

## Quince, Apple, Pear, Potato

The quince paste is turning a deep jewel pink as it splodges and thickens on the wood stove. We've been cooking it since yesterday. Our neighbour Jo gave us a few quinces after my handyman husband had a look at fixing her veggie beds. I came along too and was handed an apple straight off the tree: the best one I've had in years. It was worth taking the time to eat it slowly.

Earlier today I was in Hepburn Springs for a house and food forest tour at Melliodora, home of permaculture legends David Holmgren and Su Dennett. Everywhere you looked there was an abundance of food, even though it is mid May. Asian mint that I kept rubbing between my fingers to inhale the sharp sweetness; long red chillies just starting to crinkle; sleek little onions and leeks; late lettuce sprinkled between the friendly weeds.

The plump grey and white geese were conducting their own hunter-gathering in the orchard. If they tugged hard enough at the netting covering the huge pear tree they scored a jackpot – pale green fruit tumbled down at regular intervals.

I could smell my grandmother's kitchen as we entered the main house. Su handed us bowls of apples baked with delicate spices, sitting in sticky puddles of sweet jelly and crowned with creamy rice pudding sauce. I stood with the other pilgrims and we honoured the dish with a combination of bliss-filled silence and primitive murmurs. This was perfect comfort food.

Su and David talked about how they tend to survive on what is in the garden – this morning it was roasted chestnuts for brekky. Nothing complicated there, but not the norm. They shift with the seasons; they store food as needed. And they share.

On the way home I picked up a bag of potatoes from one of the many farmers' stalls that dot the road through Newlyn. I remembered how a few years ago flying back from Canberra I began chatting to my fellow traveller about the destructive forestry based managed investment schemes he'd been castigating the government about that day. Inevitably we got onto food supply and security. It turned out he was Simon Ramsay, at the time president of the Victorian Farmers' Federation, now a member of parliament. He talked about his farming family who were receiving a fraction of the mark-up charged by a rather large chain for their potatoes. Now, whenever I have been slack and bought potatoes from a supermarket, I feel guilty. Not guilty enough to consistently change my behaviour, but enough for me to stop and buy a 10 kilo bag at Newlyn.

I spend so much time getting angry about the big picture; about the mad decisions and unfair power wielded around agriculture, water and food supply. But we can choose to live more lightly ourselves; being more thoughtful in how we source, share and treat our food. Su Dennett reminded me, "It's how you behave individually and make personal connections that creates change. You show others what can happen." Getting things right personally is a good starting point. Small steps, but better than lamenting what I can't directly influence.

The quince paste is done now. It's a beautiful clear ruby red and the wooden spoon leaves a groove as I drag it through. In the morning I'll cut the paste carefully, wrap it up and share it with my neighbours.