

Olia Hercules

RECIPES FROM THE WILD SIDE

If the cooking of the Caucasian region isn't yet on your radar, it soon will be. For her new book, the Ukraine-born cookery star uncovers wild flavours from Georgia, Azerbaijan and beyond, and brings back stories from culinary paths less travelled. These gorgeous, flavour-packed recipes will give you a taste of what you've been missing

RECIPES AND FOOD STYLING **OLIA HERCULES** PHOTOGRAPHS **ELENA HEATHERWICK**



LABOURS OF HERCULES
Pounding with pestle
and mortar, writing
notes and folding
dumpling dough



book of the month.

Dyushbara
(Azerbaijani
dumplings
in broth), p72



A story of memories and inspiration

She has one of the most magnificent names this side of Hollywood and Olia Hercules' rise to heroine status in the food-writing world couldn't have been better scripted by a Tinseltown screenwriter. She was a young chef at a low ebb (a relationship breakup, living far from family back in Ukraine, having a young child to look after and a living to be earned...) when she began her first book, *Mamushka*. Writing the book, a collection of stories and recipes from her extended family in her home country of Ukraine, proved to be a sanity-saver and a lifeline. When it was accepted by a publisher, it became the catalyst for a whole new chapter of her life. *Mamushka* was an instant hit and her new book, *Kaukasis*, which is out on 10 August, has Hercules' admirers licking their lips in anticipation of more exotic culinary adventures.

Olia wasn't prepared for the success of *Mamushka*. "I'm still pinching myself big-time." The best bit, she says, is the feedback she gets. "I've had letters from people all over the world. A woman in her eighties wrote to me from Australia. Her family, Ukrainian Jews, fled during World War II. She sent me

this story about her life and her parents. I cried." The new book is also based on family history. "Thirty years ago my family travelled from the south of Ukraine through Crimea, then took a ferry over the Black Sea to Sochi in Russia, then all the way down through Georgia and into Azerbaijan to see our relatives," she says. "I was two and my brother Sasha was 10." *Kaukasis* retraces that journey, with Olia and her brother Sasha travelling together, collecting recipes and stories.

Much has changed in the region over three decades. The Soviet Union is no more, Azerbaijan is now an independent, oil-rich nation and Georgia is undergoing a revival in its food and wine scene, morphing into a hot tourist destination. Yet the area is still beset with political difficulties. "I couldn't go to Armenia because my passport showed I'd been to Azerbaijan. And I wanted to go to [the disputed territory of] Nagorno-Karabakh, where my aunty's family comes from, but there were reports of shooting there so I couldn't risk it."

Telling the stories of a politically volatile region is not without its challenges, Olia admits. "Writing the book I was so paranoid. I thought, 'How do I write about this?' There has been so much war."

Rivalries and hostilities among the peoples of the Caucasus remain a fact of life, but there's a strongly held belief among food writers that food has the power to unite. Did Olia come away feeling positive about the future of the region?

"I think overall there's a stereotype that people argue about which dish comes from where, but I only encountered that in a jokey way. Even Azerbaijanis talking about Armenians – they don't hate them. There's no hate. They all existed side by side for ages and people understand more and more that it's politics that is driving the divisions more than anything else."

Georgia's resurgent gastronomic scene and fantastic cooking struck a strong chord – so strong that, in Hollywood-ending style, it's where Olia plans to have her honeymoon when she gets married next year. Food from the region is being tipped as the next big thing. With these fabulous recipes you can say you cooked it here first.

Extra! Catch up with Olia's brilliant monthly blog about her allotment at deliciousmagazine.co.uk

INTERVIEW: SUSAN LOW

Khingal (Azerbaijani pasta with lamb and yogurt sauce)

SERVES 8 AS A SIDE DISH. HANDS-ON TIME
1 HOUR 20 MIN

“We often think of comfort food as something a little bland, unassuming. It may not blow our minds with flavour, but it gives us that feeling of safe satiety. When I tried khingal in the Azerbaijan capital Baku, it was a revelation to me. It did all those comfort food things, except it also made my eyes widen as my mouth was filled with firm pasta, crispy aromatic lamb and milky, but oh-so-fresh, sauce.”

- MAKE AHEAD** Make the pasta dough up to 12 hours ahead and chill, wrapped in cling film.
- OLIA'S TIP** Sometimes I stir a little bit of brown butter into the yogurt. Don't judge me.
- FOOD TEAM'S TIP** A pasta machine is useful for rolling out the dough (step 4) but you can use a rolling pin on a clean work surface.

- 1 large free-range egg, lightly beaten
- 200g plain flour, plus extra if needed and for dusting
- 100g clarified butter (or 60g unsalted butter), plus extra for cooking the onions
- 2 tbsp vegetable oil, plus extra for cooking the onions
- 300g coarsely minced lamb
- 1 tsp coriander seeds, lightly toasted, then ground
- 1 tsp cumin seeds, lightly toasted, then ground
- ½ tsp ground turmeric
- 2 onions, thinly sliced
- 200g natural yogurt
- 1 garlic clove, finely grated
- 1 tbsp each chopped fresh coriander and chopped fresh dill
- ½ tsp ground sumac

1 To make the dough, mix the egg with 60ml water in a bowl, gradually mix in the flour (stop if it seems to be getting dry), then knead the

mixture in the bowl into a dough. You should end up with a firm but elastic pasta dough, so knead in more flour if it feels too wet. Cover with cling film, then leave to rest in the fridge for 15-30 minutes (see Make Ahead).
2 Heat the oven to 160°C/140°C fan/gas 3. Heat half the clarified butter (or half the ordinary butter) and 1 tablespoon oil in a pan. When really hot, add half the minced lamb – you want the meat to be crisp, so overcrowding the pan is not an option here. Fry it without disturbing it too much until it starts crisping up. Add half the ground spices and some salt and black pepper, then cook for 1 minute. Pop into a heatproof bowl and keep warm in the oven. Repeat with the second batch of meat, oil and spices.

3 Don't wipe out the frying pan but add a little more butter and oil, then gently cook the onions until they become deep golden and luscious (20-25 minutes). Be patient – it will be worth it. Season them and add to the lamb in the oven.

4 Roll out the pasta, either by hand or using a pasta machine (see tip), to about 2mm thick. Cut the pasta into 3cm diamonds and leave to dry slightly while you make the sauce.

5 You can leave this sauce simple – just mix the yogurt with the garlic and a tiny bit of salt, adding a splash of water to loosen it up. But I recommend adding the chopped coriander and dill, then dusting the whole dish with sumac at the end.
6 Bring a large saucepan of salted water to the boil and drop in your pasta diamonds. They'll be ready in 2 minutes. Check they are cooked by tasting one when they float to the top. Drain them quickly and layer with the meat and onions, drizzling over the yogurt sauce as you go.

PER SERVING 327kcal, 19.4g fat (7.8g saturated), 12.9g protein, 24.1g carbs (4.3g sugars), 0.2g salt, 2.3g fibre

WINE EDITOR'S CHOICE The flavours here call for a smooth, easy-going red such as a côtes du Rhône.

☛ For more great ways to use sumac, see Loose Ends →



Khingal: crispy lamb, soft pasta and zingy garlic yogurt





Olia watching her friend's aunt Nazilya at work

Poussin tabaka in blackberry sauce

SERVES 4. HANDS-ON TIME 35 MIN, SIMMERING TIME 35 MIN

“Georgians love treating their fruit in a serious, savoury way. Plums, grapes, mulberries all turn delectably savoury with the addition of some garlic, salt and strong soft herbs. Small intense blackberries go beautifully with chicken. In my first cookbook *Mamushka*, I give the classic tabaka recipe and explain that the word comes from tapa, a cast-iron pan traditionally used for cooking spatchcocked chickens, which were then covered in garlic oil. This recipe is the ‘next level’ tabaka. You’ll experience savoury fruitiness here in a thrilling, even mind-blowing way. Duck and its orange should take a break.”



These recipes are from *Kaukasis: The Cookbook* by Olia Hercules (£25, Mitchell Beazley; octopusbooks.co.uk)

MAKE AHEAD

Make the sauce a few hours ahead, then warm over a low heat to serve.

FOOD TEAM'S TIP

Poultry scissors make light work of cutting through chicken/poussin carcasses.

- 2 free-range poussins (or 1 small organic chicken)
- 1 tbsp vegetable oil
- 30g unsalted butter
- 100g unripe sour grapes (if available – look for them from Middle Eastern grocers) or use sharp, green grapes
- 300g blackberries
- 1 tbsp verjuice or pomegranate molasses
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- ½ tsp cayenne pepper
- 1 tsp chopped fresh marjoram or chopped fresh oregano
- 1 tbsp chopped coriander stalks
- Tiny sprinkle chopped fresh dill

1 To spatchcock the poussins or chicken, put each bird, breast-side down, on a chopping board. Using kitchen scissors (see tip) or a knife, cut along one side of the backbone. Turn the bird over, open it out and flatten it with the palm of your hand. Season the bird(s) well with salt and pepper.

2 Heat the oil and butter in a large frying pan. Add the poussins or chicken cut-side down and make sure you brown the bones, as this will add tons of flavour.

3 Flip the bird(s) cut-side up and cook over a medium-high heat for about 5 minutes to develop a bit of colour. Cover with a cartouche (a circle of nonstick baking paper that fits snugly in the pan) and put another, slightly smaller frying pan on top. Add a heavy weight, such as a can or heavy pestle and mortar, to flatten the bird(s). Cook over a very low heat for 35 minutes (10-15 minutes longer for a chicken).

4 Meanwhile, make the blackberry sauce. Whizz the unripe sour grapes (or sharp, green grapes) with the blackberries in a blender or food processor (or use a pestle and mortar if you want to be

romantic about it), then pass through a sieve with the back of a spoon into a saucepan.

5 Add the verjuice or pomegranate molasses and cook for a few minutes, then add the garlic, cayenne pepper and marjoram or oregano and cook for 10 minutes more. Finally, add the coriander stalks with the dill.

6 The bird(s) should be ready now, but check that the juices run clear when you pull at the legs. Take them out of the pan and leave to rest for a few minutes. You can mix the poultry cooking juices through the sauce for extra lusciousness, if you like. Pour the blackberry sauce over the bird(s) and serve with a simple salad and a chunk of good bread.

PER SERVING 353kcal, 15.1g fat (6.3g saturated), 41.4g protein, 11g carbs (9.7g sugars), 0.4g salt, 3.7g fibre

WINE EDITOR'S CHOICE A juicy red, such as Italian dolcetto.

Dyushbara (Azerbaijani dumplings in broth)

SERVES 6. HANDS-ON TIME 1 HOUR 5 MIN, SIMMERING TIME 2 HOURS

“A skilled cook is able to make these dumplings so small that 10-15 of them will fit on one tablespoon. Some may think this is showing off, but Azerbaijanis tell me it is their ultimate expression of hospitality. As much as I love these dumplings really, really small, I am personally too greedy, as well as too lazy, so I make 5cm jumbo dyushbara.”

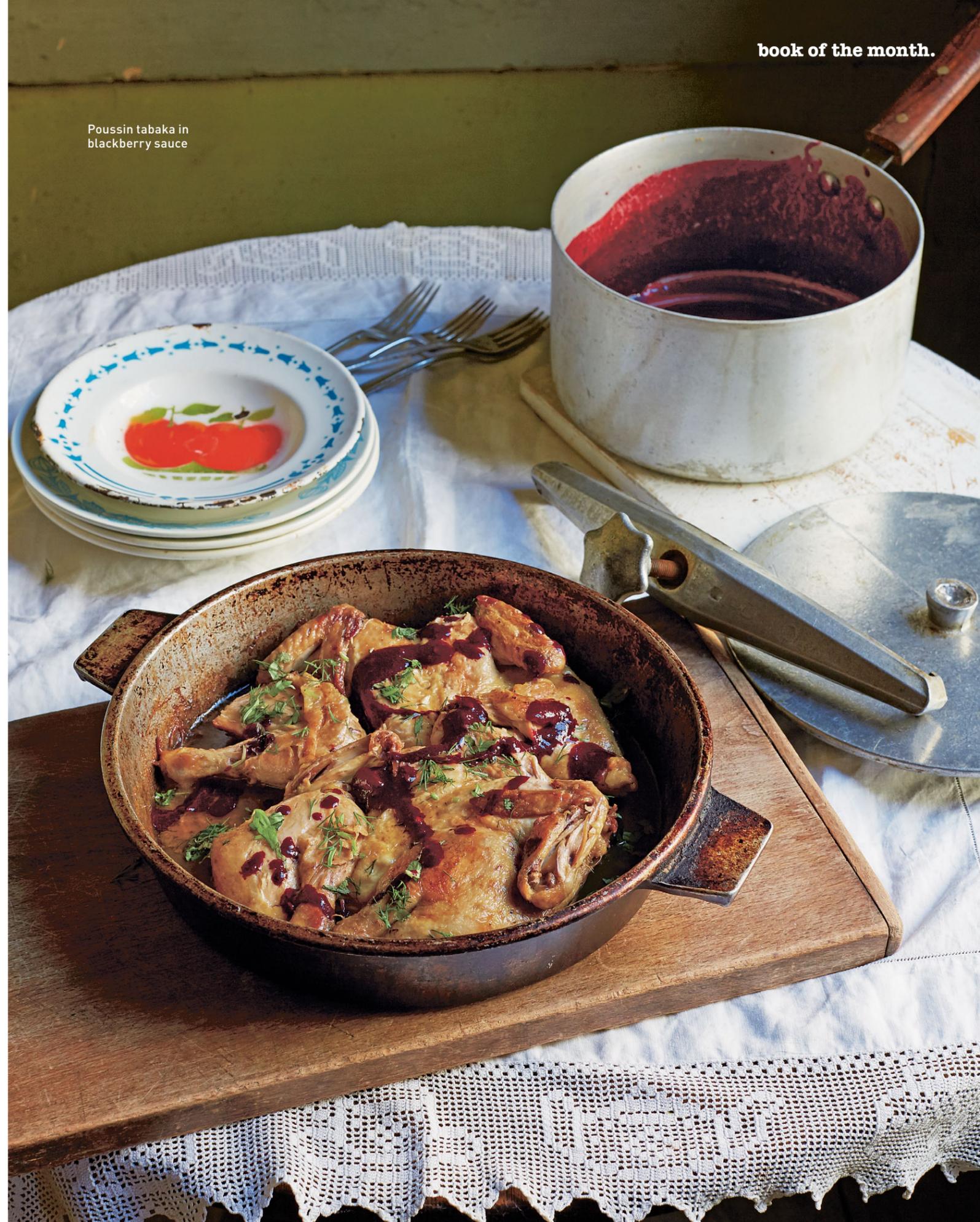
MAKE AHEAD

Make the broth up to 24 hours in advance and the pasta dough up to 12 hours in advance. Store in the fridge, covered, until ready to use.

OLIA'S TIP

Dumplings are normally served with only a couple of the items listed, such as the mint and garlic vinegar. But if I'm cooking for a crowd or for guests at home, I love bringing out a whole row of small dishes for a fun, flavour-DIY dining experience. →

Poussin tabaka in blackberry sauce





Beets, plums and bitter leaves

FOOD TEAM'S TIPS

If you're using a chicken for the broth rather than carcasses (step 1), joint it or buy pieces instead. You don't use the chicken meat in the recipe (it's great for a pie filling). If you have 1.8-2 litres good chicken stock you've already made, use that as your broth and start at step 3.

FOR THE CHICKEN BROTH

- 2 free-range chicken carcasses or 1 medium whole organic chicken, cut into pieces (see tips)
- 1 onion, halved
- 2 celery sticks, roughly chopped
- 2 carrots, roughly chopped
- 2 bay leaves, crumbled

FOR THE PASTA DOUGH

- 1 free-range egg, lightly beaten
- 200g plain flour, plus extra for dusting

FOR THE FILLING

- 100g minced lamb
- 100g minced pork
- ½ tsp ground cumin
- ½ tsp ground coriander
- ½ carrot, scrubbed and finely grated
- 1 small onion, finely diced or coarsely grated

ACCOMPANIMENTS TO SERVE

- 2 tbsp chopped fresh coriander
- 2 tbsp chopped fresh tarragon
- 2 tbsp chopped fresh dill
- 2 tbsp chopped fresh purple basil (or regular basil)
- 2 tbsp dried mint
- 2 tsp ground sumac
- 50ml good quality vinegar (white wine or cider will be perfect), infused with 1 small garlic clove, crushed

1 Put all the broth ingredients in a large stockpot and cover with cold water (about 3 litres). Bring to the boil, skim off any scum that forms on the surface, turn down to a simmer, then cook for 1½ hours. If using a chicken rather than carcasses, remove after an hour and leave to cool a little, then take the meat off the bones and save for

another recipe. Return the chicken bones to the pot and keep cooking until the liquid has reduced by one third (about another half an hour or so).

2 Strain the broth, discarding all the vegetables, the bay leaves and chicken bones. You should end up with 1.8-2 litres of broth. Season well with salt.

3 To make the pasta dough, mix the egg with 60ml water in a bowl, then gradually work in enough of the flour to form a firm dough.

4 Knead the dough on a well-floured work surface until it stops sticking to your hands. You should end up with a firm, elastic dough. Wrap in cling film and leave to rest in the fridge for at least 20 minutes (see Make Ahead).

5 Roll out the dough on a lightly floured work surface (see tips) as thinly as you can to a sheet about 40cm square. Alternatively, use a (well floured) pasta machine. Keep rolling the dough through the settings until you reach the second to thinnest setting – it might be easier to roll it in 2 pieces (the pasta needs to be thin, but thick enough not to rip under the weight of the filling).

6 Cut the sheet into strips as wide as you want your squares to be, then into squares. Tiny 1.5cm squares may mildly impress an Azerbaijani person, but if you don't have an Azerbaijani friend to impress, don't worry – cut the dough into 5cm squares for jumbo dyushbara dumplings. They should, however, remain relatively small, as the meat filling is raw and so must cook through before the pasta becomes overdone. But if the dumpling is too small, it loses appeal to me – I need to have a good mouthful of pasta and filling to be truly satisfied.

7 Mix all the filling ingredients well, seasoning with salt and plenty of pepper. Place about ½ tsp filling on each pasta square, fold in half diagonally, pinch the edges firmly together, removing any air, then take the 2 furthest away corners and pinch together. I like to pinch them so that they look like fish tails (see p69).

8 Bring a large pan of salted water to the boil, then add the dumplings, in small batches, and cook for 1-2 minutes until they float to the surface. The reason why I don't cook them in the broth is that I don't want the broth to become starchy and cloudy, but if your dumplings aren't heavily floured, you can cook them in the boiling broth.

9 Serve the dumplings in the hot broth with all the accompaniments or just a selection, and the garlicky vinegar alongside, as you wish.

PER SERVING 226kcal, 5.7g fat (2g saturated), 13.2g protein, 29.5g carbs (1.3g sugars), 0.1g salt, 2.1g fibre

WINE EDITOR'S CHOICE White wine works best with the garlic vinegar. Try a simple Alsace pinot blanc or a soave.

Beets, plums and bitter leaves

SERVES 4-6. **HANDS-ON TIME** 25 MIN. **OVEN TIME** 45 MIN

"I've also tried this with blackberries and blackcurrants instead of plums and it worked wonders – beetroot loves any dark, rich fruit that has a little acidity. I sometimes also like to use watercress or rocket."

OLIA'S TIPS

You can use any bitter crunchy vegetable instead of radicchio – chicory would work well. Any toasted seed or nut can be substituted for sesame.

- 2 tbsp rapeseed or mild olive oil
- 500g beetroot, peeled and quartered
- 5 plums, stoned and quartered
- 1 tbsp red wine vinegar
- 150g treviso radicchio (or regular radicchio)
- 1 red chilli, sliced
- 2 tsp maple syrup or honey
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- 2 tsp sesame seeds, lightly toasted in a dry pan (see tips)
- Handful soft fresh herbs (dill and coriander work really well here) – optional

1 Heat the oven to 200°C/180°C fan/gas 6. Pour the oil into a roasting tin and heat in the oven for 5 minutes.

Add the beetroot, plums and vinegar, season with salt, toss to coat, then roast for 30 minutes.

2 Leaving a little of the stalk in place, slice the radicchio lengthwise into long thin wedges. Add it to the beetroot tray along with the chilli, maple syrup or honey and a bit more salt, then give it all a good stir. Roast for a further 10 minutes. Add the garlic and stir it into the contents of the tray, then remove the tray from the oven. Sprinkle with the toasted sesame seeds and herbs (if using) and serve.

PER SERVING (FOR 6) 163kcal, 7.3g fat (0.6g saturated), 4.1g protein, 17.3g carbs (16.2g sugars), 0.2g salt, 6g fibre

WINE EDITOR'S CHOICE Slightly herby, dry and crisp whites cut it here – best is a picpoul de pinet.

NEXT MONTH
A feasting menu from Sabrina Ghayour



Tklapi (plum fruit leather); find the recipe online at deliciousmagazine.co.uk