

Carolyn Robb was chef to the Prince of Wales for 11 years. If 'bollocks' is Gordon Ramsay's favourite word, Robb's is 'challenge'. From 1989 to 2000 Robb's challenge was to transform Prince Charles's passion for rare breeds and organics into dishes for the royal table. 'I could never have anticipated the total unpredictability of each day,' she writes in her as yet unnamed book, to be published next year – not a reference to home life at Highgrove, even though she did cook through some very bumpy years, starting with the prince as a father of young children and finishing with him as a widowed divorcee. Robb, 38, is trained to give nothing away. She is slim and single, and has a mild, lady-like face that would look good in a poke bonnet. What was Prince Charles's favourite dish? 'Oo, er,' she smiles evasively, alarm bells ringing – could this cause a scandal? 'Food from the garden.' William and Harry liked chicken and homemade chips, she says, trying to be co-operative. Prince Charles ate muesli and bottled fruit for breakfast; sometimes sandwiches for lunch.'

With what filling? 'Details like that I can't really go into.' Although, in a flash of revelation, apparently crusts were always off at tea.

Prince Charles himself never boiled an egg, but he did sometimes enter the kitchen to bring in some freshly picked asparagus. To get really decent milk, it helps to have your own cow, and of course the prince has a herd of Ayrshires on his 1,100-acre Gloucestershire estate, along with Gloucestershire Old Spots, Hebridian sheep, organic vegetables and fruit. Prince Charles's role in cooking was choosing what to cook.

Robb's role was to spirit up the victuals wherever the prince happened to be. Vegetable

soup and game salmis in a log cabin when shooting in Norfolk. Steamed vegetables and pasta when dining with the Dalai Lama at Highgrove, and – not easy this – soup, salad and ice-cream served in a wide-necked flask during the intervals at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden.

Robb's duties started with breakfast, served at around 7am, and finished after dinner, which in summer might be as late as 11pm, because after a busy day, the prince liked nothing better than to linger in the garden, admiring his plants. Robb's own plants, meanwhile, lived in the bath in her 300-year-old Oxford cottage. 'You need to be very dedicated,' concludes Robb, who must thrive on no sleep and bowls of cornflakes and cheese toasties, which is what she mostly had for dinner. 'Your own life comes second.'

One of Robb's most unexpected challenges was cooking abroad. When Prince Charles represents the nation on royal visits he takes his chef and organic groceries with him. 'I have photos of me standing next to a plane with piles and piles of coolboxes,' says Robb, who took vegetables, meat, cream, frozen fruit cakes, and even bagged up ingredients to bake fresh soda bread with herbs every day – all vacuum packed and stored with ice. Robb insists the reasons were security, convenience and comfort, and absolutely not because Prince Charles was having none of that

Fit for a prince

Carolyn Robb knows what the Prince of Wales likes in his sandwiches, made chicken and chips for Harry and William, and has managed to cook a royal supper in an African broom cupboard. **Sally Williams** meets a chef whom nothing will now faze. Photographs by **Adrian Houston**

Above the chef Carolyn Robb prepares food in the kitchens of Shumi restaurant.
Right ceviche of minted scallops with pink grapefruit



'This is not a job for a chef with a big ego. You're in the kitchen, you're not the star of the evening'



300g (10½oz) puff pastry (for ease and speed you can buy the pastry)

1 tbsp olive oil

1 clove of garlic, crushed

150g (5½oz) shallots, sliced

25ml (1fl oz) dry white wine

25ml (1fl oz) double cream or crème fraîche

1 tsp soft brown sugar

200g (7oz) fresh ceps, cleaned and quartered

50ml (2fl oz) olive oil

50g (2oz) parmesan cheese shavings

4 fresh thyme sprigs

Roll the pastry out to a thickness of 3mm (¼in), and cut it into four equal-sided triangles.

Lay them out on a baking-parchment-lined baking tray and chill for 20 minutes.

Using a fork, prick holes in the pastry, cover with another sheet of baking parchment and lay another flat baking tray on top.

Bake at 200C/400F/gas mark 6 for 8-12 minutes, until lightly golden.

Remove the top baking tray and the paper and cook for two to three minutes more, to crisp up the pastry. Cook the shallots and garlic in the olive oil until they are soft and starting to colour. Add the wine, cream, sugar and season lightly. Cook gently for 20 minutes to reduce the liquid in the mixture. Cool before puréeing the mixture in a blender.

Test the seasoning. Set to one side.

Sauté the ceps in olive oil over a high heat, to give them a good golden colour. (They are quite 'meaty' and need to be well cooked to soften them.) Season well. Spread the creamed shallots on to each pastry triangle.

Arrange the ceps on top, sprinkle with fresh thyme leaves and lay the parmesan shavings over the top. Bake at 200C/400F/gas mark 6 for five minutes, then serve immediately.

Caramelised cep and thyme tartlet

serves 4



Ceviche of minted scallops with pink grapefruit serves 4

12 scallops (off the shell, coral removed)

100ml (3½fl oz) freshly squeezed lime juice

100ml (3½fl oz) fresh pink grapefruit juice

2tsp salt

100ml (3½oz) chiffonade of fresh mint leaves

2 pink grapefruit, peeled and cut into thin segments (for garnish)

2 serrano chillies, sliced very thinly diagonally (you can use jalapenos)

half a red onion, finely sliced

8 thin slices of grilled crispy pancetta (optional)

Place the scallops on a baking tray lined with baking parchment, cover with clingfilm and freeze for about an hour until the scallops are firm but not frozen solid. Blend all the remaining ingredients except the grapefruit segments in a non-metallic bowl. Remove the scallops from the freezer, two or three at a time, and slice thinly. Gently mix the scallops into the fruit juice. Refrigerate for about two hours, until the scallops turn an opaque white colour. Serve on a platter or in a glass, garnish with the grapefruit segments and the pancetta.



foreign muck. 'There was absolutely nothing wrong with the cuisine in any of the countries we stayed in – Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Slovenia, Macedonia – but the food is just so incredibly different.' And Prince Charles couldn't 'afford to be upset by local food'. Robb cooked in a variety of kitchens. 'Some of which weren't kitchens at all,' she writes in her book. 'A few were hotel bathrooms, one in Africa, a broom cupboard.'

These days Robb is a consultant, cooking for a variety of private clients. Last month she catered for the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester's daughter. 'You get used to working in other people's kitchens,' she says, although once the handle on an oven door got stuck and she saw her soufflés rise, then fall

again. The door had to be unscrewed in the end. 'I used to take a big trunk of equipment, now I take basics: non-stick pan, hand-blender, spatula, sharp knives – generally people don't have sharp knives. Henckels are great.'

Today she is cooking in the fashionable surroundings of Shumi, a restaurant in Piccadilly, London, where lunch for two costs £79. The dining philosophy is to mix modern Italian with Japanese, which means that chopsticks are set beside knives and forks and the monkfish carpaccio is designed to be shared.

Guests in tonight's private party include Shumi's owners, Jamie Barber and Geoffrey Moore (son of the actor Roger Moore); the actress Lisa Faulkner and It girl Tara Palmer-Tomkinson. 'Hi Carolyn!' she cries, erupting from the kitchen lift in a whirlwind of expensive scent, as she kisses the cook she remembers from her childhood. Prince Charles is a close friend of Tara's parents, the land-owner Charles Palmer-Tomkinson and his wife, Patti. 'We always used to have tea at Highgrove before going back to boarding school, all miserable,' Palmer-Tomkinson says, maintaining a constant stream of chatter to the photographer and Shumi chefs who are staring at her in awe, 'and Carolyn used to pack us off with... Oh, God! I'll never forgot those things she used to

Baby pears poached in a light vanilla seed and marsala syrup serves 4-6

500ml (17fl oz) water

250g (9oz) organic caster sugar

the zest of 2 limes

the zest of 2 lemons

100ml (3½fl oz) marsala wine

1 vanilla pod, split lengthways

the juice of 1 lemon

12 small pears

Place the first five ingredients in a large saucepan. Scrape the seeds out of the vanilla pod into the syrup. Leave the pod in the syrup as well. Bring to the boil and simmer for 15 minutes. Set aside.

Fill a large non-reactive bowl with cold water, add the juice of one lemon. Peel the pears, if possible leaving the stalks intact. Using a small melon baller, remove the core from the pear. Working from the bottom of the pear, this can be done in just two scoops. Place the pears into the water as soon as they are peeled to prevent discolouration.

Once they are prepared, drain well, place in the simmering syrup, cover with a sheet of baking parchment and cook very slowly for 20-30 minutes. The ripeness of the pears will determine how long it will take for them to soften. When cooked, they should be soft but not mushy. Remove the pears from the syrup, place them in a flat dish, standing upright. Boil the syrup to reduce it by one third. Then pour it over the pears. Cover and leave to cool before refrigerating. They can be served warm or cold.

I only take the basics when cooking in a foreign kitchen: a non-stick pan, spatula, hand-blender and sharp knives



Clockwise from top left caramelised cep and thyme tartlet; poached pears; Robb at work in the kitchen; with Tara Palmer-Tomkinson

make. Like Mars Bars with flakes on – all melted.’ ‘Biscuit cake?’ volunteers Robb, politely.

‘That’s it! I love it! Mouth marriage. All crumbly and delicious.’ Palmer-Tomkinson rushes back upstairs, clickety-clack in her high-heeled boots, jabbering away. ‘Carolyn looks so amazing,’ she says. ‘You’d think being in the kitchen that much would make you sweat.’

‘This is not a job for a chef with a big ego,’ concludes Robb, back at the stove, tossing fresh ceps in an enormous frying-pan. ‘You’re in the kitchen, you’re not the star. You probably need to be someone who is quieter.’ If anything, she gets even quieter as the pressure rises. A tornado of action rumbles around the restaurant kitchen. There are 80 covers this evening, aside from Robb’s party. The head chef Lee Purcell shouts Gordon Ramsay-style to his staff, ‘Are we all set down here, guys? It looks like frigging Hiroshima!’ Robb, meanwhile, is silently chopping chilled scallops precisely. When she talks about food she is confident, knowledgeable and relaxed. Her heroes are Raymond Blanc and Roger Verge. The French influence shows. On the menu is ceviche of minted scallops with pink

grapefruit, and confit of roasted vine tomatoes and red onions. ‘Detail is very important,’ she says. Robb embraces all those fiddly jobs most of us can’t be bothered with. She carefully pours balsamic vinegar from the lid, rather than sloshing it into the dressing. She spends ages selecting the perfect-shaped chervil leaf for garnish. ‘His Royal Highness was very particular about presentation,’ says Robb, whose tip for keeping garnish lively is to wrap it in damp kitchen roll.

She always uses homemade chicken stock – ‘you can make it just as you like’ and reduces it so much for the cep and thyme tartlet that it is like jelly. Sauces shouldn’t be built on compromise, she says, turning her nose up at flour as a thickener. ‘Instead of a can of tomatoes, use fresh. Instead of pulverising, leave bits. Emphasise flavours, rather than mixing lots of them together.’

Robb started cooking as a young child in South Africa, where she was born, the youngest of five. Her father was a manager with Unilever; her mother pickled and preserved produce from the garden: macadamia nuts, pecans, rhubarb, passion fruit and mulberries. Robb moved to England in the late 1980s, studying at the Tante Marie School of Cookery in Woking. She says she is very happy being a private chef. ‘If you’re cooking for a family you can sit down and talk to them, get a feel for exactly what they want.’ ■