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Opening Extract from...

The Pauper's Cookbook

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Perhaps the most significant development, food-wise, over the past decade has been the surging popularity of organic foodstuffs, now worth over a billion pounds annually and still growing. Organic products cost more than their non-organic equivalents, it is true, but they taste like the real thing. Organic vegetables are so flavourful that meatless meals can be a treat, even for non-veggie households. With this in mind I have added more vegetable gratins, risottos, pasta dishes and salads to the veggie section, and elsewhere in the book. Savings here might go toward an organic chicken (incomparably richer in flavour) at the weekend, or dry-cured bacon or all-meat sausages. Organic dairy products are another taste revelation. Organic bread flour transforms a home-baked loaf. Organic products I pass on are rice, tea, coffee and tinned stuff where the benefits, taste- and health-wise seem negligible. Vegetarians should definitely go organic, in my view, and I think babies and toddlers should be fed organically wherever possible because the purity of their food is important to their long-term development. Home-made baby food not only costs considerably less than those nifty little commercially produced jars, but you have the comfort of knowing exactly what went into it.

If I have one serious concern about relaunching my book for a new generation it is this – do they really know how to cook? I doubt Delia Smith was off-the-wall when she started her last cookery series with a lengthy demonstration of how to boil an egg. And we oldies gaped incredulously as Jamie Oliver's final fifteen (weeded out from over six hundred applicants) coolly paraded incompetence and bad attitude over the months it took to train and cajole them – well, the ones who stayed the course – into becoming employable in Jamie's new restaurant. Anecdotal evidence, some gleaned in my own family situation, suggests that while many young adults today have a quite sophisticated appreciation of good food, thanks to the media, foreign travel, and parental indulgence, they are often surprisingly ignorant when it comes to feeding themselves on a daily basis. Most of them can do one signature dish – Sunday roast, with trimmings, a fry-up, Thai green curry – but what they don't know is how to shop and budget, how to deal with leftovers, what constitutes a healthy diet, how to make a béchamel sauce, stock, batter, shortcrust pastry, pizza dough or any of the other essential, thrifty ploys which have enabled people

to stretch limited ingredients and come up with a reasonably varied diet over the centuries, across the world. The fast food, instant gratification, ethos is largely to blame of course; takeaways, microwave dishes, cook-in sauces, tinned soups, pizza bases, supermarket packs of vegetables, trimmed, washed and ready-to-go. Their parents, us, must take some of the responsibility too, I feel. Too busy bringing home the bread to teach them how to make it.

Necessity is a tough teacher. I was already a competent cook, but I learned a great deal more about cooking, planning, and shopping in my pauper days because I had to, to make ends meet; it was that simple. Pride came into it. I enjoyed the challenge of dishing up good food for our friends 'at Joe's Café prices'; this felt like a triumph, and I had fun doing it. But what really drove me on through the testing and tasting of hundreds of recipes was native greed, the most important item in any cook's equipment I tend to think. My definition of greedy – a person who prepares a treat for him or herself, when eating alone, rather than reaching for a tin of baked beans or boiling an egg. I am proud of having passed on the greedy gene to my children, all talented cooks and appreciative eaters. If my *Pauper's Cookbook* (maybe it should be titled *The Greedy Pauper's Cookbook?*) can kindle appetite in a new generation of readers, and point the way to satisfying it both thriftily and interestingly, I will be well pleased.