

# the table



## Carb your enthusiasm

**Potato, rice, or pasta? We all hunger for carbs at this time of year but if you had to choose one which would it be? Jo Weinberg asks our top restaurateurs**

**D**iets notwithstanding, everything about January screams “carbohydrate”—and man cannot live on bread alone. Every part of you longs to bed down with a plate of something hot, filling, and comforting. A mountain of buttery mash with gravy (hold the sausages); a bowl of steaming rice, loosened with dark drops of salty soy sauce; a slippery plate of spaghetti, glistening with garlicky oil.

Yet if you had to make a desert island choice between the three, could you? It’s a game I have often played with my two sisters, a family saga that ends with knives drawn and forks at the ready. My elder sister is a sucker for pasta in all its gluttonous glory, unable to resist its comfort and its temptations, while my younger one, all glowing good health, is a rice girl—so naturally good for you, so easy to make. Unwilling to commit, I have always wavered and wondered what would the chefs have to say?

“I could survive forever on pasta

pomodoro,” says Ruth Rogers, of the River Café. “I always serve it when I give a dinner, however fancy.” She is continually amazed by how much pasta people order at the restaurant. “Whether as a starter or main course, it just sells and sells. People love it.”

“Viva la pasta!” agrees Antonio Carluccio, whose fame and empire is built on it. “Pasta is about imagination. From a mixture of flour and water comes 600 different shapes and more than 1,000 dishes. I have never met anyone who does not like pasta.”

It’s easy to agree with them. Pasta is what I long for when I’m tired: the warm hug of a bowl of it with buttery tomato sauce, or a glug of good olive oil infused with garlic. It is spaghetti vongole I choose when I’m at a restaurant that I can trust to cook it properly (more bite, more salt). Pasta can be sophisticated—cooked in seawater as a bed for a lazing lobster. It can be homey—noodles to offset beef shin slowly stewed with tomatoes and bay. It can be approximate—add a handful of peas, a scattering of chopped ham, a slug of cream, whatever

herbs you have. But the cooking of it must be precise. Undercook it and you will crunch your way unpleasantly through, overcook and you won’t want to eat it at all. Get it right (cook at a rolling boil, in water salty as the sea, until there is a tiny speck of uncooked pasta at the centre—fear not, it will continue to cook) and it will meet any season, any occasion. Slurp it off a plate on your knees in front of the TV in winter, or pick it at cold, and tossed with the best olive oil and as many fresh herbs as you can muster in summer.

Henry Dimbleby, co-founder of Leon, the healthy fast-food chain, disagrees. “Anyone eating pasta twice a week is being duped by the American grain lobby. You can’t even digest modern wheat—it certainly has no nutritious properties.” He is torn between rice and potatoes. “From a nutrition standpoint, it would have to be rice, but as a cook, I’d have to go for potato.”

When he was writing the second Leon cook book, *Naturally Fast Food*, he would often think of a pasta sauce he favoured, and include it, replacing the pasta with potato or some kind of pulse, such as

quinoa. “Puttanesca is amazing with a baked potato,” he says. “In fact anything is delicious on baked potato. Last week, I roasted a chicken for Sunday lunch and made both mash and roast potatoes. Can you imagine how delicious mash is smothered on top of roast potatoes?”

Potatoes, though, to me seem more prosaic. It’s not often you long for a bowl of potato for supper. Perhaps a baked potato, split in half, with butter oozing through its flesh, but not much more.

Not true, says Samuel Clark, chef-patron along with wife Samantha of Moro restaurant, in London. He finds potatoes highly versatile. “There are so many different types, we just don’t have much exposure to them.” Good point. It is only since the war that potato varieties have been reduced to a common few, grown more for their yield than their flavour. Supermarkets are much to blame, stocking few alternatives, but track down a good source, such as Carroll’s Heritage Potatoes ([heritagepotatoes.co.uk](http://heritagepotatoes.co.uk)) and a new world opens up. The Northumberland farm grows 17 varieties of potato of all colours, ▶

► flavours and textures — from the nubby, waxy Pink Fir Apple to the deep pink Highland Burgundy and the white-fleshed, blue-skinned Edzell Blue. All worth a try. "Being a bit of a gardener, I have more of a relationship with the process," Clark says. "I dug up some potatoes and after cooking them, dressed them with crushed anchovies, a little chopped tarragon and chilli, and ate them warm."

This reminds me of a visit last summer to a friend in Devon, who dug up potatoes for our lunch (she grows them in her dung heap), washed them and boiled them with a little mint and served with a knob of butter. They seemed like a different species to those you buy in a plastic bag — with a

melting texture and skin like rice paper, but with a mineral tang, that split under the fork to soak up the juice of the mince that she'd made.

"We've recently been cooking them in a style from the Canary Islands," Clark says. "You cover small ones with salty water and boil it off. They catch and char a bit and get this chewy, dried quality almost like a baked potato, but with a dense, different texture. And I haven't even got started on things to do with peeled potatoes..."

Once peeled, the options are many: sliced and baked, resplendent in cream and garlic as a dauphinoise, roast until a perfect golden crispness, mashed with hot milk, plenty of butter and a hint of nutmeg until you have a soothing

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Which would you choose? Pasta, rice or potatoes? Vote in our poll [thetimes.co.uk/food](http://thetimes.co.uk/food)

cream. And chips! Imagine going without chips alongside steak, with a big, warm pot of bearnaise to dip them into, or fries and ketchup with a burger.

Rice is the dark horse of the race. It is the most modest of the three, with a tendency to hide its lights in a supporting role. Here, too, we are exposed to few of the varieties. But think of fragrant Thai rice steamed in a perfect lotus-leaf parcel with pork and egg, or black sticky rice cooked in sweetened coconut milk,

complemented by a sinfully sweet orange-fleshed mango. Try doing without fluffy basmati to play good cop to a fiery curry, or the sweet, nutty grains that make a great paella. Imagine winter without a creamily comforting rice pudding, scented with a crushed cardamom pod and drops of rosewater.

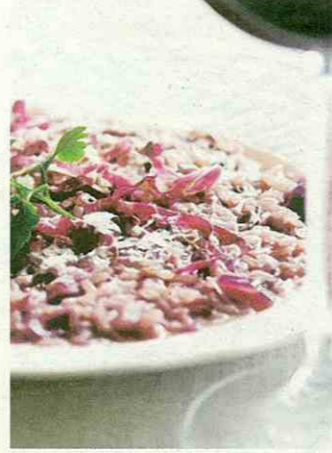
Thomasina Miers is a fan, declaring that rice combines all the qualities you need in a carbohydrate, being wildly versatile, but also comforting and unequivocally good for you. "Imagine living without another risotto, whether with shaved Parmesan or just butter, with wilted bitter radicchio, or asparagus," she says. "It's the ultimate comfort food. There are no end of things you can do with it — including the best packed lunch of deep-fried risotto balls."

Part of the appeal of rice to Miers is that it is "poor man's food". "You can put anything into it — chopped bacon and some peas, cook it down in stock and there is your supper."

Then there are the long-grained rices, which form the basis of more elegant dishes such as biryani, one of her favourites. "It's the spices that are important: allspice and black cumin and lots of butter — rice just soaks up all the flavour and fragrance."

Miers reminisces about a Greek broth that had just a few grains of rice in it: "They were so precious because there were so few of them, yet they were the making of it."

Rice seems more cherished, too, now that many of the paddy fields are under threat, either from multinationals seeking to grow more profitable exotic crops, such as pineapples, or from flooding. There is an art to rice growing that speaks of centuries of knowledge handed down. Travel through rural Indonesia, Vietnam and China and you encounter great valleys of terraced rice



**River Café tagliatelle with tomato and basil**

All dishes serve 4

- INGREDIENTS**  
320g tagliatelle  
2 garlic cloves  
2 tbsp basil leaves  
50g Parmesan, grated  
1 tbsp olive oil  
2x 400g tinned tomatoes  
100g unsalted butter

**METHOD**

Peel and slice the garlic. Tear the basil. Grate the Parmesan. Heat the oil in a pan and fry the garlic until soft but not brown. Add the tomatoes and season. Cook over a medium heat for 20-30 minutes or until the sauce is thick and the oil comes to the top. Add the basil. Cook the tagliatelle in boiling salted water until al dente. Drain into a colander. Melt half the butter in the hot pan, return the pasta and add remaining butter. Toss well. Add the tomato sauce and toss well again. Serve immediately with the Parmesan.

From River Café Two Easy (Ebury, £20)



**Henry Dimpleby's warm anchovy, garlic and potato salad**

INGREDIENTS

- 800g new potatoes  
50g (one tin) or 10 fillets of anchovies  
3 cloves garlic  
2 tbsp white wine vinegar  
100ml extra virgin olive oil  
1 tbsp finely chopped chives  
Sea salt & freshly ground black pepper

**METHOD**

Slice the potatoes in half and boil them with ample water and salt in a saucepan with a lid on until well cooked. Put the garlic, vinegar and anchovies into a blender. Whizz, then add extra virgin olive oil in a drizzle. Season. Drain the potatoes and pour dressing over them, tossing them well. Allow to cool a little for three minutes. Toss again. Dress with the chopped chives and serve.

From Leon 2: Naturally Fast Food (Conran Octopus, £20)

**Thomasina Miers's radicchio risotto**

INGREDIENTS

- 220g risotto rice  
½ radicchio  
50g shallots  
1 sprig rosemary  
½ glass red wine  
1.2 litres vegetable stock  
50g unsalted butter  
50g Parmesan cheese, grated

**METHOD**

Put your stock on the stove over a hot flame. Cut the radicchio into long thin strips and set aside. Put the rosemary and the oil in a shallow frying pan over a medium heat for a couple of minutes to infuse, then remove it and add your chopped shallots and radicchio. Fry gently until shallots turn translucent, and the radicchio has wilted. Add the rice, a pinch of sugar and stir to coat. Add wine, let it bubble off, then add the boiling stock to the pan, ladle by ladle until the rice has absorbed the liquid and it is just cooked but still al dente. You may not need all the stock. This should take about 15 minutes. Remove the pan from the heat, add the grated Parmesan and butter and whip it up by shaking the pan and vigorously stirring until it becomes creamy and fluffy. Serve immediately.

fields of breathtaking beauty.

In the end, she convinces me, citing the sheer spectrum of textures you can get from rice. I would be able fill myself with plates, whether chewy, nutty, sloppy, sticky or creamy, and never feel stuffed. I could eat it alongside anything, or make it star in a stir-fry, risotto or paella. But there would always remain a doubt, a pang for that lost potato salad, unctuous with dressing and a twang of capers, or unmatchable carbonara, heavy on the cream. Could you choose, hand on stomach, if you had to?

**What's the healthy choice?**

**White pasta**

256 calories, 1.5g fat per 220g cooked weight (75g uncooked)

Pasta is a low GI food, which means you feel fuller for longer. It's relatively good for protein, with the serving providing 8g of our daily needs (women 45g/men 55g). Even white pasta has almost 3g of fibre a serving.

**White rice**

221 calories, 0.5g fat per 180g cooked weight serving (60g uncooked)

A high GI food that is digested rapidly. Not very sustaining, so it's easy to eat double this. It is not rich in any particular vitamins or minerals.

**Boiled white potatoes**

131 calories, 0.5g fat per 175g cooked weight serving

Potatoes have the lowest calorie density of all three and with a medium GI are filling. A bonus is that they have 2g of fibre and 16mg of vitamin C, and contain potassium, believed to play a role in blood-pressure control.

Amanda Ursell

**What I ate yesterday**  
Chris Stanmore-Major



The British skipper, 32, is sailing solo around the world as part of the Velux 5 Oceans race. It covers more than 30,000 nautical miles and takes six months to finish ([velux5oceans.com](http://velux5oceans.com)).



**Breakfast**

It was chicken dansak with rice, which came freeze-dried. I added 300ml of hot water and waited 20 minutes to let it cool off — more appetising than having a boiling hot meal when the temperature inside the boat is 38 degrees, and 100 per cent humidity. I take a few onions and a chilli grinder, just to change it around a bit, because I'm going to be eating the same menu all the way round the world.



**Lunch**

Thai green chicken curry — it's a big favourite of mine. I haven't got many of those on board, so it's a bit of a treat. Because it's very hot, I'm drinking five litres of water a day, which I have to balance out with nutrients and sugars, so I'm on the chocolate and Haribo. I've got big bars of Dairy Milk that have completely melted, so I just snip the corner off, squeeze the packet and it comes out like Nutella.



**Dinner**

I had freeze-dried steak and ale stew. When we get into the Southern Ocean it's going to be below freezing for weeks, so I'll eat about 6,000 calories a day. It can end up becoming "just put the protein in", so I try to make it an occasion. I get the gas stove on the go, boil up the right amount of water so I don't waste any gas, wash my hands, and make a bit of a ceremony out of it.

Interview by Daisy Greenwell