

# COULD YOU EAT FOR VICTORY?

This summer is the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Britain. To mark the occasion, deputy editor Susan Low spent a working week living on rations, to find out what the wartime diet was really like

ard. Powdered egg. Spam. It wasn't my typical weekly shopping list, and obvious by their absence were usual suspects such as olive oil, lemons, bananas and fresh fish. It was clear – living on wartime rations wasn't going to be just another week...

Rationing was introduced by the Ministry of Food (MoF) in January 1940 and ended in July 1954. Its architects, nutritional biochemist Sir Jack Drummond and MoF minister Lord Woolton, were determined to ensure that, despite shortages, everyone in the UK would have equal access to food, and that nutrition would be a priority. So, although I knew I wouldn't go hungry in my week of eating 'rationally', I did wonder how I'd survive being limited to just one egg, 2oz cheese and (painfully) 2oz butter and 2oz tea per week (see box, opposite).

## THE STRATEGY

To plan my meals, I turned to *Eating For Victory*, a book detailing official World War II instruction leaflets, and *We'll Eat Again*, a collection of wartime recipes from the late, great Marguerite Patten, who worked as a home economist for the



KEEPING MUM Brits were encouraged to pickle onions, bottle fruit and preserve homegrown tomatoes

MoF during the war, and who sadly died in June, at the age of 99.

Breakfast was easy enough: oat or semolina porridge, made with water and what little milk could be spared, and wholemeal toast. I baked my own bread following a recipe from Jane Fearnley-Whittingstall – an approximation of the National Loaf, which was the only bread available to buy from 1942, as mandated by the government. There was little white flour around so wholemeal was used. Although it wasn't exactly much-loved, the National Loaf, which also had added calcium, was substantial and nutritious.

For lunch, if there were no leftovers from the previous night's dinner, it was more National Loaf with a scraping of

butter, a bit of bacon dripping and some cheese if any could be spared. Otherwise, a beetroot sandwich made a substantial lunchtime feast (Pret it wasn't...).

## HOME FRONT DINNERS

• **DAY 1 MENU**  
*Spam fritters, asparagus, fresh salad; rhubarb crumble*

I couldn't properly commit to eating wartime food without trying a Spam fritter, so I adapted Marguerite Patten's recipe for corned beef fritters to include the infamous tinned pink stuff. My previous experience of Spam was limited to a short but psychologically scarring incident in the school lunchroom when I was growing up in the US, so I was



SAVING OUR BACON Meat was the last item to come off rationing in 1954

a little nervous while cooking this recipe. For flavouring, the recipe called for a pinch of dried mixed herbs, 1 tsp grated onion and 1 tsp chopped parsley in addition to Spam, flour, one precious egg yolk (or ½ reconstituted egg) and milk or water. It called for 1oz (28g) cooking fat to fry them in, which wasn't quite enough. The fritters could have done with more parsley, herb and onion, but they were perfectly edible, although they made a meagre meal for four. I was grateful for pudding, even if the crumble itself had a sawdusty texture from (again) too little fat.

• **DAY 2 MENU**  
*Mock duck, carrots, broccoli, salad; equality pudding with Bird's custard*  
I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry when I read Marguerite's recipe for mock duck – it's little more than grated cooking apples and onions with sausagemeat on top ('shape this top layer to look as much like a duck as possible'). Luckily my guests, entering into the Blitz spirit, pretended it was perfectly cooked roast duck. We clinked water glasses and wished each

other bon appetit. For afters, the best I can say about equality pudding, a plain steamed number flavoured with 2 tbsp strawberry jam and 2 tbsp sugar, was that it was filling.

• **DAY 3 MENU**  
*Fish envelope, carrots, salad*  
This dish, made with tinned salmon (which wasn't rationed) and mashed veg (I used spinach and peas) encased in a potato and wholemeal pastry, reminded me of a more humble version of salmon en croûte or the Russian dish *kulebiaka*. Served with boiled carrots and, thankfully, some fresh green leaves, it made a meal that would suit czar or peasant.

• **DAY 4 MENU**  
*Potato and bacon cakes, broccoli, salad*  
More fritters, more brown. The expression 'we eat with our eyes' certainly didn't come about during the rationing years. By day four the stodginess and beigeness of the diet was becoming wearing and I realised how important it was that people were encouraged to grow their own food as part of the Dig for Victory campaign. By 1943,

## THE WEEKLY RATION

The amounts varied as foods became more or less plentiful, but the quantities below were typical per adult:

- **BACON AND HAM** 4oz (100g)
- **BUTTER** 2oz (50g)
- **CHEESE** 2oz (50g)
- **COOKING FAT** 4oz (100g)
- **MILK** 3 pints (1.7 litres)
- **SUGAR** 8oz (225g)
- **PRESERVES** 1lb (450g) every 2 months
- **TEA** 2oz (50g)
- **EGGS** 1 whole egg, if available (1 packet dried eggs were allowed every 4 weeks)



IMAGES: GETTY, THINKSTOCK

more than a million tons of veg were being grown in gardens and allotments. I was so pleased to have access to homegrown salad.

• **DAY 5 MENU**  
*Woolton pie, gravy, apple charlotte*  
The big Friday night dinner was a big pie. Not just any pie, but Woolton pie, named after Lord Woolton himself. In my pie, cauliflower, swede and carrot were boiled (the cooking water saved), then put in a dish with half the cooking water, thickened with oatmeal. This was topped with mashed potato and 4oz cheese, which I'd been saving all week. The apple charlotte made use of the last bit of National Loaf (bashed into breadcrumbs) and the last 2 tbsp butter. The pie looked pretty handsome, and my Scottish vegetarian guest had seconds. Then thirds. He did Lord Woolton proud.

## WHAT I LEARNED...

Although there's much talk at the moment about Austerity Britain, after a week on war rations it's clear how privileged we actually are: food is cheap, abundant and on tap 24 hours a day, regardless of the season or where it's grown. Back then, eating seasonal, local foods was a necessity, not tedious or a badge of foodie honour.

Sticking to the ration book took planning. There was no place for wastefulness. In fact, in 1940, it was a criminal offence to waste food – one woman was fined £10 for instructing her maid to feed stale crumbs to the birds. Now, food has become so cheap, we no longer value it, and wasting food is practically institutionalised right the way up the supply chain, from farmer to shop to consumer. We need to be aware that if we insist on strawberries in February or fresh loaves of bread at closing time on a Sunday, we're part of the problem.

Finally, although I baulked at the brownness and lack of seasoning, the dishes were very healthy: there were lots of vegetables, little meat and a lot less sugar and fat. The British population was slimmer, healthier and better fed than ever before – or, arguably, since. I'm no sugar fiend but after eating rationing-era foods for five days, I realised how accustomed modern palates have become to sugar and fat. But by the end of the week, I was craving the spices, exotic condiments and fresh herbs I reach for as a matter of course – and more grateful than ever for them. 🇬🇧