

# The Humble Crumble.

Assertive Cooking continues its series of culinary masterpieces, audacious in their simplicity, that require the minimum of effort and skill.

By Bernard Saint

Said to have been invented as a result of food shortages, the crumble would be otherwise a pie, but the fat ration did not permit rich pastries to be made, so the bare minimum of sugar and fat was used to make this unique and crunchy alternative.

Assertive Cooker Phil Martin (he refuses to aspire to the term “chef”) recalls the effect a blackberry and apple crumble had on a French guest who took his food very seriously.

“We had had a bachelor’s meal”, he said “Simple plain food, cooked carefully, with each person at the table responsible for one of the courses or one of the wines. Our French friend, Jean-Pierre, who lived below me in the same apartment block in Hong Kong, had been heard on several occasions to decry the idea that there was such a thing as British Cuisine. “It is, how do you say?, an oxymoron, a contradiction, an impossibility!” You could almost hear the unvoiced Gallic “Pah!”

He had a particularly fine contempt for the British Sausage, due to a misunderstanding about how to cook it. He’d boiled one.

In any event, once bitten twice shy, so Jean-Pierre’s contribution to the evening was a couple of bottles of a white Montrachet, and a conversation issued from the culinary high ground.

The dinner was to be St Crispin’s Day, 25th October. The rest of us had risen to the occasion of course – the main course was Beef Wellington, we’d started with Agincourt Leek Flan, in honour of the Welsh archers who won the day, we’d drunk Trafalgar beer. You get the idea.

We’d had a hugely entertaining meal, and Jean-Pierre was more than holding his own – we wouldn’t have tormented a lesser character so. Then it was my turn, and I brought out the crumble and the custard. “Ha!”, said Jean-Pierre, “La Crème Anglaise! I bet you ‘ave put cornflour in there.” You could definitely hear the “Pah!”

I hadn’t as it happened – my mother had very clear ideas about cornflour, and as a restaurant critic of some note in Hong Kong, had had a public run-in with... but that is another story. She had taught me to use only eggs, vanilla, sugar and milk, so I bristled rather, but Jean-Pierre was on a roll.

“And what is this?” he said. “Something very funny has happened to your pastry. It has fallen to bits!”

He sniggered.

Trying to maintain one’s dignity when serving the very humble dish of apple and blackberry crumble is hard, and we were all, with the exception of the smug Jean-Pierre,

trying to turn the conversation back to Nelson...

When, mid-flow, Jean-Pierre stopped, focussed on his dish, and had another dig.

“But, but... This is marvelous! What is it? This pastry is not a mistake, no? It is sweet, the texture is just parfait, ze little crumbs are so crunchy, zey are caramelised, les mûres...”

He stuffed another spoonful in and chewed meditatively, smiling, eyes unseeing.

“Robbed of the power of speech, and him a Parisian”, said Roddy Williams, the chap who’d provided the leek flan. “Takes some doing.”

“Did you see how his English went first?”, observed Dean, the Wellingtonian. “Then his French.”

I put it down to the fact that this is a very solid dish, and needs some eating – not something suitable for a light summer’s lunch, but perfect for a cool autumn’s dinner.

We watched Jean-Pierre’s consciousness surface and his thoughts slowly gather.

“I am served right”, he said. “This dish is fit for the Gods. We have nothing like it in France. There *is* a British Cuisine.

“How is it made my friends? How is it made?”

And this is what we told him....



PHOTO: AMANDA RUDKIN

## Apple Crumble

You need one implement: a knife; one cooking utensil: an oven-proof dish; and one oven.

For 6

### Topping

200g of flour

100g of sugar

100g of butter

Pinch of allspice, or nutmeg, or cinnamon,  
(or any cakey spice, or all of them).

### Filling

6-8 green apples,  
(Granny Smiths if you can't get Bramleys.

*The sharper and firmer the better.*

200g of fresh blackberries if you can get them,  
if not, 200g of sultanas or raisins).

Zest of a lemon

The lemon

100g of brown sugar for more flavour.  
(Less if the apples are sweet).

Another pinch of cakey spices

### First the crumble.

Chop up the butter, add the flour and sugar and the spice and rub in the butter. It will soon resemble fine breadcrumbs. Stop.

### Now the filling.

Take a knife and peel, core and thickly slice the apples. Work fast so that the apples don't brown. Place the apples in layers in a greased oven-proof casserole, and sprinkle a quarter handful of blackberries on top of each apple layer, and a teaspoonful of the sugar. Keep going until you run out of apple slices. Sprinkle the rest of the sugar and blackberries on top, then the juice of the lemon, the pinch of spices, and if there is room in the casserole, stick your hands in and mix it all up.

Very thinly peel the zest off the outside of the lemon skin and scatter the zest across the top of the mixture.

Sprinkle the crumble topping over the apple filling to cover completely. Sprinkle a little brown sugar on top of the topping.

Put in 180°C oven for 40 minutes or until crisp and golden.

Voilà! The Dish that Stopped the Frenchman.

Of British origin, the crumble is named for its crumbly topping – neither breadcrumb nor pastry, its texture is unique in the pudding world.