

# On the ration

To mark the 100th anniversary of the Armistice, **Caroline Roberts** takes a look at food rationing during World War I

In straitened times, cooks need to get creative to eke out the meagre contents of the larder. And, with bread containing ground turnip, mutton dressed up as venison, and potato gateaux for dessert, they certainly managed that during World War I.

Although rationing wasn't introduced until the final year of the conflict, the war years were marked by serious food shortages. Before 1914, Britain imported around 70% of its food, including large amounts of staples such as wheat, meat and sugar. But during the war, sustained attacks by German U-boats prevented many merchant ships from reaching Britain's shores.

Prices rocketed, and panic buying and hoarding by those who could afford it meant it was the poor who suffered the most. Women, laden with babies and baskets, queued for hours outside shops in all weathers. Still, the Government preferred to rely on voluntary restraint, and posters urged the public to 'Save the wheat, help the fleet' by eating less bread. But in early 1918, with food stocks dangerously low, decisive action was needed and, by the summer, basics such as meat, butter, margarine, lard and sugar were all rationed. 'When rationing was



Vicky with the book she wrote about her grandmother

## The war years were marked by serious food shortages

introduced, the nation's diet became more balanced,' says Vicky Straker, author of *Bicycles, Bloomers and Great War Rationing*

*Recipes*. 'The allowances were similar to today's recommended intakes and food was distributed more fairly.'

Vicky's book tells the story of her great-great-grandmother, Dorothy Peel, the Delia Smith of her day, who played a key role in helping housewives adapt to the limited resources of wartime. Dorothy was born in 1868 into a genteel but not very well-off family. Needing an income, she carved out a niche for herself as a journalist and author, editing several popular women's magazines and writing books advising on domestic issues. When war broke out, she was quick to recognise the need for a new way of cooking and had soon produced three recipe books. Her aim was to help the country 'shun waste, to get out of our foodstuffs the full measure of nourishment – these are essential principles in wartime cookery; and I should like to see the words "Make do" on the walls of every kitchen in the land.'

In early 1917, Dorothy was asked to work with the Ministry of Food. For a year, she travelled the country attending conferences and addressing a total of 176 meetings on food economy, sometimes facing hostility because of her 'well-fed' appearance. Changing attitudes to food



Women queued for hours for rations

## 'Eat slowly: you will need less food,' Dorothy instructs her readers

was challenging. She recalls asking a woman queuing for meat why she didn't buy fish instead. 'An' get a black eye for me pains?' retorted the woman.

In 1919, Dorothy's contribution to the war effort was recognised with an OBE. But it's a contribution that could so easily have been forgotten. Vicky grew up knowing almost nothing about 'Granny Dot', whose portrait hung in the family home. 'All my grandad said was that she was a jolly good cook. I think it was to do with the old-fashioned attitude that food was the women's department and he didn't see the importance of it,' she says. When Vicky's mother told her that Granny Dot's recipe book was in the attic, she expected to find a collection of notes on scraps of paper. Instead, she was amazed to find a copy of *The Daily Mail Cookery Book*, written in 1920 when Dorothy edited the newspaper's women's page. 'An online search showed she'd written loads of books. I was really excited and started tracking them down.'

What began as a family history project eventually grew into a book that provides a fascinating insight into the time. The first part of *Bicycles* uses Dorothy's story to explore social mores and the huge changes that were taking place in women's lives. The second part is devoted to her wartime recipes, adapted where necessary by Vicky, herself a trained cook.

'There are some interesting similarities between some of Dorothy's recipes and current food trends,' says Vicky, 'such as

the fashion for cooking with polenta and putting vegetables into sweet things.' And much of her wisdom has stood the test of time. 'Eat slowly: you will need less food,' she instructs her readers, and, 'Train your taste to desire less sugar. Begin by using

just a quarter less than you are accustomed to use in every recipe, in a week use half as much, and soon you will be quite content with the lessened quantity.' Almost 100 years later, it's advice that wouldn't go amiss today.

## MAIZE WOODCOCK

This satisfying dish consists of scrambled egg on a bed of polenta, topped with anchovy. Seeing that it contains no woodcock, the reason for its name is a mystery. Serves 6

### INGREDIENTS

- 250g polenta
- 2 knobs of butter
- 12 free-range or organic eggs
- 2 anchovies
- chives, finely chopped

### METHOD

1. Preheat the oven to 200°C/Gas Mark 6.



2. Cook the polenta according to the packet instructions, allow to cool, then cut into rounds of roughly 9cm diameter and between 1cm and 2cm thick.
3. Heat a griddle pan and melt a knob of butter in it.
4. When the butter sizzles, add the polenta rounds, frying for about three minutes on each side until lightly browned.
5. In a separate pan, lightly scramble the eggs in a knob of butter, bearing in mind that they will be cooked further in the oven.
6. Lay the rounds of polenta on a baking tray and spoon some scrambled eggs on top of each.
7. Place 2 anchovy fillets on the eggs in a cross, and bake for five minutes.
8. Sprinkle with chives and serve.

## Did you know?

- In 1916, it became illegal to consume more than two courses while lunching in a public eating place, although you were allowed three for dinner.
- Animal foods were also restricted. It was decreed

- that hens hatched after 1 January 1916 were entitled to 2oz of feed a day.
- Public drunkenness among munitions workers, many female, caused then Chancellor of the Exchequer Lloyd George

- to declare: 'Drink is doing us more damage in the war than all the German submarines put together.' Total abstinence never caught on, but 'treating', or buying drinks for others, was made illegal.

