



"Give me loads of people to cook for and I'm happy. On my own, I'll eat from the fridge." For Elisa Beynon, good food and good company go hand in hand – something she discovered soon after marrying university sweetheart Nigel. The young vicar's wife found herself feeding everyone who passed under the lintel of the Beynon family home in Highbury: "friends, family, church people, the girls..."

Guests asked for recipes and encouraged her to write a cookbook. "I love writing and knew I loved entertaining, but it took me a long time to put the two together. Then, about two years ago, I started obsessing about writing a cookbook. Nigel nagged me to do something about it, but it was a dream. I didn't have the self-belief to get off my butt and do it."

That all changed when Elisa saw *WFI's* competition. "It might sound strange, but I read Nigel Slater's article on the contest and felt a warm glow. I'm sure a lot of other people did too, but it just corresponded exactly with my dream. So I had a little feeling of hope, but I didn't really think I'd win." In late March, Elisa was told she was on the shortlist and had three weeks to submit a book proposal. "It was a time of absolute craziness, trying out recipes. Nigel became my 'meals on wheels' man, delivering food to friends in the area in return for their comments. It was a really enjoyable time."

"The day I found out I'd won, I was settling my daughter Greta at nursery. I got a call from Claire, one of the judges, and screamed so loudly everyone thought I'd seen a mouse."

The Beynons' children, Jacob (four) and Greta (two), don't really understand Mum's sudden success but Elisa has plenty of moral support. "Nigel, my mother and my sister are absolutely thrilled. Sadly, my father is no longer alive but he would have been over the moon. My friends think it's funny." As for the lady herself: "Winning is an honour and a privilege. I like food, I like writing and I like people. Chuck the lot in the same pot and I'm happy. Now I have a chance to make a living from the things I love most."

Judge Nigel Slater says, "Eliza's entry shone with enthusiasm, warmth and gentle humour. A truly original voice." Louise Haines adds: "She is a witty writer and a terrific home cook."

Elisa wins a £20,000 book deal with 4th Estate; her winning article is published here.

Writing competition

Move over, Nigella

Our search for the next great food writer is over. Nigel Slater, *WFI* editor William Sitwell, Louise Haines from publisher 4th Estate, and Claire Paterson and Tif Loehnis of literary agency Janklow & Nesbit sifted through 2,500 entries. One shone through: Elisa Beynon, a vicar's wife and home cook from north London

The winning entry

If you don't enjoy being around food it probably isn't the greatest idea to marry a vicar. After all, we all know the stereotype, don't we? The Vicar's Wife is the stuff of jokes and folklore: she's rosy-cheeked, kind if a little condescending, and she spends a great deal of time in her country kitchen, apron on, virtuously stirring industrial quantities of hot jam.

There she stands at the Aga, in her sensible flat shoes, one eye on the clock to see when the cake for the WI sale needs to be taken out of the oven.

Despite an acute awareness of all of the above, I rashly married my very own vicar in 1993. Which wasn't at all clever: being someone who only ever wears extremely high heels, I knew, absolutely and completely, that I wasn't ready to don the lace-ups and take my place at the stove. More to the point, I couldn't cook and wasn't particularly into food. At university my only claim to culinary fame was the fact that I loved tomato ketchup on my broccoli. Or on anything, to be honest. Hardly an auspicious start to vicar's wifedom.

However, church and food seem to go together like PMT and chocolate. Get a bunch of churchies together and a big feed-up is always on the cards. So start to cook, I did. And to my surprise and, in some ways, horror, so my love affair with food and the cooking of it began. Having my own kitchen and a chance to play with new pots and gadgets undoubtedly helped. But more than that, it was the powerful thrill of choosing and touching and smelling and tasting and buying that did it for me. By nature I am what I'd call exorbitantly relational, and I began to cherish the stuff in my fridge: I liked looking at it (I know, slightly psycho), felt proud it was mine (yes, even worse) and I wanted to treat it well and appreciate its particularities. Gradually I learnt, through trial and many unsavoury errors, how to treat ingredients with appropriate care. I found, to my naïve amazement and delight, that when I thought hard about how to let these babies shine, shine they did.

Encouraged by my pathetic little successes, I experimented with the marriage of flavours: I learnt that sometimes, it's best to keep things simple. When I first started concocting my own pasta sauce, most things in the weekly shop ended up in the pan: cream, garlic, onions, bacon, mushrooms, cheese, sun-dried tomatoes, more cream, a different cheese. After more than a few instances of instant queasiness I learnt self-restraint. Over time, I also learnt



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID YEO

Writing competition

that some raw materials – lamb shanks, oxtail – are, on sight, unattractive beasts. You bring them home and force onion, garlic, wine and veg to rub unwillingly against their ugly flesh. However, once in the oven, in that delicious soft heat, something miraculous happens. They make friends with the wine and the rest of their bedmates. They gain in confidence and, as they emerge, it is as if they have had a million-dollar makeover: out they come, glistening and gorgeous, gutsy yet tender. In the cooking pot it is they who are now the star players; the other ingredients now merely supporters, content to have played a part in the wondrous transformation. Now, let's be frank: I am aware this reveals I am overly whimsical and a touch theatrical. However, it was stuff like this that sold me on cooking. It wasn't recipes; it wasn't a fancy kitchen. It was interaction with ingredients. Rather like spending time with the love of your life, cooking captivated me and sucked me in – with all its challenges, joys and fascinating surprises.

I also found that, while making food made me happy, the food I cooked made others happy too. As well as having an overactive imagination, I am also an emotional, pathetic little people-pleaser. So to see others enjoy my food was, for me, delirium. Not only did I get the pleasure of a shop-fest and then all that a kitchen offers – a stirring, tasting, sensory overload – I also had the power to give others pleasure and occasionally turn tense, unhappy people into chatty, relaxed ones. A steaming plate of good sausages, fluffy buttery mash and some rich onion gravy is the culinary equivalent of a long, comforting soak in the bath and can transform even a silent Mr Harassed into chatty Mr Happy.

But all that is years ago. Now, as my 30s drain away, I am far more calculating than that. Or more loving and relational; call it what you will. For what I have realised is that most people have a favourite style of food, and asking yourself what that might be before someone comes round to eat is a right and loving thing. Of course it's easiest to knock up your fail-safe dish. But isn't it more caring to think about who is coming over, how they might be feeling, and try to create something that is just for them? It might be rugby boy Ben... or worse, crazy Saskia... but what is it that they really, really want to eat?

When I have a girlfriend over for lunch, my husband, who often works from home, takes flight. He puts his meat-loving head around the kitchen door, observes greenery and sniffs: "Hmm, Girl Food," before vanishing. In the summer, I might do 'girly' with an appropriately pretty-pink salad: for two, finely slice ten radishes, chop four spring onions and one baby gem lettuce and mix with 100g, maybe more, of smoked salmon



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trimmings. Whisk up a dressing of either three tablespoons of olive oil or two of extra virgin olive oil and one of lemon-infused oil, the juice of a quarter of a lemon (you want about a tablespoon), one small teaspoon of French mustard, and salt and pepper. Anoint the salad with the lemony dressing

and serve on a big plate, garnished with dill and extra lemon. Serve with fresh baguette and some good butter and, if you're feeling particularly frivolous, some ridiculous pink fizz.

Come winter's chill, a warming celery soup, enriched with a creamy blue cheese – Cashel Blue or the delicious Fourme d'Ambert – can bring comfort to the girl with a broken heart; a bowl of good, old-fashioned macaroni cheese soothes the premenstrual; while an earthy, warm salad hits the right note for a cosy, chatty catch-up. When my weekly veg box contains some knobbly Jerusalem artichokes I peel them, slice them thickly and cook in boiling water until soft. Into a frying pan I pour three tablespoons of olive oil. I gently soften a crushed clove of garlic in the pan, then add one or two chicken breasts, cut into chunks. After a couple of minutes, I throw in three slices of smoked, streaky bacon, cut into strips (use the scissors; it's loads easier). I then add the artichokes and five mini, skinny baby leeks, cut in half. You can add a bit more oil if things start looking a little dry. Once cooked, I pour in one tablespoon of sherry vinegar mixed with one teaspoon of French mustard, one teaspoon of runny honey and some salt and pepper. I serve the lot tossed with some baby spinach leaves, adding the dressing from the pan until everything is well coated but not drowning. When scattered with some finely chopped flat-leaf parsley and some shaved Parmesan, this is winter food without the bloat.

Girl Food. A glorious thing. But of course, I'm married to the vicar and he has stretched my culinary horizons. For him, there's Boy Food. For church, there is Crowd Food (no, I don't serve fish and bread). And of course there is the great Sunday lunch. But don't start me on that. That's something for another time...