

'The food is creative, beautifully presented and exciting' *The Guardian*

ANDREW DARGUE



# Vanilla Black

MODERN VEGETARIAN COOKING



Andrew Dargue and Donna Conroy founded Vanilla Black in York in 2004, before relocating the restaurant to London in 2008. The restaurant is now recognised as one of the best vegetarian establishments in the country and is recommended in the Michelin Guide.

ANDREW DARGUE  
WITH ALICE HANSEN

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# Vanilla Black

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FRESH FLAVOURS FOR  
YOUR VEGETARIAN KITCHEN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
EMMA LEE



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# The Food

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This book is from the people behind Vanilla Black, but the food is not from the restaurant. Well, not entirely, anyway. The recipes here will give an insight into some of the things that we do, but this is a book for home cooks.

At our restaurant, we serve a twist on traditional English and French classical dishes, reinvented as vegetarian food. The fact that it is vegetarian is not the point; in fact, it's neither here nor there. It's not food for vegetarians, in the same way that an Italian restaurant does not serve food for Italian people alone. Ours is just good food done in the modern style, and done well. This book is for all people who are interested in food. Modern food.

The dishes we cook at the restaurant are forward-thinking. Yes, we use dehydrators to take every drop of moisture out of a tarragon sponge to render it crisp. And we are also guilty of sous-vide-ing the odd item or two. And it's true that – as in most restaurants – we have a couple of guys washing up constantly. We are guessing that, unless you're astoundingly lucky, you do not have the pair of them in your kitchen.

So, in this book, we give Vanilla Black recipes adapted for the home kitchen. They are still interesting, with flavours, textures and methods that will challenge you both as a cook and as an eater. Our food is challenging. It's different. Smashing stereotypes and proving that vegetarian cuisine can become mainstream is the reason this book you are holding exists.

The recipes here are both intriguing and delicious. We infuse oil with chives to make mayonnaise. We toast oats before cooking, to make porridge taste nutty. We take butter to the point of caramelisation before using it in a brown butter filling for old-style pineapple upside-down cake. Within these pages there's a recipe for a new and improved cheese-and-onion pasty and chutneys and jams (and brown sauce) made in the microwave. We make home-made curds. We pickle grapes. When Savoy cabbage pudding was on the menu, we couldn't make enough of them. People used to order them when they rang to book. It is made from only cabbage, cheese, butter and stale bread, but they work together astoundingly well. And there are also trickier techniques here, such as roasting white chocolate to serve with a cutting-edge dessert. This book is about cooking something simple or something technical, but above all it is about having fun and trying flavour combinations you may not have previously considered.

Many times a day in the restaurant we hear 'I'm not vegetarian, but that was really good.' You don't have to be vegetarian. Just try this food. Play with it. See what you think. And if you want to serve it with a piece of grilled chicken, be our guest.

However you serve it, enjoy it.

‘Apologies in advance, no pasta bake or vegetable curry.’ Ten years ago we didn’t think we would have to put that warning on our website, but we did.

We became vegetarian for no major reason. No dreadlocks were involved. We didn’t hug trees. We kept our leather settee. We just stopped eating meat and fish. If someone had told us at 16 that we would be vegetarian adults, we would have laughed. Andrew would probably have asked them for a fight.

But we liked eating out. A lot. When we went to a restaurant, the vegetarian option was always mushroom risotto or halloumi kebabs. Andrew – a chef since the age of 16 – would say that he didn’t need to see the menu, he knew what was going to be on it already.

So we decided to open our own vegetarian restaurant. We set some standards for the food: no dish would rely on pasta, meat substitutes or heavy spicing. No piles of pulses would be used to bulk up a dish. We would create menus of unusual combinations which challenged the norms. There would be no postcards in the window advertising yoga classes. And we wouldn’t follow anyone else’s rules. It was a massive adventure to us to leave our jobs and start the restaurant. Andrew had been teaching catering and Donna was nursing.

What we do is different. Someone once said to us that ‘you put your head above the parapet and you don’t care’. In fact, we would make more money if we served veggie burgers and chips. But we do care. We care about making a difference and about breaking the mould.

We opened Vanilla Black in York in December 2004 with one member of staff: a student from the local university. And we started to divide people. We served a savoury Bakewell tart containing chilli jam and a savoury almond sponge, with vegetable vinaigrette. Once, when I took it to a customer, he took one look, got up and walked out. However, slowly we started to attract people (most of them meat-eaters) looking for something interesting.

Almost everyone was very complimentary. But one of the most interesting reactions was from Andrew’s father, who apologetically told us that it was a shame that he couldn’t come in, ‘because I’m not vegetarian’. Finally, after a long session pointing out that cornflakes, tomato soup and cheese on toast were vegetarian, the penny dropped and he came along for a meal. And thoroughly enjoyed it.

But, then, like anything does, running a restaurant became a job ... We became restless and we felt we had outgrown our little restaurant. We needed another challenge.

So we decided to move to London. That was certainly a challenge. We knew absolutely nobody there and had only ever visited once or twice as tourists and yet, a few weeks later, we went and had a look around ... We liked what we saw and decided to make the move. We were naïve but we weren’t arrogant. We weren’t under any illusion that we would arrive and all would be rosy and good. But we didn’t think it would be as hard as it was.

As we write, we are about to celebrate our tenth anniversary, of which we are very proud. It has been a challenge for us trying to break away from the stereotypes that surround vegetarian cooking. We are not trying to be clever, but the day when our menu is familiar, or comparable to some other style of cooking, and that people don't ask us dozens of questions before ordering their food, is the day we have stagnated. So, before you read this book, you should know this ...

'Apologies in advance, no pasta bake or vegetable curry.'

# A Footnote

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Don't make the mistake that, by buying this book, you are buying a compendium of healthy recipes. A vegetarian diet isn't necessarily any better or worse for your body than any other. You could eat cheese and chips all day long and never let a green vegetable darken your door from one year to the next and still – truthfully – declare yourself to be vegetarian.

## A Quick Word About Ingredients

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### BUTTER

We always use unsalted; that way it doesn't interfere with the flavour balance in sweet dishes. Also, you can then salt any recipe, safe in the knowledge that there is not already some seasoning present. You can always add salt, but you can't take it away.

### CHOCOLATE

Try to use good stuff; this is definitely a case of getting what you pay for. Look for a label that says '70% cocoa solids' on dark chocolate, as this will give a good strong flavour, but remember that this only indicates the strength of chocolate, not its quality.

### EGGS

For the recipes in this book, use medium free-range eggs. By all means trade up to organic, if you wish.

### OVEN

These recipes assume your oven is electric, either conventional or fan-assisted and definitely preheated. They will also work using a gas oven, but you need to be aware that they haven't been tested in one of those, so you will need to take more care, especially with baking recipes, that baking is happening evenly and at a smooth, slowish pace. If you have an Aga, well, lucky you. If you can, try to organise things so that you utilise your oven fully: cook two recipes that require baking at the same time, to save fuel and bills.

### SALT

Some people don't believe in adding salt to a dish, believing that it is unhealthy. Salt is not unhealthy; too much salt is unhealthy. When we say season something, we mean add a little salt and pepper; you need to use your own judgement about this as we are all different. You can use regular table salt, which dissolves quickly. We tend to use sea salt flakes, because they are not as harsh as table salt and also – for some dishes – the flakes act almost as a garnish, giving little crumbly hits of salt.

### SMOKE OIL

This is amazing. It's a naturally flavoured oil which is very intense – a little certainly does go a long way, so be careful. We buy it from a company called MSK Ingredients and you can order it online at

[msk-ingredients.com](http://msk-ingredients.com). Be careful, this company sells some amazing products and you will be tempted to add lots to your basket.

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### SUGAR

You will see that we sometimes use different types of sugar in the cakes as they can create different flavour notes. That's it.

### SUNFLOWER OIL

This is used in the cake recipes, as it gives a moister sponge. Why? Because part of butter's make-up is water, which is why it spits and splutters when you heat it in a pan. When you add butter to a recipe you are actually adding a little more water at the same time. When you use oil it contains no water, so the recipe is more stable. Also, when a cake made with oil cools down, the oil prevents the sponge from toughening up. By the way, when any of the recipes in this book ask for 'sunflower oil' you can substitute vegetable oil, if you wish.

### ...AND A FINAL THING

Don't be a slave to a recipe. If you cannot get hold of a certain sugar, use white granulated. If you are having difficulty finding heritage potatoes, use something else. If the recipe says sultanas and you only have raisins, use them. If you don't have any icing sugar to dust a cake, so what? If a dish calls for cauliflower, make it next time with broccoli, or vice versa. Try swapping cheeses in a recipe, or even mix a couple and see what happens ... sometimes the best creations can come from a little experimentation.

Oh, and have fun.

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Andrew Dargue and Donna Conroy, London, 2015



BREAKFAST





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# Best porridge

The secret to really great porridge is in the oats: toasting them in a little butter before incorporating the milk brings richness and a delicious nutty flavour.

Try it with home-made jam dolloped in the middle of the bowl and sprinkled with some more toasted oats. However, it's just as good with [Poached autumn fruits](#), [Sweet pesto](#) (see [here](#) and [here](#)), or just a drizzle of honey.

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SERVES 4

20g unsalted butter  
150g rolled oats  
1 litre whole milk  
75g light muscovado sugar  
pinch of sea salt  
4 tbsp jam (preferably home-made, see [here](#))

Melt the butter over a medium heat in the biggest saucepan you have, then add the oats and stir until they're toasted and golden brown. You will smell the toastiness and see the slight colour change; it will only take about 4 minutes. Remove 2 tbsp of oats and set aside on a plate.

Add the milk, sugar and salt to the remaining oats in the saucepan, stirring often so the mixture doesn't catch, for 10–15 minutes, until the oats have swollen to form a thick porridge.

Serve in bowls, sprinkled with the reserved oats and with some of your favourite jam.



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# Herbed soda bread

This is the perfect recipe for those intimidated by the thought of making bread, because it uses a mix of bicarbonate of soda and baking powder instead of yeast. This means it's faster to make, as you don't need to wait for the yeast to activate; these sorts of loaves were made much more in the past because of this. You can use any herbs you like, but the more robust varieties such as sage, thyme and rosemary flavour the dough best.

The bread is great toasted and served with poached eggs, baked beans and wilted baby spinach.

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## MAKES 1 SMALL LOAF

3 tbsp olive oil, plus more for the tin  
500g strong white bread flour  
1½ tsp sea salt, plus 1 tbsp for the top  
3 tsp bicarbonate of soda  
2 tsp baking powder  
1 tbsp granulated sugar  
2 tbsp finely chopped mixture of sage and thyme leaves  
450ml whole milk

Preheat the oven to 200°C/fan 180°C/gas mark 6. Oil a 26 x 12cm loaf tin and line the base and sides with baking parchment.

Sift the flour, 1½ tsp of salt, the bicarbonate of soda and baking powder into a large mixing bowl and stir in the sugar and herbs.

Make a well in the middle and pour in the milk and 3 tbsp of oil, mixing with your hands for about 5 minutes to gradually incorporate the dry ingredients (or combine in a food mixer fitted with the dough hook attachment). The mix will be very sticky and wet, but keep the faith ...

Spoon into the prepared tin – it will need a little bit of encouragement to flatten down a bit – and sprinkle the 1 tbsp of sea salt on top. Bake for 45–50 minutes, or until the loaf is golden brown with a hard crust. Turn out of the tin and cool on a wire rack.

Slice and serve toasted or not, with plenty of good butter.



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# Breakfast bar

This recipe is gluten- and dairy-free and has a texture similar to that of fruit cake. It's so simple to make and can be prepared in advance for the week. There do seem to be a lot of ingredients, but if you do a lot of baking you will have these things in your cupboards already and, if not, you can improvise as long as the weights are equal to those ingredients you substitute. If you don't have buckwheat flour and you're not aiming for a gluten-free result, use plain flour instead. We have called this a breakfast bar but – if you want to live on the edge a little – eat it at another time of day.

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MAKES 8

unsalted butter or sunflower oil, for the tin

50g rolled oats

15g desiccated coconut

40g hazelnuts, chopped

40g walnuts, chopped

40g peanuts, chopped

150g pitted dates, chopped

1 tsp bicarbonate of soda

50g buckwheat flour

25g dried cranberries

25g raisins

50g dried apricots, chopped

50g candied mixed peel

1 ripe banana, mashed

2 tbsp honey

½ tsp ground cinnamon

½ tsp ground ginger

1 tsp baking powder

pinch of sea salt

Preheat the oven to 165°C/fan 145°C/gas mark 3. Butter or oil a 26 x 12cm loaf tin, then line the base and sides with baking parchment.

Spread the oats and desiccated coconut over one non-stick baking tray, and all the chopped nuts over another, then toast in the oven for 10–20 minutes or until golden brown, turning with a spatula every 5 minutes to ensure they cook evenly and don't catch and burn.

Pour 150ml of water into a saucepan, add the dates and bicarb and set over a medium heat until the water has mostly evaporated and the dates have softened, about 5 minutes. The bicarb will turn the dates a dark green colour, but don't be alarmed! Blend them to a smooth purée using a hand-held

blender, then combine in a large mixing bowl with all the other ingredients, including the toasted oat coconut and nuts.

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Spoon into the prepared tin and bake for 30–40 minutes or until firm to the touch. Allow to set in the tin for 10 minutes before turning out and leaving to cool completely on a wire rack.

Once cool, cut into 8 thick slices. These will keep very well in an airtight container for up to 1 week.



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