How to Improvise

It has been brought to my attention by my colleagues at the Improvisation Standards Board, Canberra Region, that all is not well in terms of spontaneous and creative cooking. People generally are not very good at having fun in the kitchen and producing something even vaguely edible at the same time. It is in response to this appalling state of affairs that the ISB has produced its informative booklet *Recipes for Improvisation* which, if followed precisely, will result in the manufacture of satisfying and totally spur-of-the-moment meals. It is to this indispensable booklet that I now turn in order to teach you the proper way to do things. Sit up and pay attention.

**Rule One**
If you want to be the sort of person who can throw together a meal at short notice, you must be well-prepared. Just as no self-respecting sleazebucket ventures out without a condom in his or her possession when feeling adventurous, spontaneity requires organisation. Things must be to hand—and preferably to eye as well. A well-organised cook will have basics such as oil, rice or pasta visible or at least not hidden away at the back of a cupboard.

Fresh herbs should proclaim their freshness to the kitchen and potential cook. If kept in the refrigerator they are likely to end up as compost. Such things are ready to use without preparation, whereas jars of dry legumes generally require overnight soaking and boiling for an hour or more. My suspicion is that legumes are solely responsible for the existence of fast food outlets. They look nice in jars but require too much intelligence to use properly. Writing "soak butterbeans" in one's filofax is perhaps a bit excessive—although it could perhaps be combined with the types of odd little symbols women use to keep tabs on the menstrual cycle. But don't get them mixed up, ladies. I find that sitting in a bath overnight does very little for my wellbeing and wrinkles up my skin.

**Rule Two**
"Let's start at the very beginning—that's a very good place to start." *(The Sound of Music)* Don't be too ambitious if you are a relatively inexperienced cook. This does not mean that you need a five-year plan which starts with boiling eggs and ends with doing nasty things with truffles. We all know that such overweening schemes are doomed to failure. However, successful spontaneity does require some humility, even if I say so myself. If you are a bit frightened of cooking without a recipe, start by changing one or two details in something you know well, and soon you'll find that you are less reliant on the written word.

This rule about playing things safe has several sub-rules, according to the Improvisation Standards Board. Don't try to make sweet and sour anything when drunk. Don't get upset if your meal is not tasting as good as you thought it would. Don't be too heavy-handed with dried herbs in an attempt to make something taste like it was made with fresh herbs. Restraint is as important as generosity, and I speak as one who has eaten extra syrupy pears served with barbecued steak and mustard as an unfortunate attempt to replicate a meal the cook had at a restaurant.

**Rule Three**
Live with someone else who is a good cook, so that no one has to grind out meals when they don't want to. Drudgery is anathema to good food.

**Rule Four**
Live near a good takeaway; it relieves the tension.

**Rule Five**
The key to the great door of creativity is Mascarpone cheese. I just discovered it the other day and finally understand what was missing in my pathetically inadequate life. Mascarpone cheese is a near liquid, pale and creamy cheese to which I have decided to devote the rest of my life. I defy anyone to stand unmanned in the kitchen with a packet of Mascarpone cheese at his or her disposal. Its uses are myriad, but the following are laid down as legitimate by the Improvisation Standards Board (Fun Guidance Secretariat), and are therefore able to be attempted without filling in Form 195.

* Combine it with melted blue cheese over a low heat to make an instant pasta sauce. Sprinkle with parsley before serving.
* Mix it with eggs and honey and成果 in Form 195.
* Use as a sandwich spread, ideally with sun-dried tomatoes.
* Use in casseroles along with rice and pre-cooked vegetables.

The secret is now out and you will be able to create heavenly meals in an instant. Your fame as a cook will spread. People will stop preparing meals for you because they think you will sneer at their slapdash ways. Perhaps you will. Armed with Mascarpone cheese you will become an artist of the kitchen and never again reach for those dubious microwave meals. Copies of *Recipes for Improvisation* and the ISB's new and misleading publication 1001 More Ways to Have Fun in Canberra can be obtained by writing to them. I'll be at home playing with my cheese.

*Penelope Cottier.*