

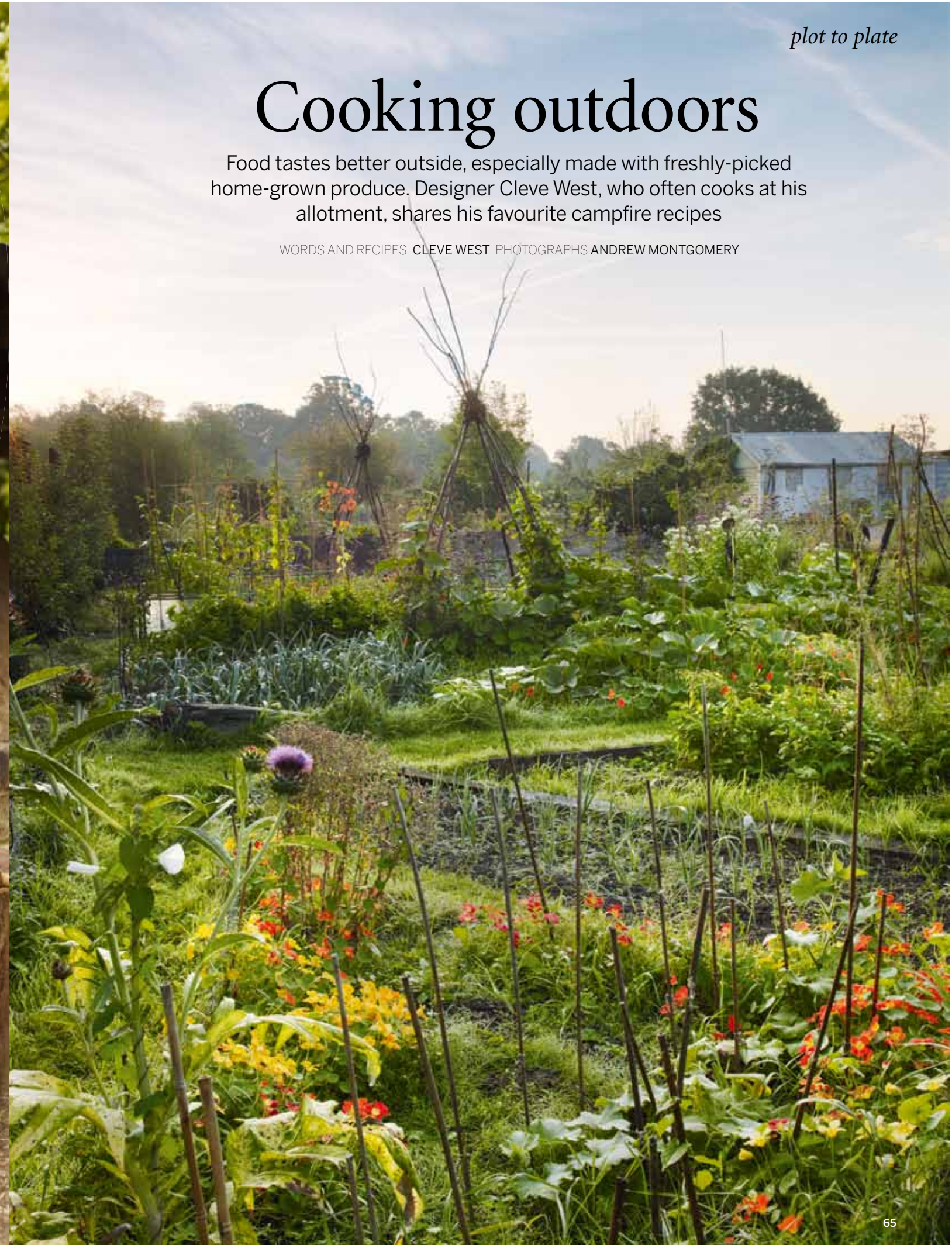
Cooking outdoors

Food tastes better outside, especially made with freshly-picked home-grown produce. Designer Cleve West, who often cooks at his allotment, shares his favourite campfire recipes

WORDS AND RECIPES CLEVE WEST PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW MONTGOMERY



There's something special about cooking outside. It's even more magical when food is cooked just yards from where it's grown and within minutes of being harvested. Cooking at the allotment has become something of a regular occurrence in our family and is now a genuine reason for spending more time there. It's not on our doorstep so a little forethought and planning is needed. Some things (such as making dough and tomato sauce for pizza) are made at home where it's easier to prepare and wash-up. Good, clean surfaces are essential for cooking alfresco (you can't have too many chopping boards) and you will only be limited by what you plan to cook with. At our plot we have a range of devices, from a small gas stove to an open-fire grill and, our pièce de résistance, an earth oven. These allow us to cater for anything from light lunches to bhajee-bashes and perfect-pizza parties. Clearing up by torchlight is the only downside but eating under the stars on a balmy summer evening is as enchanting as life gets in a vegetable garden.





Parsnip soup with medlar jam

Winter soup such as this can be a meal in itself or served as a starter – although too rich a main course afterwards will leave absolutely no room for pudding. To inject even more nuttiness to this recipe, we sometimes roast the parsnips first, but this version is easier, and still delicious.

Serves 4

2 tbsp olive oil
1 onion, chopped
1 clove garlic, crushed
1 carrot
450g parsnips
5cm nub of fresh root ginger, chopped
1 litre vegetable bouillon stock
salt and freshly ground black pepper
medlar jam and/or crème fraîche to garnish

- Heat oil, sauté onion gently until translucent. Add garlic and ginger and fry for a few seconds before adding the carrot and parsnips. Stir and cook for a further five minutes.
- Add stock, bring to the boil and simmer for 30 minutes or until the vegetables are tender.
- Taste for seasoning. If making this soup at home, purée in a blender – if cooking alfresco, improvise with a potato masher for a more rustic version. Add a little extra stock if the soup is too thick.
- Reheat gently, before serving with either crème fraîche and/or a dollop of medlar jam as a garnish.



Blackened aubergine chutney

My friend Dhundi Raj Bhusal knocked up this tasty relish while we were having a barbecue at the plot using whatever late summer veg (apart from the lemon) we could pick at the time. Use it to accompany any curry or mop up a bowl of it with naan bread.

Serves 2–4

1 medium-sized aubergine
handful of green tomatoes
some chopped fresh chilli (¼–½ tsp)
1 clove garlic
a small bunch of coriander
salt and pepper to taste
a good squeeze of lemon juice

- Put the aubergine and the green tomatoes on the barbecue or open fire and char them until they are black outside and squidgy inside. Cut along the middle and scoop out the contents of both aubergines and tomatoes and mash.
- Add the rest of the ingredients, mix and eat. It doesn't get simpler than that.

Pizza

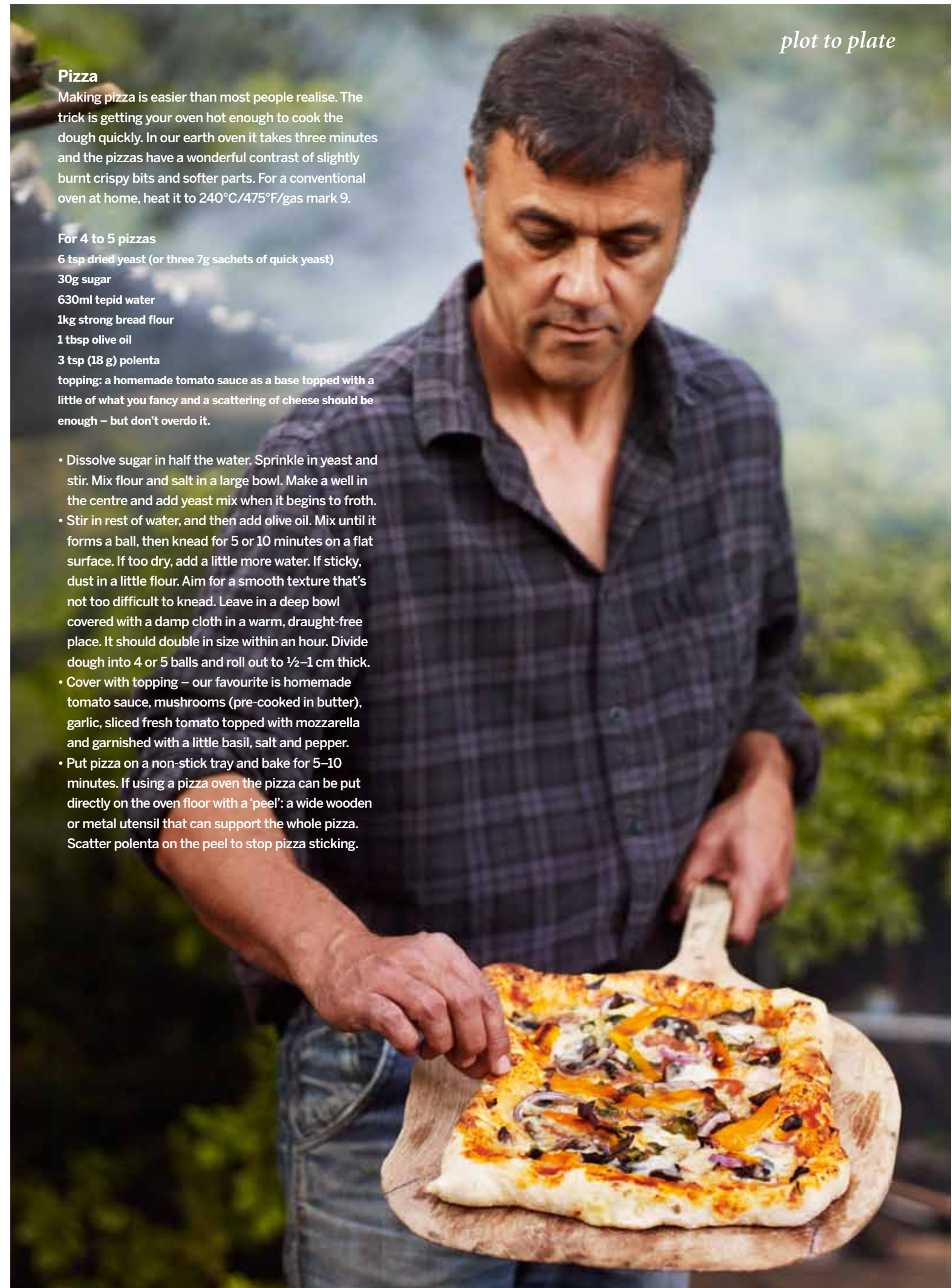
Making pizza is easier than most people realise. The trick is getting your oven hot enough to cook the dough quickly. In our earth oven it takes three minutes and the pizzas have a wonderful contrast of slightly burnt crispy bits and softer parts. For a conventional oven at home, heat it to 240°C/475°F/gas mark 9.

For 4 to 5 pizzas

6 tsp dried yeast (or three 7g sachets of quick yeast)
30g sugar
630ml tepid water
1kg strong bread flour
1 tbsp olive oil
3 tsp (18 g) polenta

topping: a homemade tomato sauce as a base topped with a little of what you fancy and a scattering of cheese should be enough – but don't overdo it.

- Dissolve sugar in half the water. Sprinkle in yeast and stir. Mix flour and salt in a large bowl. Make a well in the centre and add yeast mix when it begins to froth.
- Stir in rest of water, and then add olive oil. Mix until it forms a ball, then knead for 5 or 10 minutes on a flat surface. If too dry, add a little more water. If sticky, dust in a little flour. Aim for a smooth texture that's not too difficult to knead. Leave in a deep bowl covered with a damp cloth in a warm, draught-free place. It should double in size within an hour. Divide dough into 4 or 5 balls and roll out to ½–1 cm thick.
- Cover with topping – our favourite is homemade tomato sauce, mushrooms (pre-cooked in butter), garlic, sliced fresh tomato topped with mozzarella and garnished with a little basil, salt and pepper.
- Put pizza on a non-stick tray and bake for 5–10 minutes. If using a pizza oven the pizza can be put directly on the oven floor with a 'peel': a wide wooden or metal utensil that can support the whole pizza. Scatter polenta on the peel to stop pizza sticking.





Onion bhajees

This is a family recipe from my grandmother. It takes practice to get the right consistency and to get the oil hot enough so they don't end up soggy. Cooking in a wok over a fire saves the kitchen from smelling like a spice market, but don't cook in hot oil in the rain.

Makes about 12–16 bhajees

4 onions, thinly sliced (can also be made using beans, courgettes or aubergines)

350g gram flour (chickpea flour)

a pinch of baking powder

herbs and spices: 2 tsp turmeric, 2.5cm nub of ginger, chopped chillies to taste, handful of chopped fresh coriander including stems, sea salt, black pepper

250ml water

4–6 cloves garlic

a little lemon juice

sunflower or corn oil for deep-frying

- Sift gram flour, turmeric and baking powder into a bowl. Add garlic, ginger, chillies, salt and pepper and mix well. Add water little by little, stirring all the time, aiming for a consistency between pancake and cake mix. Add coriander and lemon juice. Heat the oil – it is ready when batter sinks then rises after a few seconds.
- Add onions – work quickly as they will release their liquid and make the mix too runny. Place several spoonfuls of mix into hot oil and let them sizzle for three minutes or until golden brown. Remove, and drain on a plate lined with kitchen paper.



Baked pears with honey, marsala and bay

This recipe from chef Skye Gyngell is a wonderful winter warmer. We've tried variations including apples stuffed with dates which is equally delicious. Take care not to burn the pears with too fierce a heat.

Serves 6–8

8 firm ripe pears (Martin Sec, Comice or Conference)

600ml marsala

220ml fragrant honey

1 cinnamon stick

1 vanilla pod, split lengthways

finely pared zest of 1 lemon

sprig of bay leaves (4 or 5 leaves)

- Place pears in a clay or roasting dish with a lid (or cover with tinfoil) in which they fit quite snugly with stalks uppermost. Pour over the marsala and drizzle over the honey, then add cinnamon stick, vanilla pod, lemon zest and bay leaves.
- Place dish on or near the embers of a dying fire (or in an earth oven once it's lost some of its heat) and roast for 20 minutes. Remove the lid and bake uncovered for a further 20 minutes. Check it's not cooking too quickly or it will burn. The pears should be soft and the skin slightly wrinkly.
- Serve warm (not hot) with the marsala and honey syrup spooned over. Add crème fraîche if you fancy, although they are good enough on their own.

Courgette ratte

This is our staple for summer and one we rarely get bored with. Quick to prepare and delicious, especially when the courgettes and tomatoes are fresh, it's a dish we fall back on when we come home with little time to cook supper – but it could easily be made at the allotment. Yellow courgettes have a sweeter taste than most green varieties and the colour makes for an especially attractive meal.

Serves 2

4–6 cloves garlic, sliced (more if you're garlic nuts like us)

4 tbsp olive oil (more if you like)

4–6 medium-sized courgettes, halved and then sliced lengthways into ½cm-wide strips

handful of cherry tomatoes

handful of basil leaves

salt and pepper to taste

- Heat the oil in a large frying pan, wok or karahi. Add the garlic and stir for a few seconds (don't allow it to burn, otherwise it will give the dish a slightly bitter taste). Add courgettes, season with salt and pepper, and fry on a medium heat for about 20 minutes or until the courgettes start to brown.
- Lightly crush the cherry tomatoes, add to the courgettes and cook for a further 5 minutes so that any water from the tomatoes is reduced.
- Remove from heat, add torn basil leaves, cover pan and leave for another five minutes before serving. We like to serve it on thick, buttered slices of homemade bread to soak up the delicious oil.

