



Monday 31st August 2020

Dear Customer,

I hope you are ok. Well that's it, meteorological summer is over, which is probably for the best. If summer can't produce summer weather then it might as well be autumn when at least we have lower expectations. Needless to say, the weather here has again been foul all week. And today, it has even been cold - I had to wear a sweater, a coat, and a scarf.

Here are a few tasty recipes you could try this week:

Spinach and Garlic Spaghetti

bunch of spinach

3 tbsp olive oil

2 tbsp red wine vinegar

grated cheese, optional

wholewheat spaghetti

4 garlic cloves, finely sliced

handful pine nuts

Cook the spaghetti. Meanwhile trim the spinach, remove any thick stems and shred. Boil the kettle and tip the spinach into a large colander. Pour on boiling water until it is completely wilted then cool under cold water and press the spinach into a ball, squeezing out all the water. Roughly chop the spinach and set aside. Gently heat the oil and garlic in a small pan for a few mins until it just starts to brown, then add the vinegar. Bubble for 1 min, then turn off the heat. When the spaghetti is cooked, reserve some of the water, then drain. In a large bowl, toss the spaghetti with the garlicky oil, spinach, pine nuts and the grated cheese if using. Add enough water to loosen everything. Serve with a drizzle of olive oil and a sprinkling of chilli flakes if desired.

Squash and Kale Gratin

1 squash, flesh cut into 2.5cm chunks

700ml organic milk

2 cloves

1 small onion, halved

60g plain flour

bunch kale leaves, large stalks discarded

1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil

1 bay leaf

pinch black peppercorns

75g butter

240g cheese, crumbled or grated

Heat the oven to 220 °C / Gas 7. Toss the squash with the olive oil and seasoning and arrange in a single layer on a baking tray. Roast for 30 minutes, turning halfway, until soft and caramelised in places then set aside. Meanwhile, bring the milk to the boil with the bay leaf, cloves, peppercorns and onion. Take off the heat and set aside for a few minutes to infuse. Turn down the oven to 180 °C / Gas 4. Make a bechamel sauce by cooking the butter and flour in a small pan over a low heat for 2-3 minutes. Strain the infused milk and add, in 4 or 5 batches, whisking to incorporate each time. Bring to a simmer and cook for 5-7 minutes, whisking regularly, until thickened. Add 1/2 the cheese, season and set aside. Meanwhile cook the kale in boiling salted water until wilted and squeeze dry. Toss the squash, bechamel and kale together in a large bowl, then arrange in a large ovenproof dish. Sprinkle with the remaining cheese and bake for 25-30 minutes until golden brown.

Spiced Squash and Apple Soup

1 tbsp oil

¼ tsp chilli flakes

400g squash, deseeded and diced

1 litre vegetable stock

1 onion, chopped

½ tsp ground cinnamon

2 apples, cored and diced

Heat the oil in a large saucepan and fry the onion for 3-4 minutes. Add the chilli, cinnamon, squash and apples and cook for 1-2 minutes. Add the stock, cover, bring to the boil, then simmer until tender. Purée using a hand-held blender and season to taste

Last week I was tormented by insect bites. This week I've been tormented by fabric swatches and buttons. How does anyone ever come to a decision. In the end you have to settle for the least, worst option.

After sending my new sofas back and giving a reprieve from landfill to my ancient Collins and Hayes sofa and armchair, 1996, Bentalls in Kingston, I managed to track down an upholsterer. A new guy had just left his firm to start up on his own with very affordable prices and short lead-time. I drove over to Barnard Castle to see him, eyesight no worse than normal, and must have been there for two hours going through sample books. It was agony, but eventually I made a decision. Driving back up the A66 I re-visualised my sofa in the chosen fabric. Urrrhg, Horrible. I rang him when I got back and said I would source my own fabric.

I got on the internet and called in a load of samples. For days I kept going through the process of elimination and always ended up with the same soft, creamy white corduroy. The best possible choice when you have a black dog and a muddy garden. More self-inflicted stress than as there is no other option.

And as for buttons. I've run out of Izzy Lane ones and need some for our new cardigans. I trawled through thousands of pictures, called in samples, and again set about trying to decide. Finally, finally I chose some, they were the only ones which would work, so I rang the wholesaler.

'Great', they had almost none left in stock. I asked if they could get more in. The answer to that was very upsetting. 'No' because nearly all the button makers in 'Button Valley' outside Milan were dead. It was one of the places worst hit by Covid-19.

I signed up for a series of online Digital Marketing classes to get better understanding of it all with my new venture launching imminently. The classes were on Zoom and I was dreading it. However, I quickly realised that one can sit in dim light a good distance from the camera and tilt the screen right back, so one's head becomes very small and dark - almost a silhouette. And that if one doesn't speak one remains at the back of the classroom in a small box and does not appear in full screen. I was a discreet presence.. Zoom, yeah, no problem, a big technological breakthrough for me that was.

Hope you have a good week,

Kind wishes

Isobel

PS Time has moved on since I wrote the letter on Saturday and it is a beautiful warm and sunny morning.