

By Royal Appointment



Carolyn Robb, 50, spent her early career working as the personal chef to Britain's Duke and Duchess of Wales, Prince Charles and Princess Diana, and their two sons, Princes William and Harry. As she releases a book packed full of their favourite recipes, *Good Taste* catches up with her to discuss all things food, family and moving on from life at Kensington Palace...

Did you know?
So passionate is he about organic and locally grown produce, Prince Charles founded his own company, Duchy Originals, which produces organic food and drinks.



You were raised in South Africa – how did you end up working for the British Royal family?

With a lot of luck really! I came over to Britain a lot as a child because my grandparents lived there, and I always thought it would be nice to work for the Queen one day. After university, and a stint at a ski chalet, I did a cordon bleu cookery course in England. I was really fortunate that, while there, a few of us were invited to interview with the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester and I was the lucky one hired.

Then you went to work for Prince Charles and Princess Diana...

The Gloucesters were living at Kensington Palace, and the next-door apartment was lived in by the Duke and Duchess of Wales. Of course, I always had my eye on a position there, and I was very fortunate that they came to dinner one night. After that, I was invited to their offices and offered the position. I was in the right place at the right time, and really passionate about what I did too.

Were you nervous about working for such a prominent family?

I was 22 years old and, for me, it was a dream come true. I think I just got so involved in the job that I wasn't really thinking about who I was actually working for. When I look back now I wonder how I wasn't more nervous! Obviously now, everybody knows it was a very pertinent time for them, but they kept that very much to themselves and I had just the most fantastic experience.

What was life there like?

Princess Diana was a wonderful mother, first and foremost. She was great fun, very kind and had an enormous, amazing sense of humour. And Prince Charles was incredibly passionate about his food. He was one of the forerunners of the organic movement in the UK so we had a lot of wonderful home grown produce, and the food that went on the table was incredibly important to him which, as a chef, made the job a lot more interesting.

Was there a focus on health as well as locality?

Because we were using so much locally grown and organic produce, the two sort of went hand in hand. They were never on a diet, as such. They just ate good home-cooked meals. I think a lot of people have an idea of royals eating caviar every day, but as they're presented with that type of food a lot on engagements, at home they just wanted good, fresh cooking. We did a lot of roast lamb, roast chicken, fish, and they also enjoyed Italian food – homemade pastas, risottos, and homemade gnocchi with fresh vegetables from the garden.

What sort of eaters were the boys?

Now that I've had two of my own children, I realise just how good they were. Mostly, it was quite traditional food such as shepherd's pie, roast chicken, fish fingers, sausages and mash, and when they ate together as a family, they'd all eat the same thing. I think from a young age, their parents knew they would have a life where they would travel, so they were sometimes served more challenging foods too.

Are there any stories that stand out for you from when the boys were little?

We were fortunate that the kitchen was very much part of their terrain, so they would often come in and help us. They loved cooking meringues and cookies. It was just such a privilege to be a part of their lives as they were growing up and it was such fun to have children around, it made it all much more light-hearted.

It was one of your cakes that William chose as his groom's cake at his wedding to Kate. Tell us how that came about...

The chocolate biscuit cake is actually something that my mum used to make a lot for me as a child, as a special treat. I used to make it for the boys from time to time and, as they grew up, they used to take it back to boarding school sometimes. And it was also something they could help with – it's nice and simple to make and

they used to enjoy bashing the biscuits and mixing it all together. But it was a wonderful surprise when I learned it was something he remembered and wanted to have for his wedding.

Moving on from the Royals, I believe you actually came and worked in Dubai after you left the palace?

Yes I did, and it was such a wonderful two years. The first year I was working with a company that imported foods, and I also worked with some of the hotels, Al Maha, Dubai Trade Centre and the Burj Al Arab among others, evaluating what they were doing, going into the kitchens and working with some of the chefs. So it was a really interesting time. Then in my second year I worked as a food writer and critic, which was hugely interesting as it was my first experience of evaluating what other chefs were preparing.

Of course, the food scene has exploded in Dubai since. What was it like then?

It was very much a fledgling industry and I think that time was a real turning point when standards were being raised hugely. Even in the two years I was there, I saw the level improve dramatically. I'd be fascinated to come back now and see what it's like, because it was so interesting to be there when the industry was really starting to blossom.

You're now back in England. Tell me a little about your day-to-day life.

I have my own company doing events, and I'm a single mother to three and seven year old girls, so I have a very busy life, but I still cook a lot. I do private

events for clients and I also have a brand called The Royal Touch, which ties in with my cookbook. I think having worked in so many different kitchens all across the world, I've got a lot of ideas I'd like to put into practice. There's a lot going on.

Are your daughters good eaters, or do you have to deal with fussy moments like the rest of us mums?

Oh yes. My elder daughter in particular is a very fussy eater. She much prefers things that come from supermarkets to anything homemade, but she's actually a very good cook herself so I think it's just a matter of time. The younger one is a great eater, and I cook with them both as often as I can. I think it's really important that children grow up with the basic knowledge and skills they need to feed themselves well.

You mention cakes and baking a lot. Do you think we've gone too far with our focus on healthy eating, given you obviously enjoy treating your children?

I really do actually. I'm quite old-fashioned in that I think a lot about my childhood, when everything was homemade. My mother was a wonderful baker and we always had homemade cookies and cakes around, and for me, it's far more important for children to avoid foods that are full of preservatives, additives and E-numbers than it is for them to avoid sugar. I think it's ok to treat kids.

Do your daughters have a sweet tooth?

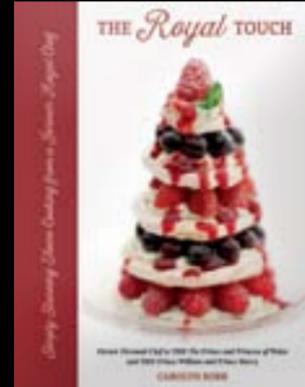
They don't have a huge amount of sugar, but I think because it's something they are allowed

at times, they don't crave it in the same way as a child for whom it is banned. I think when you prevent a child from having any chocolate or cakes, they're far more likely to try and get a hold of them. And if my daughters have sweet things, they're made with unrefined sugar and real butter, instead of highly hydrogenated fats. I'm very much of the opinion that excluding whole food groups is highly dangerous. I'd far rather let them eat some treats and then take them to the park, let them run and climb some trees and give them the chance to burn off some of the energy!

I think a lot of mums feel they don't have the time to cook from scratch. You're clearly very busy – do you think it's easier than some believe?

Oh absolutely. You don't have to spend a great amount of time in the kitchen, you can throw together a simple meal for kids in 10 minutes. Simply boil some pasta, cook some vegetables, grate some fresh cheese on top and you've got a much better meal for a child than you'd have cooking a frozen pizza. That said, I think there's a huge amount of pressure on mums already, so that's something I really want to explore more – helping people find dishes they can prepare for children, and involve them in cooking too.

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Double-baked cheese soufflé

Ingredients

FOR THE CROUTONS

- 1 thick slice of brioche

FOR THE SOUFFLÉ

- 55g butter
- 35g plain flour
- 150ml milk
- 50g parmesan, finely grated
- 50g goats' cheese
- 2 free-range egg yolks
- 4 free-range egg whites
- 15ml chives, finely chopped
- Salt, black pepper, paprika and nutmeg

TO GARNISH

- 6 small cooked beetroot
- Walnut oil and balsamic vinegar
- 100g salad leaves like ruby chard and lamb's lettuce
- Salt, freshly ground black pepper and sugar

Method

1 Preheat the oven to 180°C. Tear the brioche into small pieces and bake for 8 to 10 minutes, or until crisp and golden. Keep on one side. Soften 20g of butter and grease

the insides of six 150ml ramekins, then place on a baking tray.

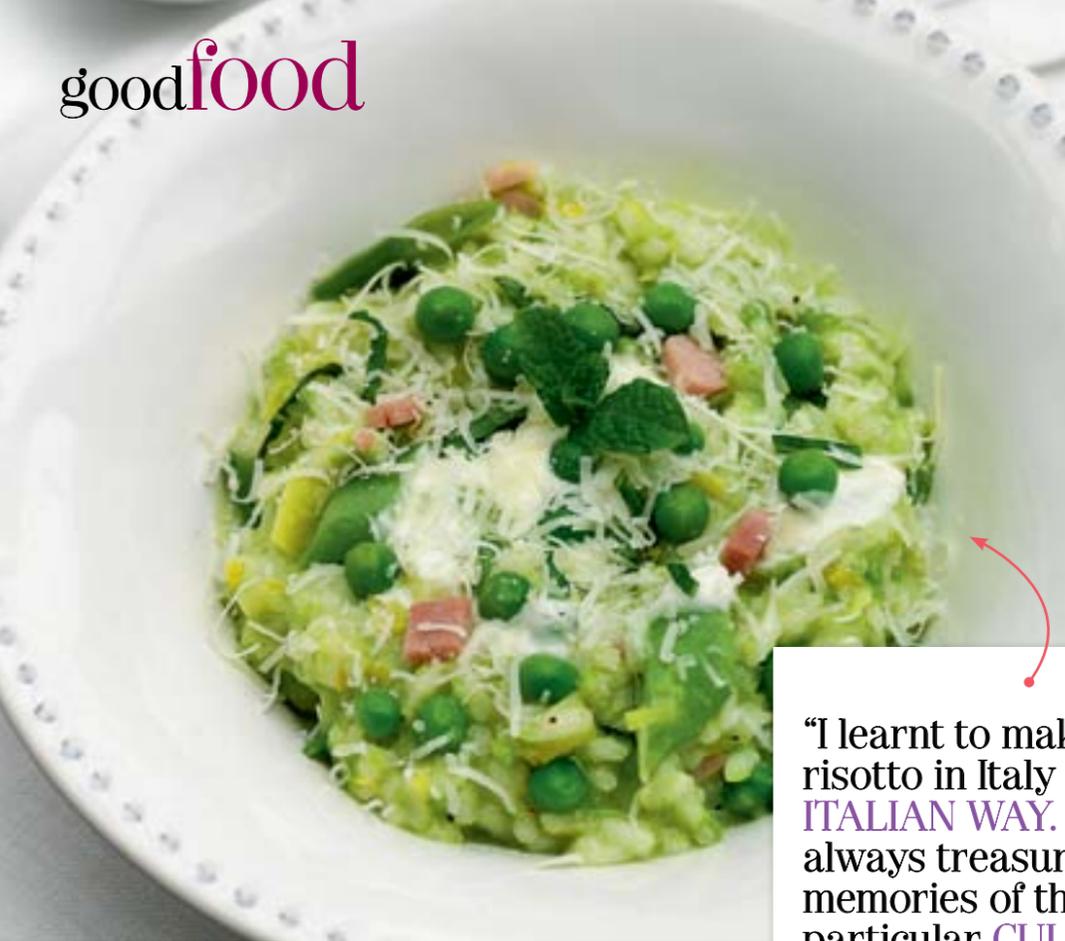
2 While the croutons are baking, reset the oven to 200°C. Melt the remaining 35g of butter in a small pan, add the flour, stir well and cook for two minutes. Warm the milk and add it gradually, off the heat, stirring constantly to prevent lumps forming. Return to the heat and cook for another minute or two, stirring at all times. Remove from the heat, add 35g of the cheese, then the egg yolks and chives. Season with pepper, paprika and nutmeg. Goats' cheese can be quite salty, so you may not need salt.

3 Whisk the egg whites until they are stiff. Fold them into the cheese mixture carefully, in three batches, then divide the mixture between the ramekins. Smooth off the top using a palette knife and run your finger around the inside of the top of each ramekin to create a better-shaped soufflé. Bake for 20–25 minutes until golden and evenly risen, then remove to cool slightly before removing from the ramekins to a board.

4 Meanwhile, dice the beetroot and dress it with vinegar, oil, salt, pepper and sugar. Wash and dry the ruby chard and lamb's lettuce. As soon as the soufflés are cooked place them carefully on the salad leaves and surround with the beetroot and croutons.

Top tip

Once baked, the soufflés can be kept for up to 24 hours in a sealed box – they'll deflate as they cool but will rise again when re-baked. Simply sprinkle with the remaining parmesan, place on a non-stick tray and bake at 180° for 20 minutes.



Pea risotto

Ingredients

- 340g frozen peas
- A handful of sugar snaps
- 115g unsalted butter
- 1 small leek, outer layers removed, remainder finely chopped
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 1 clove of garlic, crushed
- 225g Carnaroli risotto rice
- 225ml dry white wine (or extra stock)
- 1 ltr chicken stock
- 60g parmesan, freshly grated
- 115g diced ham or turkey ham
- 4 sprigs of mint leaves, finely chopped
- 60ml crème fraîche

Method

1 Cook the frozen peas in boiling, salted water until tender, then drain and reserve a little of the water they were cooked in. Set aside a quarter of a cup of the peas, then blend the rest to a smooth purée, adding about four tablespoons of the cooking water and 30g

of butter. Season and set aside. Cook the sugar snaps lightly and set aside with the reserved peas.

2 In a heavy-based, deep saucepan, melt 45g of the butter and add the onion, leek and garlic. Cook until it is very soft and starting to colour. Add the rice, stir well, then cook for a few minutes, until each grain is coated in butter.

3 Add the white wine, or extra stock, and cook rapidly. Continue stirring until the liquid has mostly evaporated. Bring the remaining stock to a simmer in a separate saucepan, and begin adding to the rice ladle by ladle, cooking over a low heat and stirring constantly. Once most of the stock has been absorbed, add the next ladleful. Carnaroli rice will take 15 to 18 minutes to cook, Arborio may take a bit longer. Taste the risotto from time to time to see if the rice is tender – you may

“I learnt to make risotto in Italy - the **ITALIAN WAY**. I will always treasure the memories of this particular **CULINARY ADVENTURE** as it was punctuated with more gesticulating and laughter than I have ever experienced in any other kitchen.”

not need to use all of the stock.

4 Once tender, but retaining some ‘bite’, add the pea purée, peas, sugar snaps and diced ham to the risotto. Heat it through quickly, but do not cook for too long. The risotto should ‘flow’. If it doesn’t slip off a spoon easily, add a little more hot stock.

5 Vigorously stir in the remaining butter and all but two tablespoons of the parmesan, for a wonderfully creamy finish to the risotto. Spoon a dollop of crème fraîche on top, sprinkle on the mint and remaining parmesan and serve at once.



“ This cake was a firm favourite in the royal nursery; so much so that, many years later, **PRINCE WILLIAM** chose to have it at his wedding for the Groom’s cake. It was designed, made and gifted to Prince William by **MCVITIE’S BISCUIT** manufacturers and is said to have been made from 1700 biscuits and **17KG OF CHOCOLATE!**”

Chocolate biscuit cake

Ingredients

FOR THE CAKE:

- 340g butter
- 240g golden syrup
- 60g unsweetened cocoa powder
- 120g dark chocolate
- 1 tsp pure vanilla extract
- 60g pistachios
- 100g soft, plump dried figs, sliced
- 450g digestive biscuits, crushed

TO DECORATE:

- 300g dark chocolate
- 50g white chocolate
- Selection of small chocolate sticks and chocolate sweeties, like Maltesers

Method

1 Melt the butter with the golden syrup in a heavy based pan. Do not let it boil. Remove from the heat, add the cocoa powder, dark chocolate and vanilla extract and stir until you have a very smooth, glossy mixture. Add the pistachios, figs and crushed biscuits to the chocolate mixture and stir well.

2 Line the base and sides of a 20cm cake tin with baking parchment or plastic wrap. Place the mixture into the tin and press it down. Leave to cool at room temperature before covering and chilling in the fridge. It will take about two hours to set completely firm. When set, remove from the tin and place it on a cooling rack.

3 Melt the dark chocolate and white chocolate separately. Spread the dark chocolate all over the cake. Decorate with the Maltesers before the chocolate sets, so that they stick to the cake. Position the chocolate sticks as desired, drizzle with the white chocolate and allow to set before serving.

4 This cake can be enjoyed as soon as it is fully set, or sliced and stored in an airtight container in the refrigerator. It will keep well for up to two weeks, although it seldom lasts that long, once people know that it is there!

Top tip

For fruit scones, add in 60g of sultanas or raisins when you add the liquid. For savoury scones, replace the vanilla, orange zest and sugar with 60g of grated mature cheddar cheese and a tablespoon of finely chopped chives at the same stage.

Scones with vanilla & orange zest

Ingredients

- 450g plain flour
- 60g golden caster sugar
- ½ tsp salt
- 3 tsp baking powder
- 100g butter
- 175ml buttermilk
- 50ml milk
- 1 free-range egg
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- Zest of 1 orange

Method

1 Preheat the oven to 220°C. Sieve the flour, sugar, salt and baking powder into a large mixing bowl, then rub the butter into the dry ingredients using your fingertips, until the mixture resembles breadcrumbs.

2 Blend together the buttermilk, milk, egg and vanilla extract. Make a hollow in the centre of the 'crumbs', finely grate the orange zest into it and pour in most of the liquid. Traditionally, a small round-bladed knife or palette knife is used to mix the dough. You want to achieve a lightly bound dough that is neither sticky nor dry and crumbly, so add in the remainder of the liquid if the dough seems dry.

3 Lift the dough onto a floured surface and knead it just three or four times to get rid of any cracks, working quickly. Pat the dough out to a thickness of 2cm and cut out around 15 scones, dipping the pastry cutter into flour each time so that it makes a clean cut. Divide between two greased baking trays. Gather the trimmings, lightly bring them together and pat the dough out again to cut out more scones.

4 Bake for 10 to 12 minutes, until well risen and golden.

