

Guy rope recipes

The best thing for a lemon tree, according to Dad, is to leave the fruit rotting at the base. It's hard to not think of this as a cosmic metaphor while we rot away in lockdown. Of course, that's on the more morose days. Some days it doesn't feel like rotting. It feels like tightly tucking yourself away; budding, ready to unfurl and bloom—to become sweet, pretty lemon flowers. Other days we're squeezing into lemonade, or churning into lemon butter, or fortifying into limoncello. All the lemon metaphors are ready at hand as a gnarled lemon tree reaching out of a concrete slab is one of the first things I see in the morning and that's pretty much every morning since this pandemic began. It's also the source of one of my greatest coping mechanisms this lockdown. I have been perfecting the perfect lemon tart.

I did work in hospitality for fifteen years and love to cook, but I was never much of a baker—that's my sister. In another lockdown land, inside the Ring of Steel, she has been perfecting macarons. Like many hundreds of Melbournians, she also took to baking her own bread. What was the reason for this craze? Needing to knead the frustration away? Or the boredom? Or the angst? Though this wasn't a passing phase for her, as she now hasn't bought bread for over a year.

I have images of these feelings being infused into our food, like those magical realism films *Chocolat* (Hallström, 2001) and *Like Water for Chocolate* (Arau, 1992). While cooking we pour emotions, identity, and a sliver of ourselves into our food. When I make curd, it's a kind of magic. Slowly, it thickens—look away for a second and you miss it. Is it thickened with inner musings? Does it pull my thoughts out and funnel them into the saucepan? In normal times, we

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share this emotional sustenance with others; friends and extended family, colleagues and partners. But stuck inside, we can only serve it back to ourselves. Locked away, stuffing our own mouths with our own toxic thoughts. Again... these are the thoughts I had on the more morose days.

Now, as I press walnuts with the back of the cup, that magical realism fantasy seems like a terrible simile. I could use the blender to crumb the walnuts. That would take seven seconds. Instead, I stand, press, and spiral the cup down. I'm up straight and my weight on my feet feels more solid. I am here. In my kitchen. I breathe deeper knowing that.

I have found an answer for these feelings and reactions in an unlikely place—a Horror creative writing class. In this class, it was said that there are two types of horror; the terrifying and the sublime (Burke, 1767). The pandemic shocked us. Terrified us with pictures of bodies and hazmat suits. But the true horror lies in the unfathomable reach of this plague. This is horror's idea of the sublime; when our minds balk at an infinite number of consequences, when awe turns to terror, when vastness reveals how small an individual is as the possibilities pivot down, burrowing to never-ending depths, and we are engulfed.

Hence, a lemon—one that grows from my tree, the one outside my window. I see it flower, become fat and ripe. I wrap my hands around its flesh and I pull. I have it under my hand when I push down and grate. It makes me smile to think that this is the origin of the meaning of a zest for life. Narrowing your focus back down to something that can fit into your hand, that you can feel, touch, and smell. And what a smell it is; it shoots into the air, incredibly fresh and alive.

I have been perfecting my recipe for lemon tart over the last year or so. I've read dozens of recipes. To suggest some: My recipes (n.d.), Recipetips (n.d.) and Fine Cooking (n.d.). I've experimented; combining the curd from one, the crust from another, tweaking it as I go along. Have I made the perfect lemon tart? No, there is no such thing.

In a restaurant over a decade ago, I served the 'perfect lemon tart' (Sibley, n.d.). It was written up—already renowned from the chef's previous venture. Over and over again, we would say; 'This is the best lemon tart,' 'It's perfect. Just. The. Way. It. Is.' It was a single piece and it sat proudly alone on the plate. It was so perfect it didn't need cream or ice-cream. In fact, requesting such was like requesting parmesan on seafood pasta—an unforgivable restaurant sin.

Although unlike seafood and parmesan, it was only a sin in our restaurant. We would say politely, 'Just try one bite; you'll see it doesn't need it'. People wouldn't. They would just say,

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they paid \$22; they expected it would be accompanied. Sometimes they would say this politely. Other times, they were defensive. They would stare, scowl, yell, curse, snap, and bite back. ‘I’ve heard this is the best, what do you mean it doesn’t come with anything?’

After the Groundhog Day argument, you would slink back to the kitchen and ask for cream or ice-cream. The kitchen would then stare, scowl, yell, curse, snap, and bite back. ‘It doesn’t need to come with anything.’ It was a particular kind of horror—Sisyphian in its futility. This hell only rolled away when it was decided that we should charge \$5 for a scoop of house-made ice-cream. Everyone seemed happier—although the staff only very reluctantly so.

The problem with the perfect lemon tart is everyone has certain expectations. Unless it is deconstructed, reconstructed, turned into foam and served on a bird bath, people will not be impressed by a lemon tart in a hatted restaurant. More than that, people will not become a single homogenous group, all enjoying the same piece of tart. I certainly didn’t think it was the best lemon tart. Not that I ever ate it served alone on a plate. I ate it out the back, with four other forks duelling for a taste while my hands were covered in vinegar as I polished two bathtubs worth of cutlery.

Perhaps this is why I have been so determined to find *my* perfect lemon tart. I’m still resentful of the days when you hadn’t eaten for six hours after running around a busy section and, famished and fatigued, all you had at the end of service was the *perfect* lemon tart. Too much time, too much waiting, too much overthinking, too much arguing; all over people’s expectations about what should be happening. Only disappointment can be at the end.

But *my* lemon tart, that is my version of perfection. One small thing that I can be happy about. I have the power to make my tart so sour you need cream in each bite to soothe the intensity. That is unless you want to live on the edge and take a naked bite which screws up your face like a sour Warhead. As soon as the regions opened up, I placed two pieces of my perfection on plates and couriered them on the passenger seat of my car. I drove to a neighbouring town, and sat on the beachside of a dune and shared my emotional sustenance with an old friend. We laughed and gossiped and waved away over-confident puppies. Perhaps those magical realism fantasies aren’t that far away from reality. This has been my way of conquering the sublime; turning from unfathomable to something tangible. Something fresh and alive, sweet and decadent.

This is not to say that I have solved a crisis with cake. I am not reducing the sublime to soufflé. It’s just in these moments I am happier. The moments where I am tinkering with a

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recipe or taking a bite are like guy ropes securing my sanity. Stanley Tucci's (2020) article in *The Atlantic* was the first thing I read in a newspaper that made me laugh after January 2020. It inspired me to think about food in this way. He offered a path out of the labyrinth of personal anxieties: you can find yourself in recipes and cooking. They can guide you back to the land of the sane. And now that we are once again able to move around, we share the food that we clung to in these strange times.

Recently, the possums have started eating the skin of the lemons on my tree, leaving the fruit hanging there, naked. I'm trying not to think of it as a new kind of morose metaphor. Some new tale of horror. It would be a pretty stark one if I placed too much significance on it. One where lockdown has left us stripped bare; soiled, dried, and useless. It is unsurprising that I'd prefer to think again of budding and unfurling—blooming into sweet, pretty lemon flowers. Or imagining people as hungry caterpillars now becoming free butterflies. Or do we simply drop the flowery language and remember that life is not lemons, and metaphors aren't prophecies—just little processing mechanisms that help us understand the sublime.

Although now I'm going to stop overthinking, and just sit back for a moment and eat some cake.

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