

# A Cooking Life

FOR HER FIRST COOKBOOK, F&W SPECIAL PROJECTS DIRECTOR AND *TOP CHEF* STAR **GAIL SIMMONS** DRAWS FROM TWO DECADES OF FOOD ADVENTURES. HERE SHE SHARES SOME FAVORITE, INSANELY DELICIOUS RECIPES FROM HER HOME KITCHEN.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN KERNICK

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Balance creamy spaghetti pie with a crisp green salad.

**I**'VE BEEN LUCKY enough to spend the last 20 years working in food media, following the brightest restaurant talents, traveling in search of great food and eating alongside some of the world's best chefs. In my role as special projects director at *Food & Wine* and as a judge on Bravo's *Top Chef*, I've eaten my way through more tasting menus, late-night small plates and street-food stalls than I'd like to admit. But, of course, that's the side of my life everyone who knows anything about me already knows.

What most people probably don't realize is, long before I sat at the *Top Chef* Judges' Table, I was a cook. In fact, cooking is in my blood. When I was growing up in Toronto, my mom was a cooking instructor and food writer. She made our kitchen a teaching space and filled our fridge with exotic-seeming ingredients. The happy times I spent with her there helped make the kitchen a place where I've always found comfort and exhilaration. It was my love of the kitchen that drew me to New York City after college, first as a culinary student, then as a line cook. It's also what motivated me, once I left restaurant life, to seek out jobs that kept me connected to cooking. I did research and recipe testing for a food writer, managed events and PR for a chef, and then landed at *Food & Wine*, while also taking a seat at the Judges' Table when *Top Chef* began in 2006. I'd like to think of my role as that of chef translator, helping to make dishes, techniques and flavors accessible to home cooks.

Among the most meaningful moments in my career so far have been opportunities to learn from chefs and food experts I've befriended. Lessons these mentors have shared can be found throughout my new cookbook—my first—*Bringing It Home: Favorite Recipes from a Life of Adventurous Eating*, a collection of dishes I love making for family and friends. Many are ideal for entertaining, something that's very important this time of year. My hope is the book will encourage people to embark on their own cooking and eating adventures. Here's a taste, with recipes I've created specially for *Food & Wine*.

**Gail's Inspiration** When I was 19, I traveled through New Zealand with my best friend, Camille. We soon became obsessed with a dish that appeared at practically every roadside diner: spaghetti sandwiches! Part oozy grilled cheese, part tangy, tomato-sauced noodles, this mash-up was the kernel of what's become one of my greatest culinary triumphs, spaghetti pie. I've prepared multiple variations, and it always makes my guests extremely happy. This version, perfect for fall gatherings, incorporates plenty of wild mushrooms, spinach and herbs—plus a spoonful of chopped oil-packed black truffles, if I'm feeling decadent.

### Spaghetti Pie with Wild Mushrooms and Spinach

Active **45 min**; Total **1 hr 35 min**  
Serves **8 to 10**

**Unsalted butter, softened, for brushing**

**1 lb. spaghetti**

**3 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil**

**1 medium yellow onion, minced**

**2 garlic cloves, minced**

**1 lb. mixed wild mushrooms, such as cremini, porcini and stemmed shiitakes, cut into 1-inch pieces**

**Kosher salt and pepper**

**5 oz. baby spinach**

**3 large eggs**

**1½ cups whole milk**

**3 cups shredded Fontina cheese (10 oz.)**

**1 cup fresh ricotta cheese**

**1 cup finely grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese**

**1 Tbsp. finely chopped sage**

**1 Tbsp. thyme leaves**

**1.** Preheat the oven to 425°. Tightly wrap the outside of a 9-inch springform pan with foil and brush the inside with butter. In a pot of salted boiling water, cook the spaghetti until barely al dente; drain.

**2.** In a large skillet, heat 2 tablespoons of the olive oil. Add the onion and garlic and cook over moderately high heat, stirring, until sizzling, about 1 minute. Add the mushrooms, season with salt and pepper and cook, stirring occasionally, until browned, 10 to 12 minutes. Scrape into a bowl.

**3.** In the same skillet, heat the remaining 1 tablespoon of olive oil. Add the spinach, season with salt and pepper and cook over moderate heat, stirring, until just wilted, about 2 minutes. Scrape into the mushrooms and let cool slightly.

**4.** In a large bowl, beat the eggs with the milk. Add the spaghetti, mushroom mixture, 3 cheeses, sage, thyme, 1½ teaspoons of salt and 1 teaspoon of pepper; mix well. Scrape into the prepared pan and smooth the top. Set the pan on a baking sheet and bake for about 35 minutes, until bubbling and the top is golden. Let stand for 15 minutes. Remove the ring, cut the pie into wedges and serve.

**MAKE AHEAD** The pie can be baked up to 2 hours ahead and eaten warm or at room temperature.

**WINE** Juicy Russian River Valley Pinot Noir: 2015 Hartford Court.



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In the Kitchen → Gail Simmons



A spiced cucumber yogurt sauce elevates this hearty breakfast dish.

**Gail's Inspiration** In my teens, I spent a summer on a kibbutz in Israel, working in my first professional kitchen. I was assigned to breakfast duty and fell in love with scrambling, poaching and frying eggs by the dozens. Today, one of my go-to brunches is baked eggs in a cherry tomato-pepper mix seasoned with the Mediterranean spice blend za'atar. It never fails to conjure happy memories of that magical time.

### Za'atar Baked Eggs

Total 30 min; Serves 4

**3 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling**

**1 medium yellow onion, thinly sliced**  
**Kosher salt and pepper**

**2 pints cherry tomatoes**

**2 red bell peppers, chopped**

**¼ cup plus 2 tsp. finely chopped parsley, plus more for garnish**

**2 tsp. za'atar, plus more for garnish**

**4 large eggs**

**1 cup plain yogurt**

**½ cup finely chopped seeded English cucumber**

**1 Tbsp. fresh lemon juice, plus more for drizzling**

**½ tsp. sumac**

**2 tsp. finely chopped mint**

**1.** Preheat the oven to 375°. In a large ovenproof skillet, heat the 3 tablespoons of olive oil until shimmering. Add the onion, season with salt and pepper and

cook over moderate heat, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 5 minutes. Add the tomatoes and cook, stirring occasionally, until some of them burst, 5 to 7 minutes. Add the bell peppers and cook, stirring occasionally, until the peppers are softened and all of the tomatoes have burst, about 10 minutes. Remove from the heat and stir in ¼ cup of the parsley and 1½ teaspoons of the za'atar. Season the tomato sauce with salt and pepper.

**2.** Using a spoon, make 4 wells in the tomato sauce, then crack an egg into each one; season with salt and pepper. Transfer the skillet to the oven and bake for 10 to 12 minutes, until the egg whites are just set and the yolks are still runny.

**3.** Meanwhile, in a small bowl, mix the yogurt with the cucumber, the 1 tablespoon of lemon juice, the sumac, mint and the remaining 2 teaspoons of parsley and ½ teaspoon of za'atar. Season with salt and garnish with za'atar. Drizzle the eggs with olive oil and garnish with parsley. Drizzle the tomato sauce with lemon juice. Serve with the cucumber yogurt.



These Indian-accented grilled cheese sandwiches get their heat from jalapeño and ginger.

**Gail's Inspiration** *Top Chef* host Padma Lakshmi introduced me to Indian melted sharp cheese and spicy chiles on toast. My grilled cheese version gets a flavor boost from mango chutney spiced with fresh ginger.

### Chile Grilled Cheese Sandwiches

Active **45 min**; Total **1 hr 15 min**  
Serves **4**

- ½ tsp. coriander seeds**
- ½ tsp. mustard seeds**
- 1 Tbsp. canola oil**
- 1 small onion, minced**
- Kosher salt and black pepper**
- ¼ cup white wine vinegar**
- 1 Tbsp. sugar**
- 1 Tbsp. plus 2 tsp. minced peeled fresh ginger**
- 2 ripe mangoes, chopped**
- ¼ tsp. crushed red pepper**
- 1½ cups shredded Monterey Jack cheese**
- 1½ cups shredded sharp white cheddar cheese**
- 1 jalapeño, minced**
- 2 Tbsp. minced cilantro**
- Eight ½-inch-thick slices of sourdough boule**
- 3 Tbsp. unsalted butter, melted**

**1.** In a medium saucepan, toast the seeds over moderate heat for 2 minutes. Coarsely crush.

**2.** In the same saucepan, heat the oil. Add the onion, season with salt and cook over moderate heat, stirring occasionally, until softened, 5 minutes. Add the vinegar, sugar and 1 tablespoon of the ginger and cook, stirring occasionally, until the vinegar is slightly reduced, 2 minutes. Add the mangoes, crushed seeds and crushed red pepper and cook over moderately high heat, stirring, until the mixture resembles jam, 5 minutes. Scrape the chutney into a small bowl and let cool. Season with salt.

**3.** Heat a griddle over moderately low heat. In a large bowl, toss both cheeses with the jalapeño, cilantro and remaining 2 teaspoons of ginger. Season with salt and black pepper.

**4.** Brush 1 side of each bread slice with butter. Arrange 4 slices buttered side down on the griddle. Top each with one-fourth of the cheese mixture and 3 tablespoons of the chutney. Close the sandwiches and cook until golden, 3 minutes per side. Let rest for 2 minutes, then cut in half and serve.

**Gail's Inspiration** When I was a kid, butterscotch pudding was my number one dessert choice. Recently, I've seen it prepared with fancy embellishments, but I like to keep mine homey, focusing on the buttery flavor and lingering finish of real Scotch. When I want to impress, I'll thicken the pudding more than usual and pour it into a pie shell flecked with golden pecans. The contrasting textures of rich pudding and nutty, flaky crust make this a grown-up ode to the comforting childhood classic.

### Butterscotch Pudding Pie

Active **1 hr 15 min**

Total **5 hr 50 min**

Makes **one 9-inch pie**

#### PIECRUST

**½ cup plus 1 Tbsp. chopped pecans**

**1¼ cups all-purpose flour**

**½ tsp. kosher salt**

**6 Tbsp. unsalted butter, cubed and chilled**

**¼ cup ice water**

#### FILLING

**1¾ cups whole milk**

**1½ cups heavy cream**

**6 Tbsp. unsalted butter, cubed**

**1 cup packed dark brown sugar**

**2 large eggs**

**3 Tbsp. cornstarch**

**¾ tsp. kosher salt**

**2 Tbsp. Scotch whisky**

**2 tsp. pure vanilla extract**

**Turbinado sugar, for garnish**

**1. Make the piecrust** Preheat the oven to 350°. Spread the pecans on a baking sheet and toast for about 8 minutes, until fragrant and lightly browned. Let cool.

**2.** In a food processor, pulse ½ cup of the pecans until finely ground. Add the flour and salt and pulse to mix. Add the butter and pulse until pea-size pieces form. Add the ice water and pulse until a dough starts to come together. Transfer the dough into a 9-inch round fluted tart pan with a removable bottom and press it evenly over the bottom and up the side. Prick the piecrust all over with a fork, then freeze it for 30 minutes.

**3.** Preheat the oven to 375°. Put the piecrust on a large baking sheet and bake for about 35 minutes, until the edge is lightly browned and the crust is firm. Let cool completely.

**4. Meanwhile, make the filling** In a small saucepan, bring the milk and ½ cup of the cream to a simmer over medium heat. Remove from the heat. In a medium saucepan, melt the butter over moderately high heat. Add the brown sugar and cook, whisking constantly, until the mixture is bubbling and smooth, about 2 minutes. Remove from the heat and gradually whisk in the milk mixture.

**5.** In a medium bowl, beat the eggs with the cornstarch and salt. Very gradually whisk in ½ cup of the milk mixture. Scrape the mixture into the medium saucepan and cook over moderate heat, stirring constantly, until very thick, about 7 minutes. Strain the pudding into a medium bowl and stir in the Scotch and vanilla. Let cool slightly, then press a piece of plastic directly on the surface and refrigerate until well chilled, at least 4 hours or overnight.

**6.** Scrape the butterscotch filling into the piecrust and smooth the top. In a large bowl, using a hand mixer, beat the remaining 1 cup of cream until stiff peaks form. Mound the whipped cream on the pie and garnish with turbinado sugar and the remaining 1 tablespoon of pecans. Cut the pie into wedges and serve.

**NOTE** Use the bottom of a metal measuring cup to help press the dough into an even layer in the tart pan.

**MAKE AHEAD** The pie can be refrigerated overnight.



A lemon-honey drizzle adds a touch of sweetness to this savory, free-form Winter Galette.

**Gail's Inspiration** My former boss chef Daniel Boulud created seven amazing vegetable dishes for my wedding feast. That unforgettable array was the stimulus for this seasonal rustic tart. In colder months, I top it with paper-thin slices of whatever's on hand, from winter squash to celery root. The dough is easy to prepare and shape into a free-form crust, while fresh ricotta, infused with herbs and lemon zest, forms a creamy base.

## Winter Galette

Active **1 hr**  
Total **2 hr 30 min** plus cooling  
Serves **6 to 8**

### DOUGH

- ¾ cup** all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- ¾ cup** whole-wheat flour
- ½ tsp.** kosher salt
- 1 stick** unsalted butter, cubed and chilled
- ¼ cup** sour cream
- 2 Tbsp.** ice water
- 1 Tbsp.** fresh lemon juice

### FILLING

- 2 Tbsp.** extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 large** shallot, thinly sliced
- Kosher salt** and pepper
- 1 cup** whole-milk ricotta
- 1½ tsp.** finely grated lemon zest plus **1 tsp.** fresh lemon juice
- 1 large** garlic clove, finely grated
- 1 tsp.** thyme leaves, plus more for sprinkling
- 1 tsp.** minced oregano, plus leaves for sprinkling
- ½ tsp.** minced rosemary, plus leaves for sprinkling
- ½ lb.** acorn squash—seeded, peeled and shaved into ribbons
- ½ lb.** celery root, peeled and shaved into ribbons
- 1 small** baking potato, peeled and shaved into ribbons
- 1 large** egg beaten with **1 Tbsp.** water
- ¼ cup** freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano
- 2 tsp.** honey, warmed

**1. Make the dough** In a food processor, combine both flours with the salt and pulse to mix. Add the butter and pulse until pea-size pieces form. Add the sour cream, ice water and lemon juice and pulse until the dough starts to come together. Transfer to a lightly floured work surface and pat into a disk. Wrap in plastic and refrigerate until chilled, about 1 hour.

**2. Make the filling** Preheat the oven to 400°. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. In a small skillet, heat 1 tablespoon of the olive oil. Add the shallot, season with salt and cook over moderately low heat, stirring, until softened, about 5 minutes. Let cool.

**3.** In a small bowl, mix the ricotta with the lemon zest, garlic, the 1 teaspoon of thyme and the minced oregano and rosemary. Season with salt and pepper. In a large bowl, toss the squash with the celery root, potato and remaining 1 tablespoon of olive oil. Season with salt and pepper.

**4.** On a lightly floured work surface, roll out the dough to a 13-inch round. Transfer to the prepared baking sheet. Spread the ricotta on the dough, leaving a 1-inch border. Pile the squash mixture on the ricotta and fold 1½ inches of the dough edge over the vegetables. Sprinkle with thyme, oregano and rosemary leaves. Brush the dough edge with the beaten egg.

**5.** Bake the galette for 15 minutes, until starting to brown. Sprinkle the Parmigiano over the filling and bake for 15 to 20 minutes, until the vegetables are tender and the crust is golden.

**6.** In a small bowl, mix the honey with the lemon juice. Drizzle the lemon honey over the galette. Serve warm or at room temperature.

**MAKE AHEAD** The galette can be baked up to 3 hours ahead and rewarmed before serving.

**WINE** Full-bodied California Chardonnay: 2015 Cambria Fog Tide.



These beguiling brownies get their complex flavor from black licorice chews, licorice root and anise.

**Gail's Inspiration** My South African-born father, Ivor, passed down his love for salty, chewy *dubbel zout* (double salt), the Dutch black licorice coins. Dad's other sweet vice is bittersweet chocolate, and this deeply dark-chocolaty brownie with a sophisticated touch of salt, plus notes of molasses and anise from black licorice, is an homage to him.

### Chewy Black Licorice Chocolate Brownies

Active **30 min**  
Total **1 hr 10 min plus cooling**  
Makes **12**

- 1½ sticks unsalted butter, melted, plus more for brushing**
- 1 cup all-purpose flour**
- ½ cup unsweetened cocoa powder**
- 2 Tbsp. licorice root powder**
- 2 tsp. ground anise seeds**
- ½ tsp. kosher salt**
- 1 cup granulated sugar**
- 1 cup packed brown sugar**

- 3 large eggs**
- 1 tsp. pure vanilla extract**
- 2 oz. bittersweet chocolate, chopped**
- ½ cup chopped soft black licorice chews (3 oz.)**

- 1.** Preheat the oven to 350°. Line a 9-inch-square baking pan with paper or foil, leaving 2 inches of overhang on 2 sides. Brush the paper with butter.
- 2.** In a medium bowl, whisk the flour with the cocoa powder, licorice root powder, anise and salt. In a large bowl, whisk the melted butter with both sugars,

then whisk in the eggs and vanilla. Stir in the dry ingredients, then three-fourths of the chocolate and licorice chews. Scrape the batter into the prepared pan and smooth the top. Gently press the remaining chocolate and licorice chews into the batter.

- 3.** Bake the brownies for about 40 minutes, until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean, with a few moist crumbs attached. Let the brownies cool completely, then lift them out of the pan using the paper. Cut the brownies into 12 rectangles and serve.

**Gail's Inspiration** I met chef Andrew Carmellini when we both worked for Daniel Boulud. Now with his own restaurant empire, Carmellini stirred a national frenzy with his meatballs, and my own owe a debt to his—as well as to my honeymoon trip to Vietnam. The mix of lemongrass, fish sauce and tons of herbs creates a craveable, salty brightness.

### Vietnamese Lemongrass Meatballs

Active **30 min**; Total **1 hr**  
Serves **4**

- 4 shallots, 2 thinly sliced and 2 minced**
- ¼ cup unseasoned rice vinegar**
- Kosher salt**
- 1 lb. ground pork**
- 1 large egg**
- 3 Tbsp. minced lemongrass**
- 1 Tbsp. minced cilantro, plus leaves for garnish**
- 1 Tbsp. Asian fish sauce**
- 2 tsp. cornstarch**
- 1 garlic clove, minced**
- 1 Tbsp. canola oil**
- Bibb lettuce leaves, mint and basil leaves, lime wedges, chile-garlic paste and julienned cucumber and carrot, for garnish**

- 1.** In a small bowl, mix the sliced shallots with the vinegar and a generous pinch of salt.

**2.** In a bowl, mix the pork with the egg, lemongrass, minced shallots and cilantro, fish sauce, cornstarch, garlic and 1½ teaspoons of salt. Cover and refrigerate for 30 minutes. Form into 1½-inch balls.

- 3.** In a large skillet, heat the oil. Add the meatballs and cook over moderate heat until browned and cooked through, 8 to 10 minutes. Transfer to a platter and serve in Bibb lettuce leaves with the pickled shallots and garnishes.

**WINE** Off-dry Riesling: 2016 Long Shadows Poet's Leap.