



the proof is in the eating

WELLINGTON PIE AND PUDDING
CONNOISSEURS ARE BEING TREATED TO
DELECTABLE COMESTIBLES MADE THE
OLD-FASHIONED WAY

WORDS SHARON STEPHENSON PHOTOGRAPHS PAUL MCCREDIE

ON PAPER, it sounds foolhardy: use 14th and 15th-century recipes to produce English pies and puddings made with hot-water-crust pastry and crammed full of organic pork, game and jelly or studded with nuts and fruit. What's more, do it all by hand and in a way that isn't the least bit shy of salt, fat, sugar or alcohol.

Trust Valentina Dias to pull it off. What started as a hobby in the Wellingtonian's kitchen six years ago has blossomed into Pudding Lane, an award-winning company responsible for reviving the Melton Mowbray-style ingredients and traditions of authentic pork, turkey and venison pies, Yorkshire parkin (a dense oatmeal/ginger loaf) and old-fashioned suet puddings which have almost disappeared from our culinary landscape. Come Christmas time, Valentina recreates an 18th-century ancestral cannonball pudding, a deliciously crumbly, spicy creation that's a world away from the dense pud most Kiwis consume at this time.

"Doing things the old-fashioned way means making everything from scratch and by hand, from creating the pastry and jelly to making the fruit mince pie filling a year in advance," says Valentina. It's labour intensive and time consuming, but the 42-year-old believes that putting the love and quality of early pie-makers back into the production process ensures a very different taste and texture from processed food.

"I enjoy making these pies and puddings the way they were meant to be made." Creating a batch of 13 signature pork pies is, for example, a three-day process that involves boiling pigs' trotters to make jelly, dicing free-range pork and bacon by hand, marinating it overnight with spices and mace in the medieval way, hand-raising hot-water-crust pastry to mould around the filling and pouring in the jelly once the pies are cooked.

Despite following ancient recipes, this mother of three says she usually has no problem locating ingredients, although suet can sometimes be a little hard to come by. In a concession to modern tastes, Valentina adds anchovies and fresh herbs to her pork pies and uses free-range, organic and local products whenever possible. One notable exception is the cannonball pudding tins which are sourced from a traditional manufacturer in the north of England.

With no formal chef's training, Valentina admits it's been a long and winding road to pie nirvana. She was born in Sri Lanka to a traditional family. Her doctor father set the achievement bar high, expecting academic success from his three daughters. For Valentina, that meant a career in law and investment banking while her younger sisters chose psychiatry and public health.



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When Valentina was one, her father's job took the family to Zambia and two years later to Horsforth, a small town in West Yorkshire, where they remained for the next 15 years. "Yorkshire is where I spent my formative years so that region is very special to me. It's also where my love of local, seasonal food was nurtured and where I first became interested in the stories behind food."

In fact, as soon as she was old enough, Valentina began researching the social history of local food and discovered that "the old recipes had literally been watered down because removing the cream, butter and eggs removed the richness". It was a hobby she filed away under I for interesting, never imagining it would later form the backbone of a business.

When Valentina was 18 the family emigrated to Wellington where Victoria University not only yielded a law degree but a husband, accountant Daminda. In 1995 the couple set off for London, where Valentina held down roles in international finance law and later moved into investment banking. Eight years later and with two toddlers in tow, her love of the high-octane corporate life began to curdle and she came back to New Zealand, intending to retire.

It was her youngest daughter's christening (Saama is now 10, Taara is eight and Ileshaa five) which kick-started Pudding Lane. One of the guests, friend and former lawyer Hilary Domett, suggested Valentina's food was good enough to be stocked at the Domett's boutique butchery Meat on Tory (since closed). But being an enthusiastic foodie and running a business are two very different things. "I had zero experience of the food industry so had to get my head around things like sourcing ingredients, food safety, developing packaging and finding a commercial kitchen."

In one of those serendipitous twists of fate that seem to befall this elfin businesswoman, the search for a pie HQ led to her buying a Miramar restaurant. "My intention was to rent the kitchen when it wasn't being used but the owner was selling it and, despite having no experience, I ended up buying the café as a going concern." Café Polo, as she subsequently named the eatery that's a favourite with staff at Peter Jackson's nearby Weta film company, now has a loyal following.

Yet despite her success, Valentina has no desire to grow the business. "Keeping it small means I can still do it all myself by hand." It also means she keeps in touch with the end user. "I've had letters from people in their 80s telling me the pies are just like the ones their grandmothers used to make, or saying it's the best Christmas pudding they've ever eaten." The highest compliment, though, came via a regular customer who took one of Valentina's pork pies back to the spiritual home of pies, Melton Mowbray. "The customer's brother used to make pork pies there so she took one over and somehow it survived the 30-hour journey." And the verdict? "Her brother said it tasted just as good as those he used to make, which makes it all worthwhile." 

PUDDING LANE YORKSHIRE PARKIN

Leave wrapped in baking paper and tinfoil in the tin for at least a week before serving as it becomes more moist with age.

- 220g golden syrup
- 30g treacle
- 120g butter
- 120g dark brown sugar
- 120g self-raising flour
- 1 heaped tablespoon ground ginger (check it's freshly ground and not stale)
- 210g quick porridge oats (Flemings Fine Ground Creamoata is the best but now almost impossible to find)
- 2 free-range eggs
- 2 tablespoons milk

Place golden syrup, treacle, butter and brown sugar in a pan and heat gently until melted. Do not allow to boil.

Mix flour, ginger and oats in a large mixing bowl and add the melted sugar/butter mix. Gradually stir until well blended; add beaten eggs and milk.

Pour into a lightly greased 20cm square cake tin and bake at 140°C for 1 hour. Allow to cool in the tin before turning out. Don't forget that even though it smells amazing, you have to wait a week before eating!



PUDDING LANE CHRISTMAS MINCE

This gets better with age so make it now for Christmas. Use the freshest dried fruits and nuts you can find and unspoiled fresh fruits.

- 300g raisins
- 250g sultanas
- 400g currants
- 100g mixed peel
- 100g chopped prunes
- 100g chopped dates
- 100g chopped dried figs
- 450g Granny Smith apples, peeled, cored and grated or finely chopped
- 350g muscovado dark brown sugar
- Grated rind and juice of 3 oranges and 3 lemons
- 100g freshly chopped almonds
- 100g freshly chopped walnuts
- 1 tablespoon mixed spice

- 1 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon ground cloves
- 200ml cognac
- 220g shredded suet (ask your butcher to get some for you)
- 50ml Cointreau

Mix all the ingredients except the Cointreau and use only 150ml of the cognac; leave in a ceramic or glass bowl overnight.

Next day, cover with foil and place in a preheated oven at 110°C for 3 hours. When cooled, add remaining cognac and Cointreau and spoon into sterilized preserving jars. Store in a cool place out of the sunlight for as long as possible (minimum 2 months).

Makes about 2.5kg; enough for 5 dozen deep mince pies