

eat in my kitchen



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to cook, to bake, to eat, and to treat

MEIKE PETERS

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To Mama and Jamie, my two rocks.





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introduction

My food is in my hands. Whatever I buy, whatever I cook and eat—it's all up to me. My mother and grandmothers introduced me to the marvelous everyday pleasures of the kitchen. I was a young child, but watching them create fantastic treats with such ease and satisfaction impressed me and sparked my lifelong love of food. Through them I understood that it is a sensory process that leads to an unforgettable meal. The idea for a recipe is only the start. Before the cutting, searing, and stirring even begins, smelling and choosing fresh fruits and vegetables at the market, or picking a nice piece of meat at the butcher or a warm loaf of bread at the bakery is what turns a simple dish into something greater. When I sit down at the table, on my own or with family and friends, I enjoy every single bite to the fullest. It is pure bliss created by my own two hands. If there isn't much time, I keep it simple, with only a few ingredients tossed together in half an hour, but I won't skip it. To cook, to bake, to eat, and to treat is my daily feast.

My culinary education is rooted in hearty German comfort food, with strong influences from French and Italian cuisine. It all started with my mother who is my biggest inspiration in the kitchen. She's a fabulous cook, a wonderful host, and she introduced my young taste buds to the pleasures of fine olive oil and the generous use of Mediterranean herbs and garlic, along with France's elaborate classical dishes and Italy's simple but scrumptious pastas. Although I grew up in western Germany, in North Rhine-Westphalia, most of the traditional German recipes I cook originated in the South of the country. I learned to love them through my Swabian stepfather who brought wonderful treats like Spätzle and Maultaschen (*see page 90*) to our table. Our lavish family gatherings aroused an unstoppable appetite for traditional homemade cakes, and led to my huge passion for baking, which I continue to indulge in, especially on cozy weekends.

My kitchen journey continued when my partner came into my life, bringing with him the culinary traditions of his Maltese mother and American father. Spending summers in Malta, on the warm edge of Europe, sixty misty miles from Sicily, easily changes the mind, humor, and cooking of a German girl. My Mediterranean family brought lots of love and laughter into my life and many new recipes and habits into my kitchen. Similar to Sicily, the

cuisine of Malta has strong Arabic influences and features warming spices like cumin, coriander, and fennel, as well as the concentrated zest and juice of lemons, tangerines, and oranges, which add depth, flowery fruitiness, and tangy edge. For this reason, I use citrus in almost everything, especially when it comes from my Maltese mama's garden.

My partner's American family bestowed upon me a new love for luscious sandwiches, chunky cookies, and Sunday morning muffins. The size of my burgers also grew dramatically, but besides this, I learned to be more free and experimental and less traditional in how I think about ingredient combinations for my recipes.

This is my culinary map and I'm thankful for every single influence and experience. I combine and make use of everything I've learned—cooking, baking, and eating based on what I've seen, smelled, and tasted in the world. New ideas, trusted family classics, and culinary traditions melt into each other and turn into delicious treats to be savored at the long wooden table in our old flat on one of Berlin's wide boulevards.

The seed for my deep fascination with food was sown early—maybe it's been there from the start. An old photograph from when I was a baby—I couldn't even walk yet—shows me toothlessly licking the last pieces off a chicken bone with such persistence that it seems obvious where my passion would take me. Years later, in November 2013, I decided to write about my kitchen adventures, and share my experiences on my blog *Eat in My Kitchen*. Not knowing what it would lead to, I simply enjoyed exchanging tips and recipes with readers all over the world. Some of those readers became friends, and have been with me on this journey since the beginning. We are all connected through the universal language of food, and inspire each other with our different cultures and creations.

I love to end my day in the kitchen; it relaxes me. Listening to music, enjoying a glass of wine with some nibbles—a bit of cheese, some olives or grapes—turns the cooking experience into a greater pleasure. The meals that follow are some of my most treasured memories, and are a big part of who I am. The food we choose to create and eat, the way we set up the room where it all happens, and the importance we give it in our lives says a lot about who we are. This is what I was curious about when I started *meet in your kitchen* (see page 240), an interview series I do for my blog that's also included in this book. Each guest shares a personal recipe and their views and stories about food, so it offers a real and honest insight into someone's life through their kitchen.

a few notes on equipment and kitchen specifics

My own kitchen is a rather small but bright room with a large window facing an old brick wall covered in vines. Every second spent there is precious to me. I've been cutting, stirring, and kneading on my worn-out marble countertops for many years and every scratch has a story connected to a meal.

My collection of **pots and pans** has grown over the years. It's an international *mélange* of American cast iron skillets, French copper, and German stainless steel saucepans that were a



gift from my mother for my first kitchen, and have been with me for more than twenty years.

My **plates and cutlery** are an eclectic collection of new and old. Only my **wine glasses** are uniform. When it comes to wine, I believe that form must follow function—for the wine's sake.

The most important equipment in my kitchen is a large **chopping block** and **sharp knives**. One large knife and one small one, both with a fine blade, are essential; a simple honing steel to maintain your knives is a beneficial investment.

I work with an **electric stove** and all recipes are made in a conventional oven, unless otherwise stated as convection setting or broiler. Every oven works differently and the material and shape of a baking dish alters the way heat is transferred. Food needs your attention while it's cooking or baking. It's better to check once too often than to miss the right moment. Pricking the surface of a cake with a skewer doesn't affect its beauty, but a burnt top does; a piece of meat with a cut surface speaks for a careful cook and not for a lack of experience.

Talking about precise **amounts in a cookbook** is tricky, as the needs of two, four, or six people can vary considerably. I would describe my appetite as healthy—I don't eat like a mouse, but it's also not excessive—and this has been my guideline.

In my early cooking days, my mother taught me to trust my own taste and I pass her words on to you: Use your senses. Being brave and open-minded helps you discover what pleases your taste buds. **Recipes need adjustments** to fit your personal preferences. Vegetables and fruits have to be ripe, but a zucchini grown in America, versus in northern or southern Europe, will add a different flavor to a dish. The soil, the climate, and the variety, all make a difference, and demand your attention when it comes to cooking times and seasoning.

a few notes on ingredients

The **dairy products** and **eggs** used in my kitchen are **organic**, the **meat** is from a butcher, and the **seafood** is preferably wild. Both the meat and seafood are rinsed under cold water and dried well with paper towels. We eat meat or fish only once or twice a week, because the realities of responsible consumption change far more quickly than any regulation can dictate. A law might come into effect too late, or with too many compromises, for our environment to recover from our exploitation.

Learning about the **seasons** and following their natural rhythm with my recipe choices led to less frustrating grocery shopping and far tastier results. To know when tomatoes are sweet, peaches are juicy, and cucumbers are packed with flavor is essential, and prevents disappointment in the kitchen. The next step was leaving out artificial flavoring, additional processing, and industrial agriculture as much as possible, which helped me rediscover the original tastes as I remember them from my childhood.

Vegetables, also preferably organic, are rinsed or scrubbed, if not explicitly stated as peeled. The **weight** indicates the final amount after peeling, coring, pitting, and cutting.

Onions and garlic are peeled, unless otherwise stated. Before using garlic, make sure the bulb is fresh. If it smells a bit odd and moldy, you'll end up with this unpleasant flavor in your dish. Whether you use a press or a knife to finely chop the cloves is up to you.

Instead of buying ground powders, I like to use a **mortar and pestle** to grind or crush whole **spices**, especially black **peppercorns**, which I use to finish many of my dishes. You



will often find both ground and coarsely crushed peppercorns in the same recipe, which is a Maltese habit I learned to appreciate. They each add unique spice and taste, so I like to layer them when I cook. When it comes to **salt**, I trust Mr. Cini from the Xwejni Salt Pans in Gozo, Malta's little sister island. He and his family harvest salt straight from the rocks (see page 244); the beautiful white grains are of exceptional taste and quality, and refine my cooking every day. I'm often asked about the deliciously salty flavor of my cooking and the answer is so simple: It comes from the clear blue Mediterranean Sea. I mostly use sea salt that's been finely ground with a mortar and pestle, but for oven roasting or creating a crunchy topping, I stick to the large, flaky crystals.

Although I find the thyme, sage, and rosemary from my mother's garden to be the most fragrant in the world, I do grow them, along with a selection of other **herbs**, on my windowsill. Most of the pots stay outside until Berlin's frosty winter kicks in. Basil, chervil, oregano, marjoram, tarragon, and savory all grow happily in my city garden, and beat any dried herb, which I rarely ever use.

When it comes to **citrus**, especially the zest or peel, it's essential to buy **organic** produce, and to rinse and scrub the skin well. A stiff **vegetable brush** is helpful.

Cheese is always freshly grated or sliced; pre-packed products lack aroma and taste. In general, I prefer strong, aromatic cheese for cooking. Soft chèvre is the exception; its milky sourness fits perfectly with spring greens.

I use white spelt **flour** for all of my baking recipes, both sweet and savory, though the recipes in this book call for all-purpose flour. White spelt flour weighs as much as unbleached all-purpose wheat flour (**1 cup equals 130 g / 4½ ounces**) and has almost the same qualities in taste and texture. You can use the same amount of unbleached all-purpose wheat or white flour or white spelt flour for all of my recipes; I simply prefer spelt's nutritional value. For pizza dough and buns, I use fast-acting yeast and let the **yeast dough** rise in a warm environment or 100°F (35°C) oven. Letting dough rise at room temperature prolongs the process.

You will find two kinds of extra-virgin **olive oil** on my shelves: a simple one for cooking, and a finer one, with a stronger flavor, that I use for cold dressings and to make adjustments at the table. I use a basic **sunflower oil** for deep-frying, which is a rather rare event.

A thick, dark **balsamic vinegar** and a white balsamic vinegar are always at hand. The lighter one, perfect for deglazing crisp bacon or for fruity dressings, can be replaced with high-quality white wine vinegar. Classic dark balsamic is my everyday addition to vinaigrettes.

Capers and **anchovies** are preserved in salt. For **preserved lemons**, I prefer to use my recipe on page 239.

I make my own **broth** (see page 239) for my soups and sauces, as instant products tend to have an unpleasant artificial note. Nothing beats the pure concentrated flavor of a homemade broth, ready to add taste and depth to further creations.

salads

PERSIMMONS, MOZZARELLA, PROSCIUTTO DI PARMA, AND BASIL
WITH MAPLE VINAIGRETTE

ARUGULA, GRAPE, AND CHICKPEA SALAD WITH ORANGE BLOSSOM DRESSING

GREEN BEAN, ARTICHOKE, AND GRAPEFRUIT SALAD WITH OLIVES AND ROSEMARY

CABBAGE AND PEAR SALAD WITH BALSAMIC BACON

WARM SALAD OF SAUTÉED CARROTS, PRESERVED LEMON, AND MINT

ENDIVE AND STRAWBERRY SALAD WITH PINK PEPPERCORNS

FENNEL AND MELON CARPACCIO WITH CHERVIL

CUCUMBER, ARUGULA, AND ORANGE SALAD WITH TURMERIC AND MINT

MEDITERRANEAN POTATO AND FAVA BEAN SALAD WITH ARUGULA AND LEMON PESTO

ROASTED PEPPERS AND CHERRY TOMATOES WITH BURRATA, LEMON, AND BASIL

RADICCHIO, PEACH, AND ROASTED SHALLOT SALAD WITH BLUE CHEESE

RED CABBAGE AND POMEGRANATE SALAD WITH CANDIED WALNUTS AND ROSEMARY

ZUCCHINI, SPINACH, AND TOMATO SALAD WITH LIME VINAIGRETTE

persimmons, mozzarella, prosciutto di parma, and basil with maple vinaigrette

Whenever I spot ripe persimmons at the market—honey-sweet and plump, so soft that their golden skin can barely hold its juices—I have to buy a bunch of them. They’re one of those fruits that offer a sensory experience of pure bliss, but only when they’re perfectly ripe, and that’s often limited to a day or two. As with avocados, mangos, and kiwis, it can be challenging to find the perfect moment to cut open a persimmon. They can be glorious and memorable, but there’s always the potential for disappointment. Still, when the time is right, I only need a spoon to scoop out their syrupy sweetness.

Many, many years ago in Paris, I ate the first and also the best persimmons of my life. I bought two of them and they were so soft that they almost slipped out of my hands as I pulled off the stems. Eating those persimmons was a mess, but also a true pleasure. I might have been a little biased by the city’s beauty and the fact that I was still an excitable teenager, but I’ll never forget my first taste of this jelly-like fruit.

For salads, I like to tear persimmons into luscious chunks, and for one of the most sensual salads I know, I pair it with creamy bites of mozzarella di bufala and the thinnest slices of prosciutto di Parma. Finished with basil and a maple syrup vinaigrette, it’s heavenly. Needless to say, this decadent salad is practically made for a romantic dinner for two.

SERVES 2 TO 4

FOR THE DRESSING

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 tablespoon white balsamic vinegar

½ teaspoon maple syrup

Fine sea salt

Ground pepper

2 very ripe and soft persimmons, peeled and torn into chunks

4½ ounces (125 g) mozzarella di bufala, drained and torn into bite-sized chunks (*double the amount for 4 servings*)

8 very thin slices prosciutto di Parma or prosciutto di San Daniele

1 small handful fresh basil leaves

A few black peppercorns, crushed with a mortar and pestle (optional)

For the dressing, whisk together the olive oil, vinegar, and maple syrup. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Arrange the persimmons, mozzarella, and prosciutto on a large platter or individual plates. Drizzle with the dressing, sprinkle with the basil and crushed peppercorns, if desired, and serve immediately.





arugula, grape, and chickpea salad with orange blossom dressing

Some of the best recipes emerge out of a spontaneous mood. The inspiration can come from a quick look in the fridge, a stroll through the farmers' market, or a chat with a friend. Within a split second, a whole dish can appear in front of my eyes and all I have to do is go to the kitchen and cook what my mind created.

This recipe arose from one of these magical moments. As I was rinsing firm arugula leaves under cold water, I felt their rough surface. Looking around, I spotted plump, dark grapes lying gracefully on a white plate. I immediately thought of chickpeas and in the next second I found myself imagining the smell of the orange blossoms in my Maltese mama's garden in Msida. My salad was born: spicy and crisp arugula, ripe grapes, velvety legumes, and a beautiful flowery dressing made of olive oil, freshly squeezed orange juice, and fragrant orange blossom water.

The taste of orange blossom water depends a lot on quality. Some products resemble soap rather than the bloomy elegance of orange blossoms. It's worth seeking out an organic brand and spending a little more money. This essential water is strong, so you won't need more than a teaspoon or two, and it's really only enjoyable if it manages to capture the natural essence of the blossoms, which is very different from any artificial flavoring.

SERVES 2 TO 4

FOR THE DRESSING

3 tablespoons olive oil

2 tablespoons freshly squeezed orange juice

2 teaspoons high-quality orange blossom water, preferably organic

Fine sea salt

Ground pepper

2 large handfuls arugula leaves

5 ounces (140 g) red grapes, preferably seedless, cut in half (*remove the seeds if necessary*)

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup (140 g) drained and rinsed canned chickpeas (or $\frac{1}{2}$ cup [60 g] dried chickpeas*)

1 small handful fresh chervil leaves

For the dressing, whisk together the olive oil, orange juice, and orange blossom water. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Arrange the arugula, grapes, and chickpeas in a large bowl. Drizzle with the dressing, garnish with chervil, and serve immediately.

* If using dried chickpeas, soak them in cold water overnight then cook them in plenty of simmering water (without salt) for about 1 hour or until completely soft. Drain the chickpeas, quickly rinse, and let cool.

green bean, artichoke, and grapefruit salad with olives and rosemary

It's not hard to fall for green beans, cooked al dente and bursting with crunchiness. Their sweet and grassy taste makes it easy to experiment with flavors and textures. In this dish, green beans are side by side with bittersweet pink grapefruit, tender preserved artichokes, and assertively fruity Kalamata olives. A light orange dressing, refined with woody rosemary, wraps up this vibrant composition.

This salad is like a colorful antipasti platter, but instead of having different treats arranged separately on a plate, everything is tossed together to create one adventurous dish. It's crisp and soft, juicy and unctious, tart and sweet.

SERVES 2 TO 4

10 ounces (280 g) trimmed green beans

1 pink grapefruit

4 artichoke hearts, preserved in olive oil, cut into quarters

8 black olives, preferably Kalamata

FOR THE DRESSING

3 tablespoons olive oil

3 tablespoons freshly squeezed orange juice

1 heaping teaspoon finely chopped fresh rosemary

Fine sea salt

Ground pepper

FOR THE TOPPING

A few fresh rosemary needles

A few black peppercorns, crushed with a mortar and pestle

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil and blanch the beans for 4 to 5 minutes or until al dente (the cooking time can vary depending on the freshness of the beans). Drain and quickly rinse them with cold water. Set aside. You can prepare the beans in advance and keep them covered in the fridge.

To cut the grapefruit into segments, first peel off the outer skin then cut off the white pith. Working over a bowl, hold the grapefruit in one hand and use a small, sharp knife to cut between the membranes and release the segments into the bowl.

For the dressing, whisk together the olive oil, orange juice, and rosemary. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

In a large bowl, toss together the green beans, grapefruit, artichokes, and olives. Drizzle the dressing over the salad, sprinkle with a few rosemary needles and crushed peppercorns, and serve immediately.

