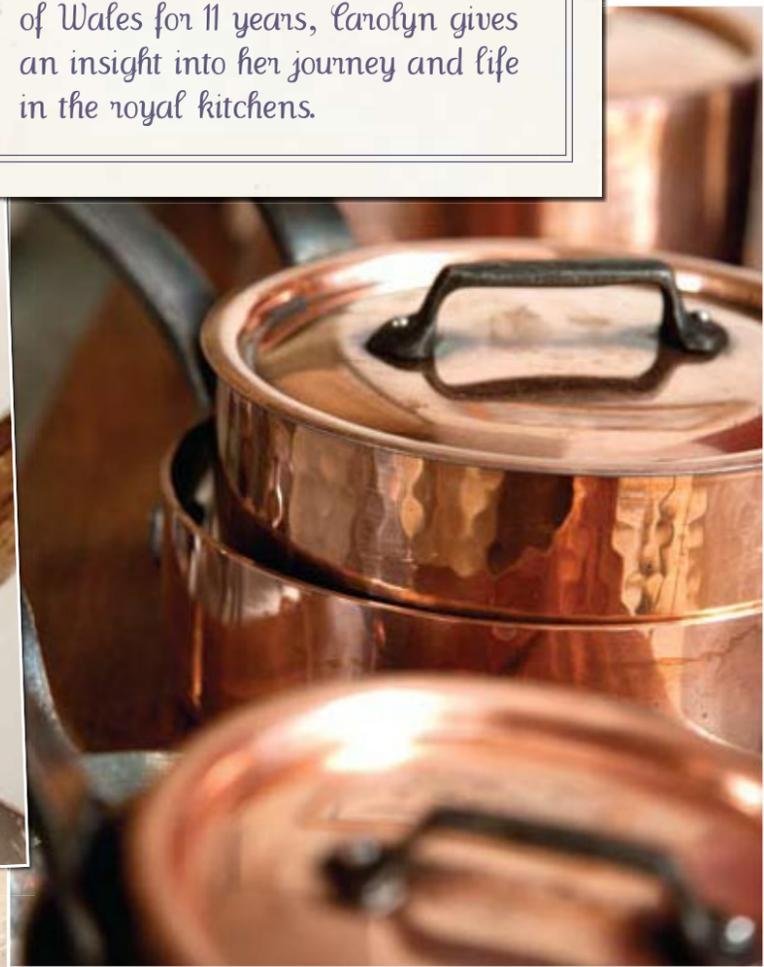




Carolyn Robb

THE ROYAL TOUCH

Carolyn Robb tells how her lifelong passion for cooking has led her on an extraordinary journey. She relates her story from her 350-year-old cottage in Oxfordshire, England. As a teenager with a pile of Diana scrapbooks, Carolyn hardly dared to dream that she would ever realize her ambition of becoming a royal chef. As chef to Their Royal Highnesses The Prince and Princess of Wales for 11 years, Carolyn gives an insight into her journey and life in the royal kitchens.



“A house is beautiful not because of its walls, but because of its cakes.”

— Old Russian Proverb



My earliest memory is one of sitting in the kitchen on the long-legged wooden stool. I remember it was painted a very pale shade of blue. My mother was baking wonderful things and I was assisting — wielding my large wooden spoon. I was probably not even 3 then, but the sounds, smells, and flavours of that first cooking lesson are still vivid, alive, and cherished in a special corner of my mind. Several decades on, and I watch with pride and joy as my Lucy, now 2 years old, gleefully delves into everything with her blue spatula while I cook. I wonder if this freedom in the kitchen at such a tender age will lead her down the same happy path that I have taken. If it brings her as much fun, fulfilment, and unexpected adventure as my life in food has afforded me, then I hope that she does follow in my culinary footsteps.

My childhood in South Africa was a very happy one. The youngest of five, I doted on my big sister and three big brothers. They are the most fantastic siblings anyone could wish for. My parents were very hardworking. My father had a demanding job and then came home to still more work, tending a large garden. To a tiny person, the kitchen garden was a magical maze; there were bean

tunnels, Cape gooseberry bushes, the grand old mulberry tree, lanky African “mealies” (corn), and there were secret passages aplenty. Amidst the immaculate rows of vegetables there was a myriad of places to look for fairies and elves. Unfortunately, the odd frog hid there too ... To this day I do not have a good relationship with frogs!

I can't think of many things that my father did not grow, and not a thing ever went to waste as my mother endlessly baked, bottled, preserved, jammed, and pickled. My appreciation of great food and my admiration for great cooks and chefs sparked at a very young age. My mother still reigns supreme at the top of the list. Her constant and generous praise of my creations (even when my exuberant juvenile culinary efforts did not warrant it) and her infectious enthusiasm surely gave me



the confidence to pursue my dream. My father recently reminded me that at 5 years old, I announced that I was “going to cook for The Queen one day” — and I did.

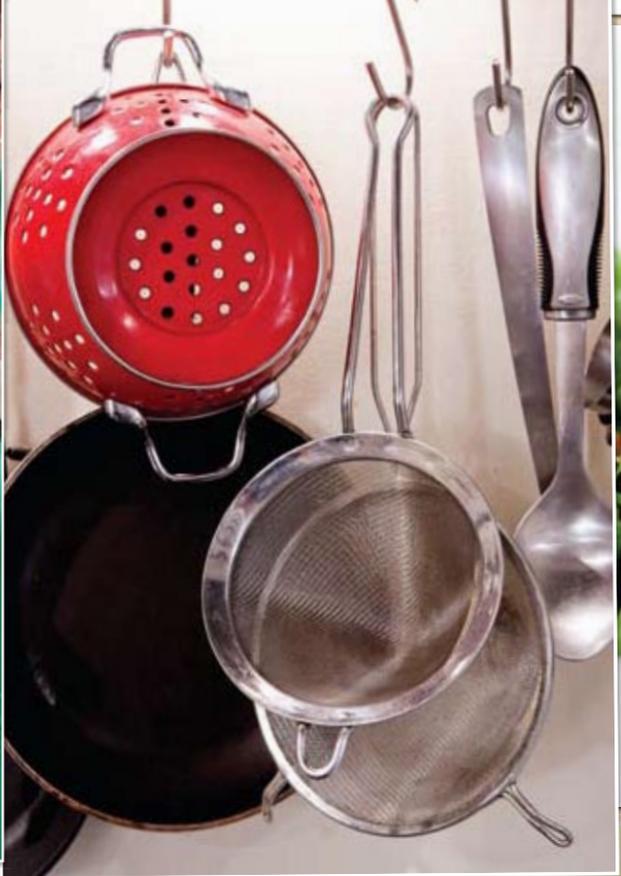
At 19 I left South Africa to work in a superb hotel in the Swiss Alps for a season. I learnt everything there is to learn about a fondue, I tried hard to master Swiss German, and I brushed up on my French, but I mostly skied at every single opportunity — sunshine or blizzard! After that, I spent a magical six months eating, sleeping, and drinking food, food, and more food while I completed my diploma in Cordon Blue cuisine in Surrey, England. Knives highly sharpened, new skills finely honed, and enthusiasm bubbling over, I was ready to take on the world.

I spent a very happy two years cooking for Their Royal Highnesses The Duke and Duchess of Gloucester, and their three children at Kensington Palace in London. The Duke and The Queen are first cousins. Everything changed after a dinner party to which The Gloucesters invited their neighbours within the palace, Prince Charles and Princess Diana. Not too many weeks later, I found myself settling into my new position as chef to The Waleses, as they were affectionately known. My dream job.

My world changed. The next 11 years gave me an intriguing insight into an incredible world of fantastic food, people, and places. The “real world,” the world as I had always known it — when viewed from within the Palace walls, became the “outside world.” I looked, I saw, I tasted, I experienced, I learned, and I appreciated things that I never dreamt I would have access to.

I accompanied Their Royal Highnesses on many official Royal tours. We visited countries that some people barely even know exist — the Royal Kingdom of Bhutan, Swaziland, The Isle of Man, Guyana, and Macedonia to name but a few. We stayed in royal palaces, presidential residences, castles, and stately homes. I cooked for Kings and Queens, Heads of State, religious leaders, some of the world's greatest academics, actors, musicians, artists, and by far the most intimidating for me — some of the greatest chefs of our time. My kitchens ranged from palatial to very small, hot and rocky, and the galley on HMY Britannia (The Royal Yacht!). I remember cooking in my coat and scarf in a sub-zero “kitchen” with no running water in a beautiful corner of Bhutan, and setting myself up with my knives and a makeshift chopping board in a large broom cupboard in a Swaziland hotel.





KENSINGTON PALACE

September 24
1990

Dear Carolyn,

A little note to say thank you for being so wonderful during the last few days. It's an exhausting time here. I know, with WTS makes to feed, but always the coffee

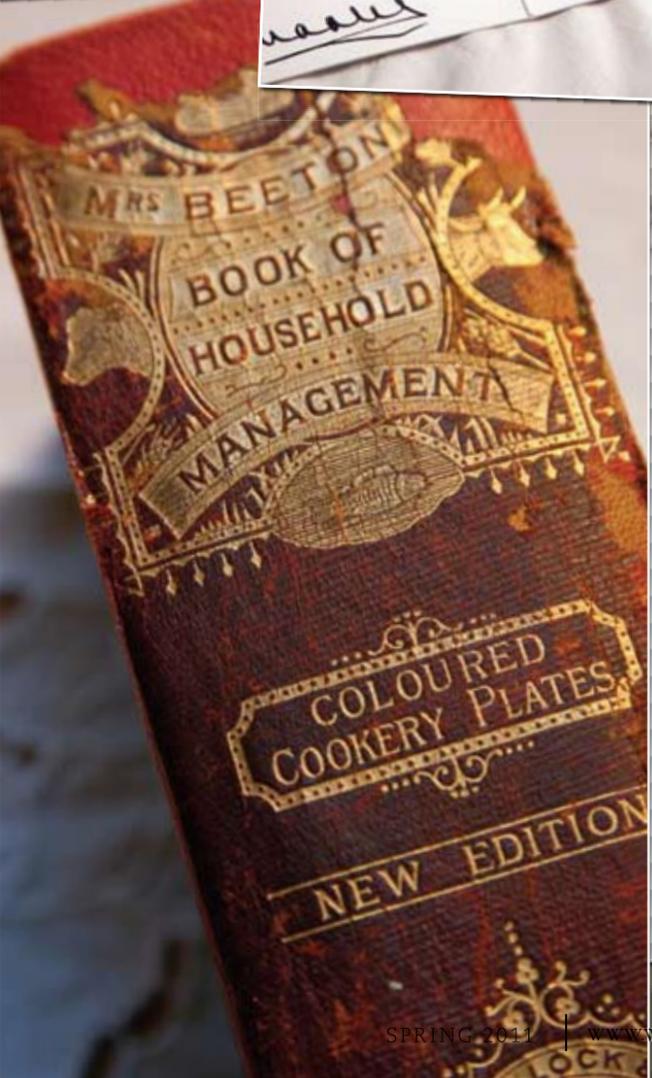


OF TRH THE PRINCE & PRINCESS OF WALES
TO BRAZIL - 1991



Maria ... Diana

Menu
Oeuf Mollet
Roast Pheasant
K...
C...
Menu
Herbme Venison and Mushroom Pie
Highgrove Plum Sponge
Sandringham
Grouse
Sunday
23rd March



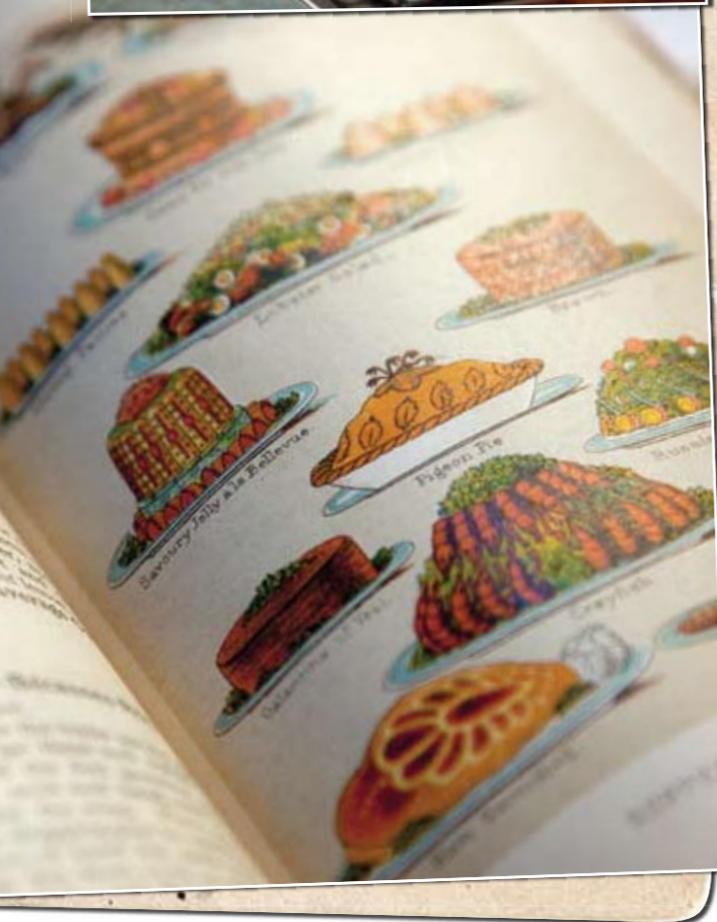
Carolyn
Yours sincerely
Diana



Life behind the green baize door was not glamorous, though it may sound that way, but it wove a very rich tapestry from which I will draw happy fond memories for the rest of my life. The job was exciting, highly pressured, unpredictable, challenging, and very hard work, but as an energetic 23 year old, I relished every aspect of it.

Prince Charles is a man who loves his food, and a chef couldn't ask for a better mouth to feed. I cooked with exquisite organic produce from the kitchen garden at Highgrove, their country residence. His handwritten notes of appreciation (sometimes not more than a couple of words scribbled on a tiny scrap of paper) in the middle of a meal, "A triumph," "Wonderful soufflé," or "Let's have this again," served as a real catalyst for me to keep striving for greater perfection.

Princess Diana at home was every bit as beautiful, vivacious, and caring as the public persona of Diana. She loved simple food and was always immensely appreciative. When I joined the household, William and Harry were 7 and 4 years old, respectively. They enjoyed traditional English nursery food: Shepherds pie, sausages and mash, roast chicken and roast potatoes, blackberry and apple crumble, golden syrup sponge, and homemade ice cream with chocolate sauce (for a treat), to name but a few favorites from the junior royal menu. As they grew up, their tastes very quickly broadened.





They were always a delight to cook for and with. Not many days after I arrived, William appeared in the kitchen for what became the first of many cooking sessions. It is funny how many different things two young boys can do with a piping bag full of unctuous meringue mix! As a teenager, William often requested tuition in specific recipes so that he could cook for himself at boarding school.

After 13 years in the Royal Household, I said a fond farewell and set off to broaden my horizons elsewhere. I spent two years in Dubai, where amongst other things, I reviewed in excess of 400 restaurants. I also lived in California for two years — something everyone should do!

Now I am happier than ever. Lucy and I share our tiny 350-year-old cottage with Pip, our gorgeous Cocker-poo, and two great cats. Life is busy being a mother, “housekeeper,” chef, and now a writer too, as I work on my book. I cook more and more, and I can’t imagine ever stopping.

Where Women Cook would like to thank Carolyn Robb for her involvement in the Spring issue. To learn more about Carolyn, please visit carolynrobb.com.



Eton Mess

(Serves 4)

This indulgent dessert is a great summer picnic classic in England. More specifically, it originates from Eton College (which was attended by Princes William and Harry). It dates back to the 19th century when it was served at the annual June 4th prize giving day, which according to the school's historical anecdotes, was actually always held on the last Wednesday in May! This version of mine (more contemporary than the original recipe) was a great favorite of Prince William's.

3 egg whites at room temperature

3 oz. super-fine sugar

3 oz. brown sugar

A few drops of pure vanilla extract

8 oz. mixed berries (I use strawberries, blueberries, and raspberries)

½ cup raspberry puree or sauce

1 cup heavy cream

½ cup mascarpone

Handful of very finely chopped fresh mint leaves

A few extra mint leaves for garnish

Confectioner's sugar for dusting

1. Preheat oven to 325 degrees.
2. Line two baking trays with non-stick baking parchment.
3. Make the meringues: In a dry clean bowl, whisk the egg whites to a stiff peak stage — they should be glossy and stand in firm peaks.
4. Gradually add all the sugar, whisking continuously. Continue for about 5 minutes until the mixture is very thick and stands up on its own. Add the vanilla extract.
5. Using two spoons, place the meringue mixture onto the baking tray in small mounds, or if you have a piping bag, use a medium nozzle and pipe small meringues.
6. Bake for 1–1½ hours. When cooked, they will be firm and crisp, and will easily lift off the baking parchment. Check them after 1 hour, and cook for longer if required. When cooked, turn off the oven but leave meringues in to dry out further.
7. Wash, dry, and prepare all the berry fruits.
8. Whip the cream until thick, and then stir in the mascarpone, sugar, and chopped mint.
9. Assemble the dessert either in one large bowl or in four individual sundae glasses. Layer up the fruit and the cream alternately with the meringues and a drizzle of the raspberry puree, finishing with cream and then fruit.
10. Garnish with mint leaves, and complete the dish with a dusting of confectioner's sugar just before serving.



Tips

- The meringues can be made up to a week in advance. Store in an airtight container.
- The raspberry puree/sauce can be bought or made by blending 4 oz. raspberries with 2 TB. confectioner's sugar, and adding a few drops of lemon juice. Rub through a sieve to remove all pips before using.
- You can use bought meringues if you are pushed for time, but homemade ones are much nicer!
- Do not assemble the dish more than a couple of hours before you are going to serve it, as the meringues lose their crispness.
- For a more elaborate dinner party presentation, make little discs of meringue, and layer them up in a stack with fruit and cream. Serve on individual dessert plates with a drizzle of fruit puree.

