

Baking with my mother

Sharon Stephenson sifts through the Sunday afternoon rituals of her childhood.



If I were to assemble the fragments of my childhood, Sunday afternoons would be a good place to start.

Sunday mornings held their own shape: a rushed breakfast, arguments about hogging the bathroom, and Mass, an hour spent trying to make the hands of the clock spin faster.

It was a relief to fall into the arms of Sunday afternoon, when my mother and I would measure, mix and bake until we filled the ancient cake tins, carefully lining the rusty bottoms with greaseproof paper first. In a house awash with testosterone, it was the only girls' time we were able to chisel out.

Yet despite years of identical Sunday afternoons, my mother remained a terrible baker. A transplant from a hotter, more exotic place, it wasn't in her DNA to casually chuck together flour and butter the way other mothers did. Give her a cup of rice, some spices and a cheap cut of meat and she could conjure up a feast. But baking was somewhat of a foreign

country and – as she'd already done the emotional weightlifting of moving hemispheres – learning how to knead, cream and caramelize were skills she didn't have the time or energy to perfect.

Yet she persevered. Three hollow-legged sons, frequent requests to “bring a plate” and a tiny budget meant she was forced to spend Sunday afternoons doing something she wasn't good at for people who didn't appreciate it.

Hers was a limited repertoire: there were impenetrable date scones and Afghans that couldn't keep to themselves, spreading across the baking tray to congeal into a large chocolatey mass. Later there were flat Victoria sponges and a messy fiesta of oats and golden syrup masquerading as Anzac biscuits. Once I came home from a friend's house raving about her mother's melting moments, having spent the afternoon eating more than was appropriate. Mum was determined to replicate the recipe which, in the cookbook, resembled a frothy confection of carbs and buttery icing. Unfortunately, the recipe failed to return her enthusiasm, whispering to her “I am not for people like you.” I can still remember the burn of embarrassment at having to take her not-so-melting moments to a school morning tea. I may even have asked why we couldn't just buy a packet of Mallowpuffs.

If our criticism stung, Mum never showed it: she was a woman untroubled by the cult of perfectionism that tugs so painfully at her youngest daughter. She was careless with recipes, frequently substituting ingredients with whatever was at hand. It mattered little if cookies burned or cakes stuck to the tin; in her world, the act of doing was enough.

“If you don't like it, you don't have to eat it, but don't then complain about being hungry,” she would remark in a voice that left us in little doubt that to refuse her baked offerings was to flirt with starvation. Chubby photos from the time make it clear which option I chose.

BEING A CHILD of war, Mum was heavily invested in zero waste, which meant nothing ever ended up in the bin. Whatever came out of the oven went into our bellies. These days she'd be called sustainable or a greenie, terms that would make her smile. Back then, it was a case of making do.

The end results weren't always pretty, but the fun was in the making. Mum had never really got on with mess, but Sunday afternoon was her time off for good behaviour: she baked the way abstract artists paint – throwing flour, sugar and melted butter at bowls in the hope some of it would stick. It was the only time of the week I saw her relax and we'd laugh and gossip, in summer with the back door flung open, in winter as condensation ran thick down the windows. Growing up, it's probably the only time I felt close to Mum; her job as a primary school teacher, wife and mother of five left little time for bonding. As far as she was concerned, those who were capable were left to get on with it.

And so I did, moving cities and continents and clearing the usual milestones of adulthood: university, travel, career and mortgages. But in my early 30s, the underlying differences that had stalked us for decades spiralled out of control and we stopped talking. For four years. It was tough for both of us, but as we lacked the tools to navigate our way back into the relationship, it seemed easier not to try.

The ice-breaker was Mum's old cookbook. One day while moving house, I found the A4 exercise book she'd given me when I left for London. In pages splattered with butter and melted chocolate, in her looping, cursive handwriting, Mum had detailed ingredients and oven settings for decades of cookies, cakes and slices. When I got to the recipe for melting moments, I felt an immediate stab of love and reached for the phone.

These days, Mum is in her late 70s



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and lives in tropical Queensland where it's far too hot to bake. Time has rubbed smooth expectations and our mutual need to be anyone but who we are, and now we happily trade recipes by email or Skype, just not for baked goods.

Sometimes, before Sunday wears itself out, I like to pull out her cookbook and whip up a batch of Afghans or a coconut sponge. It never fails to pull me into the centre of a childhood memory.

My baking may stand up a little straighter in the tin, and the ingredients will have been coaxed together by a fire-engine red Kitchen Aid I'm too ashamed to admit the cost of. But I'm not sure I can ever compete with Mum, probably because my baking isn't made with the pure love and selflessness that hers was.

Afghans

Makes about 30

200g butter, at room temperature
 1/2 cup sugar
 1 1/4 cups standard plain flour
 1/4 cup cocoa
 2 cups cornflakes

1. Preheat oven to 180°C. Cream butter and sugar until light and fluffy.
2. Sift flour and cocoa. Stir into creamed mixture. Fold in cornflakes.
3. Spoon mounds of mixture onto a greased oven tray, gently pressing together.
4. Bake for 15 minutes or until lightly browned and firm.
5. When cold, ice with chocolate icing and decorate with pieces of walnut.

Anzac Biscuits

Makes about 30

1 cup flour
 1 cup caster sugar
 1 cup desiccated coconut
 2 cups rolled oats
 125g butter
 2 tbsp golden syrup
 1 tsp baking soda
 3 tbsp boiling water

1. Preheat oven to 180°C (160°C fan bake). Line two baking trays with non-stick baking paper.
2. Place flour, caster sugar, coconut and oats in a bowl and stir to combine. Make a well in the centre.
3. Place butter and golden syrup in a saucepan (or microwave in a bowl) to melt.
4. Dissolve baking soda in boiling water.
5. Add melted ingredients and dissolved baking soda to dry ingredients and mix to combine.
6. Roll spoonfuls into balls and press onto prepared baking trays, allowing space for biscuits to spread while cooking.
7. Bake for 15 minutes or until firm and golden brown. Remove to a wire rack to cool.

Melting Moments

Makes 16 filled biscuits

200g butter, softened
 3/4 cup icing sugar
 1 cup plain flour, sifted
 1 cup cornflour
 1/2 tsp baking powder

For the Butter Filling

1 tbsp butter, softened
 6 tbsp icing sugar, sifted
 1 tbsp custard powder

1. Preheat oven to 180°C. Line a baking tray with baking paper.
2. Cream butter and icing sugar until light and fluffy.
3. Sift flour, cornflour and baking powder together. Mix into creamed mixture.
4. Roll dough into small balls and place on the oven tray. Flatten slightly by pressing with a fork.
5. Bake for 20 minutes or until cooked.
6. To make butter filling, beat all ingredients together until smooth.
7. Sandwich biscuits together with butter filling.