

LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Friends,

It is truly wonderful to welcome you into the warm, inspiring, and delicious world of *The Kitchen Front*. Thank you for choosing it for your book club; I hope you're enjoying it immensely.

While researching women in Second World War Britain. I came across a heartwarming tale of two women who met in a maternity home, their beds beside one another. They got talking, and by the time they left, babes in arms, they were firm friends. One was a young war widow, the other a mother of two toddlers with her husband on the front line in North Africa. When the young widow was bombed, finding herself homeless, the other took her in, asking if she could help out by looking after both babies and toddlers during the day so that she could take a iob for much-needed money. Working together, they became a family of sorts, and soon took in a third friend, all mothers working together to bring up a large, extended family. The tale was so inspiring that it became the destination for my lovely cooks: they would all create a new family of sorts, a supportive community in which to grow and thrive.

The cooking element was inspired by my own grandmother's love for food and her warm and witty stories of the wartime years, sheltering from the bombs, trying to make the most of rationed food, and eking out extra dishes from vegetable gardens, the neighbor's rabbit hutches, and the woodland close to where she lived.

The same year that my mother dug out my grandmother's recipe book, my Uncle David sent me a World War Two recipe book. A jovial, food-loving fellow who sadly passed away earlier this year, Uncle David had picked it up in a secondhand book stall at a market in Wells, the country town where he lived. It was written by Marguerite Patten, and as I read through the fascinating introduction I realized how all-important food had become to the war effort: how getting food rationing right and keeping cooks, housewives, and restaurant chefs on top of it was imperative for keeping up morale and ensuring people were properly fed.

As I scoured the pages of recipes for salt cod, Spam, and—I could hardly believe it—whale meat, it struck me

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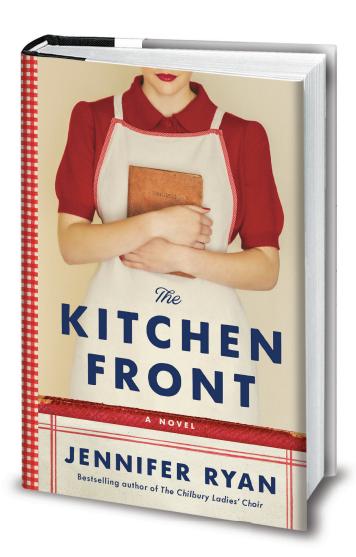
what a fascinating book it would make. Through my interviews and research, I knew that there were plenty of cooking contests during the war years, so I hatched the idea to make it into an all-women cooking contest. The prize was to become the first female cohost of the daily BBC radio program *The Kitchen Front*, which sought women presenters after realizing that they were needed to better connect with the mostly female audience.

All of my works rely on the words of women who were living through this era, and I would like to say a very hearty thank-you to every one of them. I for one would have found it frightening, hard work, and incredibly stressful to get through the war, and yet they were all so ready to step up. "This was our moment," one of them told me. "It was our time to show the world what we're made of, and we weren't holding back."

As you read and discuss *The Kitchen Front*, I hope you take the time to enjoy your book club, and that the fun and support of friendship rubs off on you all. Thank you again for choosing this book—for becoming part of the group story—and take pleasure in your time together: our clubs and friends are what makes life inspiring, steady, and most of all, fun.

With warmest wishes,

Jennifer



HOW TO SURVIVE FOOD RATIONING IN WORLD WAR II BRITAIN

1. KNOW WHAT RATIONS YOU ARE ALLOWED:

Wartime food rations for one adult for one week

4 oz. bacon and ham

Meat to the value of 1 shilling and tuppence (2 lb. mincemeat or 1 lb steak or joint)

2 oz. cheese

4 oz. margarine

2 oz. butter

3 pints milk

8 oz. sugar

2 oz. jam

2 oz. loose leaf tea

1 fresh egg (plus 1 packet of dried egg powder, making 12 eggs, every month)

3 oz. candy

Fish, sausages, offal, and vegetables are not rationed but are hard to get. Get up early to join the lines, especially if the butcher has a new delivery. If you see a line outside a shop, first join it, then ask what it's for.

2. MAKE FRIENDS WITH YOUR SHOPKEEPERS: Food is sold from different shops: a greengrocer, a butcher, a baker, a fishmonger, and a grocer for cans, packets, flour, eggs, and so forth. You have to sign up with one of each to get your rations for the week. When they get supplies, it's their job to distribute it fairly to their customers, but loyal customers who spend more and have a personal connection often get an extra pork chop set aside.

HOW TO SURVIVE FOOD RATIONING IN WORLD WAR II BRITAIN

- 3. TURN EVERY SPARE PIECE OF LAND YOU HAVE INTO A VEGETABLE GARDEN: You'll want to convert every spare piece of land to grow vegetables, including parkland, cricket pitches, and village greens. At the beginning of the war, the Ministry of Agriculture switched farm production away from vegetables and toward cereals, on the grounds that people could grow their own vegetables. Not only will you find your stocks of vegetables handy to feed your family, but you will be able to swap a sack of carrots and cabbages for other things, like rabbit meat, eggs, or logs for the winter fire.
- **4. RAISE CHICKENS AND RABBITS:** A few chickens in a makeshift coop can be fed scraps and provide fresh eggs and a nice roast for special occasions. The Ministry of Agriculture made a bit of an error in getting rid of the chicken farms, making eggs scarce until dried egg powder became available a few years into the war. Chickens can make all the difference—and your neighbors will become very polite and friendly, wanting any extras. Rabbit hutches can be set up to provide extra meat for the unsqueamish.
- **5. JOIN A PIG CLUB:** A pig club is where a group of neighbors join together to buy two piglets and raise them on their own land, splitting the meat when the pig is slaughtered. The government started the program to help people get more meat. The first pig is for the club members to share, and the second can be sold for extra income. People often risk a third, illegal pig, smuggled in with the others. But watch out: you'll be heavily fined if you're caught.
- **6. LISTEN TO** *THE KITCHEN FRONT* **RADIO SHOW EVERY MORNING TO FIND OUT WHAT'S AVAILABLE**: This is especially useful for chefs and cooks providing food for restaurants and canteens, as well as housewives. Every morning the host will read out the list of foods that are in great supply, mostly due to large shipments from abroad or gluts at harvest times. Calls to eat salt cod happen every few months, when large trawlers from Iceland bring massive supplies of this dried, salted white fish, and even though it is widely unpopular, is often the only source of good protein. The radio program will then give recipes for salt-cod curry, a favorite method of covering the salty taste.

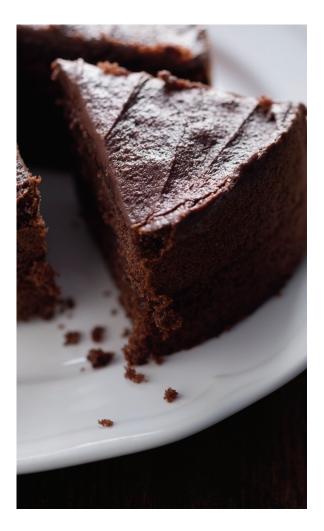
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- **7. GO TO THE WOODS, RIVERS, AND BEACHES**: Wild food is not rationed, which means you can make a feast from mushrooms, berries, nuts, herbs, and even tree syrup collected from the countryside. This also goes for game, and poaching game birds is now popular, especially with fewer gamekeepers around to take you to task. Alternatively, grab your line and a basket and go to the rivers and coasts to fish and gather shellfish. Mussels are especially popular if you can find a beach that isn't plugged with landmines to blow up invading Nazis.
- **8. ASK IN THE PUB ABOUT THE BLACK MARKET**: Find a black market spiv to help get extra of little treats like chocolate, sugar, cream, wine, whiskey, or tinned salmon. It's illegal, but if you listen to the bloke at the pub, everyone's doing it.
- **9. DON'T WASTE ANYTHING!:** It is illegal to throw away usable bits of food, including potato peelings, the tough outer leaves of cabbages and lettuces, and every last scrap of bread, no matter how stale. For scraps that truly are unpalatable, there is a pig bucket outside the village hall, which you can take to feed your pigs.
- 10. COOK CREATIVELY AND DON'T FORGET TO EXPERIMENT: One of the missions of the Ministry of Food is to make cooks and housewives change the way they cook, encouraging them to modify their favorite recipes and try something new. They provide information and recipes in leaflets, magazines and newspapers, and on the BBC radio program, *The Kitchen Front*. The Ministry of Food internal missives speak widely of "women's ability to experiment in the kitchen." The war effort depends upon it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. How are Gwendoline, Audrey, Nell, and Zelda different? Do they have any traits in common?
- 2. Which character did you most relate to and why?
- 3. Who did you feel had the most pivotal transformation, and did her shifts feel realistic?
- 4. There are many other themes in the novel—second chances, hope, family bonds, overcoming adversity. Which themes resonated with you the most?
- 5. How does the time period inform the characters' interactions and decisions throughout the book?
- 6. What role do wealth and status play in the characters' perspectives on life and on each other?
- 7. Discuss how you feel about the ending. Is it satisfying? If so, why? If not, why not . . . and how would you change it? What do you think will happen next to the main characters?
- 8. The setting of the WWII England is intrinsic to *The Kitchen Front*. Discuss the ways in which the setting functions as a character in the novel and how each of the human characters relates to it.
- 9. Compare this book to others your group has read. Is it similar to any of them? Did you like it more or less than other books you've read? What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book?
- 10. What do you think the author's goal was in writing this book? What ideas was she trying to illustrate? What message was she trying to send?
- 11. What scene would you point out as the pivotal moment in the narrative? How did it make you feel?

GWENDOLINE'S EGGLESS CHOCOLATE SPONGE CAKE



INGREDIENTS

- For the cake
- 11/4 cups flour
- 1 tsp baking powder
- ½ tsp bicarbonate of soda
- ½ tsp salt
- 1/3 cup cocoa
- 1/3 cup of butter or margarine
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 1 tbsp golden syrup or treacle
- ½ cup milk and water
 For the icing
- 1/4 cup butter or margarine
- 1/4 cup milk powder
- 1 tbsp cocoa powder
- 2 tbsp sugar
- ½ tsp vanilla essence

Serves 4-6

METHOD

In a saucepan, dissolve the sugar and bicarbonate of soda in the water. Add the butter or margarine and syrup or treacle and mix slowly but well.

Sieve the flour, cocoa, salt, baking powder into a mixing bowl. Add the mixed ingredients from the saucepan and mix well, again slowly. Pour into two cake tins and put in a moderate oven (350 °F/180 C) for 20–25 minutes. When cooked, leave the cakes in their pans until cool.

Next, make the icing. Melt the butter or margarine, then mix with the cocoa powder, milk powder, sugar, vanilla essence until soft and shiny and pour to the side of the meat. Garnish with elderberries poached in a small pan with a little water and sugar.

AUDREY'S FRUIT SCONES



INGREDIENTS

- 3 cups flour
- ½ tsp salt
- 1 tbsp sugar
- 5 tsp baking powder
- ¼ cup butter
- ½ cup margarine, lard, or suet
- 1½ cups dried fruit
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1 cup milk

Serves 12

METHOD

Sieve the flour, salt, and baking powder into a bowl. Add the sugar and dried fruit and mix. Cut the butter or fat into small pieces and rub in. Mix the egg and milk and slowly add until of a stiff consistency. Roll it out into a thick layer, about 1-inch thick, and use a floured cutter to cut into circles. Place on a greased baking tray and cook in a preheated oven (425 °F) for 10 minutes, or until risen and golden brown.

MRS. QUINCE'S WARTIME SPECIAL OCCASION CAKE



INGREDIENTS

- 21/4 cups flour
- 2 tsp baking powder
- 2 tbsp butter, margarine, or fat
- ½ cup oatmeal
- 1½ cups grated carrot
- 1 tbsp sugar, or the equivalent in saccharine
- ½ cup dried fruit
- 2 eggs, or 2 tbsp dried egg powder, reconstituted
- 1 tbsp syrup or honey For the mock marzipan
- ¼ cup margarine
- ½ cup sugar
- 2 tsp almond essence
- 1 cup soya flour For the icing
- 4 tbsp powdered milk
- 2 tsp sugar
- 2 tbsp margarine or butter
- Vanilla essence

Serves 2-4

METHOD

Sieve the flour and baking powder into a bowl then rub in the butter or fat. Add the other dry ingredients, including the grated carrot, and mix well. Add the syrup, the reconstituted eggs and mix with a little water so that it's relatively firm. Put mixture in a cake pan and bake in a moderate oven (350 °F) for one hour.

To make the marzipan, blend all the ingredients together into a paste. Smooth it around the outside of the cake. For the icing, mix the powdered milk and sugar in a bowl with a little water. Melt the margarine and mix in with the vanilla essence. Add water until you get the right consistency.