It transformed it instantly! I made the marzipan cake because I had an open packet of marzipan. Have you tried toasting it, then eating it with roasted rhubarb and cream? It's rapturous. As for the fennel gratin, that was the product of a bout of insomnia! Being a bad sleeper has its benefits.

E: You said in the bread chapter, 'there can be no pleasure without pain'. What does bread mean to your heart and soul?

N: Where do I start? I don't know if there's any other foodstuff that makes me happier. Is there anything truly better to eat than good bread and butter? It's not just about the sheer joy of eating bread, but what it means. It feels like – indeed, is – essential sustenance, and yet entirely miraculous at the same time. I love knowing that if I have flour, yeast and water (I haven't given myself over to sourdough yet), I can magic loaves into being. And, I find making bread so deeply nourishing in itself. The feeling of the soft dough of my old-fashioned sandwich bread in my hands transports me instantly to a safe and calm place. Though much as I love kneading, I am in utter thrall to the life-changing wonder of the no-knead bread recipe in the book. Making it feels like a sacrament, and eating it feels like the profoundest of pleasures.

E: Did lockdown change the way you cook?

N: I have always cooked properly, even when it's just me eating, but I've never gone so long without feeding other people. I was working furiously, writing and retesting recipes, and I was in total isolation, so it was a long time of feeding just myself. I loved the utter absorption of cooking just for me, the quiet ceremony of it – it was a very pure pleasure, untainted by anxiety. It certainly fed into the book: I added notes for how to change many recipes into solo suppers.

E: Do you think lockdown changed cooking attitudes for the country? Did you have a different type of engagement from people wanting – or needing – to cook?

N: Yes, I certainly did. I felt that many people who had perhaps not yet discovered cooking's potential to rub the rough corners off the day, really began to appreciate that for themselves. I also think it allowed people to realise that a recipe can be a starting point, rather than an absolute edict. Having to adapt a recipe to the ingredients you have to hand is what cooking



is all about. And, I felt enormously connected to those who asked for tips on Twitter. Cooking is so much about connection, and in that time of isolation, it felt so important to have that conversation; at its most basic, it's just about shared humanity.

E: Are there any qualities as a cook you'd like to have that you don't?

N: Well, I'd start with improving my non-existent knife skills! I have no technique at all. But, whenever I've thought of trying to acquire them, I wonder if I'd enjoy cooking as much. Besides, not being an expert is what makes me understand the constraints and fears of other home cooks, and helps me write recipes. Or, maybe I'm just making a virtue out of necessity!

E: There are so many cookbooks now, many from non-cooks. Does that make it more exciting, or is it too much competition?

N: Well, to the professional chef, I am most definitely a non-cook, so it wouldn't occur to me to think of others in that way. Besides, I adore cookbooks, and am enormously grateful to other food writers. I don't think of them as competition, and I'm not trying to fit into any mould – I'm just writing about the food I cook and love.



FESTIVE QUICK-FIRE

What will you be doing differently this year? I don't think I'll have a lot of people around my table. It's going to be a small-scale Christmas.

What you can't live without during Christmas My children in the house.

Is there anything you're ditching this year? Parties.

Your Christmas comforts Wearing pyjamas and slipper socks for days on end.

How long do you tend to spend in the kitchen on Christmas Day? I tend to potter about stove-side for most of the day, very happily.

Your tip to compensate for a covid-19 Christmas I'm quadrupling the number of fairy lights and candles, and going into full-on festive mode before we even get to December!

MAKE NIGELLA'S...

Luscious vegan gingerbread

I am preposterously proud of this squidgy gingerbread, and I don't mind who knows it. It's everything you want out of gingerbread – sticky, spicy, deeply aromatic – and you would never miss the butter or eggs. Warning: ideally you need to make this at least a day before you plan to eat it. Harsh, I know.

CUTS INTO 12-18 slabs **PREP** 20 mins **COOK** 1 hr **EASY** V

150ml vegetable oil
200g golden syrup
200g black treacle
125g dark muscovado sugar
75g pitted soft prunes (about 8), finely chopped
30g ginger, peeled and grated
2 tsp ground cinnamon
2 tsp ground ginger
1 tsp ground allspice
pinch of ground cloves
¼ tsp ground black pepper
¼ tsp fine sea salt
250ml oat milk
300g plain flour
1 tsp bicarbonate of soda
2 tsp cider vinegar
vegan clotted cream, blanched almonds, caramel sauce or maple syrup, and pomegranate seeds, to serve (optional)

1 Heat the oven to 170C/150C fan/gas 3½. Line the base and sides of a 23cm square tin with baking parchment.

2 Tip the oil into a jug, then pour into a heavy-bottomed saucepan, about 22cm wide. Measure the golden syrup and treacle into the oily jug – this will prevent them sticking, so they'll pour easily. Pour into the saucepan.

3 Tip in the sugar, prunes and ginger, then sprinkle in the dried spices, pepper and salt, and warm over a low heat, whisking to combine. Be careful not to overmix – you don't want to add a lot of air to the mixture.

4 Once everything is melted and combined, remove the pan from the heat – it should be warm at this stage, rather than boiling hot. Add the oat milk, whisking gently until completely incorporated.

5 Whisk in the flour in three or four additions, being sure to whisk out any lumps as you go. This will take a few minutes. The only lumps you should see when all the flour has been incorporated are the little bits of prune – these will melt into the gingerbread as it bakes. Dissolve the bicarbonate of soda in 2 tbsp warm water in a large mug, then add the vinegar and quickly whisk the fizzing mixture into the pan.

6 Carefully pour the gingerbread batter into the prepared tin, and bake for 50-55 mins. Check it after 45 mins. It may look cooked after this time, but as it's so moist, a cake tester won't be a good indicator, as you'd expect some crumbs to stick to it. Take it out of the oven and touch the top quickly; if cooked, the gingerbread should bounce back a bit under your fingers.

7 Leave the gingerbread to cool completely in the tin on a wire rack. But, don't eat as soon as it's cold



– once cooled, wrap the tin in a double layer of baking parchment, then put in an airtight container, and leave to stand for a day or two before cutting into it. This will help enhance the flavours. Cut into 12-18 thick slabs and serve as is, or top with clotted cream, almonds, caramel sauce and pomegranate seeds, if you like.

GOOD TO KNOW vegan

PER SERVING (18) 242 kcal • fat 9g • saturates 1g • carbs 38g • sugars 24g • fibre 1g • protein 2g • salt 0.4g

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