

TOM PARKER BOWLES



THE KITCHEN SURVIVAL KIT

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Those stale spices and congealed oils won't save you in a cooking emergency, but our food doctor can rescue the day

For years now, I've dreamed of having the perfect kitchen store cupboard. You know the sort of thing – neat rows of spanking fresh spices, all stored in gleaming glass, vast stashes of pasta, rice and noodles, easily visible and elegantly labelled. And various vinegars and oils standing pert and proud, ready for action.

The cupboard pictured here is a depiction of this fantasy. My dream cupboard – and it is a dream – would hold all these or variants, depending on where I was able to shop. In reality, it would take a brave man to venture into my kitchen store without a compass, a revolver and a two-way radio. Manage to fight your way through the clouds of cayenne pepper and you're faced with a lethal avalanche of Carnaroli Gran Riserva risotto rice. One wrong turn and you risk being crushed by great boulders of palm sugar or possibly impaled by a rogue clove. Swing across the raging manuka-honey river and dodge the psychotic star anise and Lord knows what you might find. An undiscovered stone-age tribe of ancho chillies, perhaps. Or a once respectable cinnamon stick, gone native and turned into Colonel Kurtz. The horror, indeed.

That's not to say it's dirty or squalid – the smell is intoxicatingly beautiful and nothing is out of date. But it's total chaos in there, and while I do wish for order, I'm too lazy to do anything about it. Despite this, it has everything I need. And it gives me the means to make proper food quickly and without even a modicum of hassle.

The usual necessities of any kitchen cupboard – the plain flour, baked beans, Marmite, sugar and tea – are a given. I'm more interested in the slightly more exotic brands and spices, the sort of things you pick up on your travels around the world and actually want to use. Unlike that masala mix that was made for you in the Delhi spice market all those years ago, and sits untouched, stale and unloved.



A good range of vinegars provides the backbone of the cupboard; I like red- and white-wine versions, sherry (a Vinagre de Jerez DOP) and cider for marinades and dressings, each giving its own idiosyncratic nuances to whatever it touches. Add in some mild white-rice vinegar and you have everything you need. In addition to the usual olive and vegetable oils, walnut oil is wonderful sprinkled over tomatoes, or mixed with olive oil for a dressing. Cooking destroys the flavour and it can go off quickly, so don't leave it sitting about for years. And a red chilli oil, thick, dark and smoky, makes a perfect spicy

dipping sauce for your takeaways, or adds an instant hit of rich chilli heat.

A jar of passata – Italian strained tomatoes – is perfect for instant pasta sauces. Just cook up some onion and garlic, add the passata and salt and you'll get something far superior to those cloying supermarket horrors. Another instant classic is a packet of ready-cooked Puy lentils by Merchant Gourmet – I simply

heat them up and plonk a poached egg on top.

Ortiz tinned tuna is among the best in the world, expensive but worth every penny. And the tinned

pilchards from The Pilchard Works in Cornwall are unbelievably good, sweet and succulent and so fine I just eat them straight out of the tin. For a quick and easy soup, try the vegetable bouillon powder from Steenbergs or miso paste – just add boiling water.

As for spices, I always keep a bag of Sichuan pepper, with its numbing, floral hit, for Sichuan dishes, as well as dried Thai red chillies, which can be either soaked and cooked or dry-fried and crushed into powder. Both are cheap and easily available from Oriental supermarkets. If you want a fantastic black peppercorn, then the Malaysian

Sarawak variety is wonderful, and although my staple is Maldon Salt, the Cornish Sea Salt Company produces a salt every bit its equal. And for Bloody Marys and soft-boiled eggs, a small jar of celery salt is essential.

For paprika, La Chinata has to be my favourite, while Susie's Hot Sauce is the perfect fruity, fiery Caribbean table sauce. Colman's mustard powder is invaluable, both for making fresh mustard and for adding to dressings and sauces. Japanese wasabi paste is great either with sushi or added to mayonnaise to give it punch, while harissa paste, a North African pepper condiment, adds some much-needed oomph to couscous and bulgar wheat. One last favourite is Slap Ya Mama Cajun seasoning, which seems to find its way on to everything at the moment, especially avocados sprinkled with fresh lime and good salt.

The final essential components are noodles; rice vermicelli, udon and soba are all great in soup, although I like munching the last two on their own with lime and soy sauce. Easy dinner, ready in seconds.

Of course, this list is adapted to my tastes, hence the surfeit of chilli. But these ingredients mean you'll always have a decent meal to hand. That is, if

you can battle through the cupboard and find it in the first place. ■

Top shelf (from left): Ortiz Tuna, £3; Steenbergs Celery Salt, £2; Pilchard Works Pilchards, £2; Merchant Gourmet Puy

Lentils, £2; Manuka Honey, £12; Clearspring Wasabi, £2.79; La Chinata Paprika, £2.34.

Centre row: Crushed Chillies, 80p; Colman's Mustard, £1.69; Marigold Bouillon, £1.79; Szechuan Peppercorns, 99p; Halen Môn Sea Salt, £4.25; Harissa paste, £2; Ferron Carnaroli Rice, £4.70; Maria Dolores Salsa Habanero, £1.29; Clearspring Miso, £3.69; Clearspring Udon Noodles, £1.49; Wayanad Peppercorns, £2; Blue Elephant Rice Vinegar, £1.69.

Bottom row: Aspall White Wine Vinegar, £1.69; L'Olivier Chilli Oil, £5; Junmai Daiginjo Sake, £10; Aspall Red Wine Vinegar, £1.69; L'Olivier Walnut Oil, £5.50; Slap Ya Mama Cajun Sauce, £4.39; Aspall Cyder Vinegar, £1.69; 12-Year Balsamic Vinegar, £3.49; Blue Dragon Rice Noodles, 99p; Clearspring Soba Noodles, £1.79; Organic Passata, £2