



# The Crafty cook

In her new monthly slot, *Zest's* cooking expert Alison Clarkson shares the nice-but-not-naughty tricks that helped her shed four stone – without losing her passion for food. She's here to prove you can have your cake and eat it!

## The challenge

**You'd think it would be easy to eat healthily over the summer months – all that salad and fresh fruit around. But it's surprisingly tricky to avoid mounting up the calories with dollops of dressing, and I for one can never resist cutting an extra large slice of whatever is on offer. Now, with my No-Sacrifice Summer Lunches you can do both...**

**'D**ieting just doesn't work for me – but it took me years to realise my attempts to stick to a restrictive, calorie-controlled eating plan weren't doing me any good. So many times I'd start a diet with great resolve only to crumble after a few days. You see, when I was 18, I also happened to be a size 18. I desperately wanted to lose weight but I couldn't stand the thought of a lifetime of grilled chicken, brown rice and steamed vegetables stretching out in front of me. Over the years, I've tried every 'get-thin-quick' diet you can think of – from the Super Juice detox that had me gagging on Spirulina to the Cabbage Soup diet, so packed with high-fibre vegetables I was, well, afraid

to go out in public. Each one lasted no more than a matter of days.

My longest-lived attempt was a slimming class where I dropped two stone and two dress sizes in eight months. I was so pleased with myself that when I passed the two stone mark I spent the next few days rewarding myself with celebratory treats...and a week later I'd regained 5lbs. I realised I'd fallen into a cycle of scoffing at the start of the week, going hungry before the dreaded weigh-in session, then

celebrating (or commiserating) with a splurge!

The problem is I love food and I love cooking. It's a big part of my social life and I don't like to feel I'm missing out, or inflicting 'diet' meals on my friends and family when entertaining. So →

after much 'falling off the wagon', it finally dawned on me that a love of food is something to embrace rather than suppress. Instead of denying myself, I set about finding ways to craftily tweak the recipes I love, making sure I still get the satisfaction of a great meal while also being able to stay a healthy weight. After lots of experimenting, I hit on some seriously tasty tricks that I'll now be sharing with you every month. They're the reason that three years ago I was able to do the unthinkable and turn my passion for cooking into a career – who would have thought that a girl who once gorged on fry-ups for breakfast could now be paid to nibble and taste every day, and still stay a size 12.

**“I don't like to feel I'm missing out, or inflicting 'diet' meals on my friends and family”** -

A crucial part of being a crafty cook is to start off with the best-quality produce you can afford and to think seasonally. If you start with bland,

tasteless ingredients then they'll need lots of salt, fat and sugar to give them any flavour. Summer brings an abundance of deliciously fresh fruit and vegetables but even these can get boring served up on their own. My potato salad dressing has much less fat than using just mayonnaise and it can be adapted for lots of uses, delicious spread on chicken sandwiches, for dressing asparagus or drizzling over barbequed kebabs. The filo pastry I use in my quiche recipe is also a great option for summertime, it's so much lighter than its bulky short crust cousin, so works well at lunch time as it won't send you into a carb-snooze mid afternoon.

But of course, there's more to it than just that – over the next few months I'll reveal my sneaky ways to adjust familiar meals making them healthier. Just a few changes in the right places means you can entertain your friends and family with gorgeous recipes without them ever knowing they're eating healthily – I won't tell if you don't!

## Cunning quiche without the calories

Using filo pastry gives you the crispy crunch of pastry but the calorie count is slashed. I've also swapped the double cream for 3% fat crème fraîche, and ditched fried lardons in favour of tasty smoked salmon.

**SERVES 8 for lunch**

**PREPARATION TIME Xxxxxx COOKING TIME Xxxxx**

**PER SERVING 130 calories, 6g fat (2g sat fat)**

- 4 medium eggs
- 500ml 3% fat crème fraîche
- 5 sprigs of dill chopped
- ½ tsp cayenne pepper
- 5 sheets of filo pastry
- 2tsp oil
- 100g smoked salmon trimmings
- good pinch of grated nutmeg
- 15g Gruyère, finely grated

Low-fat crème fraîche is just 3% fat compared with 48% fat in double cream.

I've used crispy filo instead of 300g of buttery shortcrust. It saves around 9.5g of fat!

100g of smoked salmon is 142 calories, the same amount of bacon lardons is 276 calories! It's much fresher-tasting for summer, too.



## Our pick: dressings

BEST FOR...

### ORGANIC

**Pollen Organics Organic Everyday Dressing, £2.50 for 250ml**



Containing no hidden nasties, this handmade salad dressing is light on calories and its subtle hint of mustard and honey makes it an ideal for jazzing up any salad.

BEST FOR...

### LOW CALORIES

**The English Provender Co. Honey and Mustard Dressing, £1.58 for 250g**

With less than 2% fat, this dressing provides a burst of honey and Dijon mustard flavour that will convert those who think cutting calories means compromising on taste.



BEST FOR...

### CLASSIC VINAIGRETTE

**Waitrose Low-Fat Vinaigrette, £1.35 for 250ml**



For vinaigrette fans, this low-fat option, made with Dijon mustard, red bell peppers and parsley, won't fail to impress and provides a healthy balance of ingredients.

BEST FOR...

### BALSAMIC FANS

**Kraft Light Balsamic Dressing, £1.99 for 250ml**

This flavoursome dressing made with garlic and mustard contains only 1g of saturated fat per half bottle, there's even more reason to enjoy an extra dollop.



BEST FOR...

### A BIT OF SPICE

**The Bay Tree Hot Chilli And Garlic Dressing, £3.35 for 240g**



A robust dressing made using quality ingredients and a kick of chilli to satisfy spice lovers. Use sparingly – it adds a decent amount of heat to any salad dish.

BEST FOR...

### LUNCH BOXES

**The English Provender Co. Singles, £1.45 per box of six**

Each sachet has enough dressing for one serving, with less than 3% fat and 44 calories per pouch. Choose from Classic French, Lime & Coriander or Honey & Mustard.



**1** Heat the oven to 180°C/160°C fan/gas mark 3 and combine the eggs, crème fraîche, dill and cayenne.

**2** Brush a sheet of filo pastry with oil and use it to line a 20cm loose-bottomed flan tin, pushing it into the corners. The pastry is fragile so be gentle. Let the edges hang over the sides of the tin and trim any that are too low. Use a piece of clingfilm to cover the pastry you aren't working with so it doesn't dry out.

**3** Repeat this with another 4 sheets, putting each in the tin at a different angle so you get a frilly edge around the tin.

**4** Pop the tin into the hot oven to bake blind for 5 minutes so that the pastry starts to cook and the bottom doesn't go soggy when you add the egg. Press

down any sections that have risen up, then scatter in the salmon pieces and pour over the eggy mixture and sprinkle with the nutmeg and cheese.

**5** Return the dish to the oven and cook for 30-35 minutes until the quiche is golden brown and just cooked through but with a little wobble in the middle. Serve warm or chilled with a watercress salad.



The crafty cook's sneaky tip...

For a change, swap the salmon, dill and cayenne for lean ham, chives and seasoning.

## Crafty cook's seasonal favourite

### MICROGREENS

The latest word in the kitchen is that the best ingredients come in small packages – microgreens. Favoured by top chefs in recipes for soups and salads or as garnish, the explanation is in the name. Microgreens are the shoots of plants harvested as the seeds sprout, rather than when the leaves have grown to full size. Remember when you used to grow cress on cotton wool as a child? Well, it's the same idea. These baby leaves pack a nutritional and flavoursome punch, and the pretty coloured stems liven up a dull-looking green salad.

Pea shoots are available in supermarkets including Marks & Spencer and Sainsbury's but other microgreens are trickier to find. So it can be easier to grow your own – especially at this time of year, when they thrive in the warm summer sunshine. Simply sprinkle a few seeds onto the surface of a pot (if you don't have a plant pot, a plastic punnet or old baked bean tin with drainage holes will do) filled with compost and put them on a windowsill or a sunny spot in the garden. Depending on the type of seeds and how big you want the leaves to grow, they'll be ready for you to harvest in one to three weeks.

**For a mix of colour and flavour, these are my favourites:**

- GREEN BROCCOLI
- BASIL
- BEETROOT
- CELERY LEAF
- CORIANDER
- KALE
- ROCKET
- PEA SHOOTS

## Smart Caesar Salad

I used to fool myself that all salads were healthy but creamy dressings can hide a vast amount of fat – and there's nothing more boring than a green salad without dressing. My Smart Caesar Salad recipe strips out almost all the fat but hangs on to that summery Caesar taste. Crafty but delicious!

**SERVES 4 for lunch**

**PREPARATION TIME Xxxxxx COOKING TIME Xxxxxx**

**PER SERVING 207 calories, 7g fat (2g sat fat)**

- 2 grilled chicken breasts torn into pieces
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1 garlic clove crushed
- 2 slices of granary bread crusts cut off and cut into cubes
- 1 large or 2 small heads of cos lettuce (or an equal amount of romaine)
- 2tbsp extra-light mayonnaise
- 2tbsp low-fat natural yogurt
- ½ tsp anchovy paste
- ½-1tsp Dijon mustard
- 20g Parmesan cheese

*Dry frying croutons instead of shallow frying them saves 50 calories.*

*Anchovy paste has all of the taste of whole anchovies but isn't dripping in oil.*



*The crafty cook's sneaky tip... If you like extra dressing, increase the dressing ingredients by 50% and reduce the Parmesan to 10g, but grate it very finely.*





**1** In a bowl, coat the chicken in the lemon juice and garlic and set aside to marinade [for how long?].

**2** To make the croutons, heat a large frying pan and dry fry the cubes of bread until they are browned and crunchy, then set aside.

**3** For the dressing, beat together the mayonnaise, yogurt, anchovy paste and mustard. This should be the consistency of double cream, if it's too thick add a couple of spoons of water and mix well.

**4** Tear the lettuce up and place in a large bowl. Add the chicken and croutons. Pour over most of the dressing, keeping some back if there is more than you prefer to use. Toss together so that

everything is coated in the dressing, adding the extra if you need (or want) it.

**5** Divide the salad between 4 plates and using a vegetable peeler shave off thin slices of Parmesan – sprinkle them over the top of each plate.

*Good-quality Parmesan has a strong flavour, so you can use it sparingly.*

*This salad has all the flavour you'll want - no need to add extra oil.*

