



# a celebration of spring

## Robin Van Creveld welcomes the end of winter with food for feast days

**In our house, spring is heralded by clear sunrises over the downs, Orlando's birthday and a huge sense of relief!** The heavy dark months may have left their mark on my body, my spirit and my social life, but the lighter days always bring me a deep sense of reconnection with Nature and openness to life's infinite possibilities. I am however an unashamed optimist when it comes to the spring – regardless of the temperature, when I see the first blossoms

winter is over! My partner may laugh at my short sleeves and thin coat, salad for dinner and my gung-ho dips in our local river, but for me the seasons are more about attitude than weather. I have lived half my life in a warmer climate, so my strategy for thriving on these shores is simple – knowing that this life is totally incredible and that the rhythms of Nature and the melody of experience make for sublime music... This, and appropriate clothing. >

# recipes

## St Patrick's soup

> St Patrick's Day is an important Christian feast day that usually falls on 17 March, right in the middle of the 'hungry gap' months, when fresh vegetables are limited to roots, and brassicas such as cabbage and kale. This soup is perfect for celebrations. It's easy and quick to make, can feed the masses and has any number of variations. The addition of oatmeal is optional, but does make for a very nourishing and substantial soup. For a vivid green colour, add a handful of very finely chopped parsley to the pot a few minutes before serving.

*Serves 4–6*

50g/2 oz butter or 3 tbsp olive oil  
1 large leek, washed and sliced  
2 large potatoes, peeled and finely diced  
2 large carrots, peeled and finely diced  
1.5l/3 pt vegetable stock  
4 tbsp oatmeal (optional)  
2 handfuls spring greens, cabbage or curly kale, finely chopped  
salt and pepper to taste  
single cream to swirl (optional)  
a handful of fresh parsley, finely chopped (optional)

Heat the butter or olive oil in a large saucepan and gently fry the leek, potatoes and carrots for about 5 minutes, until they start to soften. Add the vegetable stock and oatmeal (if used); bring to the boil, then simmer for about 20 minutes. Blend until the soup is smooth and then add the greens. If you prefer a slightly chunky soup, just purée half the mixture and add the greens. Cook until the greens are just tender, season with salt and pepper to taste, and serve with a swirl of cream, chopped parsley (both optional) and some fresh bread.



## Calcote Romesco

This is a traditional dish from Cataluña that is served ceremonially at community and family feasts to welcome in the spring. It is a very poetic dish that reconciles winter with spring and marries earth and sky. The new shoots of last season's onions are brushed with oil and cooked over hot coals until blackened and then served with a sweet and piquant salsa Romesco, which is made from fresh and dried peppers and roasted almonds. This dish is a sensory delight and is best eaten with hands and a bib. I serve it as the filling for a giant bocadillo sandwich.

*Serves 4–6*

16 spring onions  
1 large baguette or bloomer-style loaf  
4 tbsp olive oil  
1 small onion, finely chopped  
4 cloves of garlic, 3 of them finely chopped  
2 large sweet red peppers, preferably long, pointed Romano peppers, chopped  
2 tbsp tomato purée  
4–8 tbsp vegetable stock  
4 tbsp roasted almonds, ground to a semi-fine powder  
1 tsp smoked paprika  
salt and sugar

### Salsa

Heat half the oil over a medium heat and fry the chopped onion until just soft. Add the chopped garlic and peppers and cook briefly; you are aiming for the garlic and the peppers to be lightly cooked so that their fresh flavour is prominent. Add the tomato purée, a pinch of salt and sugar and enough stock to make a smooth sauce. Cook for a few minutes and then add the almonds and paprika. Cook for 5 minutes more until the sauce is glossy and then blend to a consistency of your choice, adding the remaining oil as you blend. Season to taste.

### Calcote

Heat a grill until very hot. Trim the spring onions and brush with olive oil. Cook under the grill, turning often, until the outer layers of the onions are charred. You can also do this in a ridged griddle pan. Peel off the charred skin to reveal the tender cooked onion.

### To assemble

Halve the bread and rub with garlic and the remaining oil and then grill or toast until browned. Spread the salsa liberally over the bread and top with the onions. Finish this off by squashing the bread down slightly, and cut into big chunks.







## Hot cross buns

These much-loved buns are traditionally eaten for breakfast on Good Friday to celebrate the end of Lent and for many of us the start of spring. This recipe is very versatile and easy to adapt to make larger quantities, and because there is actually a lot of yeast in proportion to the amount of flour the dough is very active, which results in fast-rising, quick-to-bake buns.

If you do make larger amounts, you can freeze any dough that you don't use. Make the dough and portion off as much as you need for your buns and then dust the remaining dough with white flour and wrap up in a plastic bag or cling film before freezing.

*Makes 16 good-sized buns*

250g/8 oz strong wholewheat flour  
500g/1 lb strong white flour (plus more for dusting)  
2 tsp dried yeast  
3 tsp mixed spice  
1 tsp salt  
2 tbsp sugar  
1 tbsp butter  
4 tbsp mixed vine fruit, soaked in warm water for half an hour if possible  
1 egg (beaten)  
500ml/1 pt warm milk  
oil for baking  
4 tbsp milk mixed with 2 tsp sugar for the glaze

In a large bowl mix the flour with the yeast, spice, salt and sugar. Rub in the butter and then stir in the vine fruit, egg and warm milk. Mix together to form a soft dough. Turn this out onto a dry surface and knead for 5 minutes. It is a sticky dough, so work it quickly with light dustings of flour. Put the dough back into the bowl, cover it with a damp tea towel and allow it to rise in a warm place for about an hour. Turn it out onto a floured surface and lightly knead it again, roll it out to form a long sausage shape and cut it into 16 equal portions. Oil a large baking tray and preheat the oven to 180°C/360°F/Gas Mark 4.

Take a portion of dough for each bun and, using a circular motion with the palm of your hand, gently roll it on a non-floured surface while drawing your fingers upwards to make a ball shape. The ball shape can also be created by rolling the dough between the palms of both hands, using the same circular motion. Place the balls on the baking tray, allowing enough space between them for them to double in size. Allow them to rise in a warm place for up to 60 minutes, or a little longer for lighter buns. Just before you put the buns in the oven, cut a cross on the top of each one using a sharp knife, and brush it with the sugared milk. Bake for 10 minutes and then turn the tray. Cook for another 5 minutes and then allow the buns to cool slightly on a rack before serving.

## Pancakes with rhubarb and apple compote

Another thing I love about spring is the opportunity to cook and eat even more pancakes than usual. Shrove Tuesday, or Pancake Day, is the start of Lent, and pancakes are a traditional vehicle for using up the soon-to-be-forfeited fat and sugar. Serve the bold-flavoured compote with whipped cream or thick yoghurt, rolled up in a pancake.

*Serves 4–6*

### Compote

1 tbsp butter  
300g/12 oz young rhubarb (6–8 stems, cleaned and chopped)  
500g/1 lb dessert apples (peeled, cored and chopped into small pieces)  
50g/2 oz brown sugar – add more if you feel the fruit is too sour  
2 tbsp water or apple juice

Heat the butter in a pan and add the rhubarb and chopped apples. Cook for a few minutes and then add the sugar and the water or apple juice. Cover and cook on a low heat until very soft.

### Pancakes

1 free-range egg  
275ml/½ pt semi-skimmed milk  
1 tsp bicarbonate of soda  
1 tsp sugar  
a pinch of salt  
100g/4 oz plain flour  
oil for frying

Beat the egg and milk together with a balloon whisk. Add the bicarbonate of soda, sugar, salt and 1 tablespoon of flour at a time and whisk together. Adding one spoon at a time helps avoid a lumpy batter. The batter should be reasonably thin, with the pouring texture of single cream. Heat a 20–25cm non-stick frying pan, and oil it lightly. Add enough batter to coat the bottom of the pan and cook over a medium to high heat until the up-facing side is dry and has bubbles forming. Turn and cook the other side until done. Cook the rest of the pancakes in this way, storing them on a plate under a tea towel and separating each with a layer of kitchen paper until they are all ready to serve. ●

**Robin Van Creveld** is a chef, educator, social activist and entrepreneur. He lives in Sussex and is married to the artist Riga Forbes. When he is not parenting Anoushka, aged 5, and Orlando, aged 2, he runs [www.communitychef.org.uk](http://www.communitychef.org.uk).