

In Karen's kitchen

While mourning the closure of her iconic restaurant, The Kitchen, Karen Dudley has focused on spreading her Insta wings, dreaming up a mentorship project, and cooking nourishing food for her family

POUFFE
DOUGHNUTS

PHOTOGRAPHS
JAN RAS
PRODUCTION
ABIGAIL DONNELLY
RECIPES KAREN DUDLEY
TEXT ISHAY GOVENDER
FOOD ASSISTANT
BIANCA STRYDOM



Karen and her husband, David, with their children Maggie and Ben, and xxxxxxxx.

KAREN DUDLEY

– chef, caterer, creator of the “love sandwich” – has bid a bittersweet farewell to her restaurant, The Kitchen, after 11 fruitful years operating in Woodstock, Cape Town, one of the more demographically representative suburbs in the city. The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in a harsh new reality for chefs, restaurateurs and the hospitality industry on a global scale. Businesses previously keeping afloat with small profit margins have been startled into submission, and those that were previously struggling have evaporated – some dismantling shop overnight to escape the obligations set by unreasonable landlords and unforgiving insurers.

Karen made her decision early on.

Soon after President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that the initial Level 5 lockdown would commence, she knew: the days of The Kitchen – an eclectically decorated home away from home for many locals, which saw everything from ladies who lunch regularly to marriage proposals, business deals, gossip-filled brunches, spats unfold and friendships form – were over. Known for its lavish weigh-your-plate salads jewelled with the flavours of the Levant, Southeast Asia and something undeniably South African, nourishing sandwiches and “World Peace Brownies”, her restaurant languished in a sunny space, somewhere between rush-hour café and city bistro. It’s that sweet spot that Karen refers to as approachable but aspirational. And if vegetables, which she calls “an entire palette full of potential!” were ever to be deemed aspirational, generously laden onto large ceramic

platters with torn herbs, punchy dressings and soft labneh, they earned that title at The Kitchen. But winter brought with it an unceremonious ending.

“Mine is a level 1, no, a level 0 business,” Karen says. “To do it the way I did, I was deeply attuned to the needs of my customers. I believe in the connection built around sharing at the table; there has to be hugs and close contact. I can’t tell how you feel behind a mask, all I see is panic.”

In between taking care of her 16 staff members and slowly dismantling the bones of the business, the months that followed her decision have been a time for quiet reflection. And grieving. “I’ve been planting out my seedlings. Part of saying goodbye is doing a bit of stock-taking,” she says. “I’m evaluating what I’ve done and what I’ve learned. There is no manual that can prepare you, and so I find myself wanting to talk about this kind of loss, that many of us are processing, very plainly and honestly.”

DURING THIS TIME, KAREN HAS CHANNELLED HER ENERGY

into cooking for her family – husband David and teenage children Ben (16) and Maggie (13). What was previously a ritual daily sit-down meal now offered salvation as she pared down ingredients using whatever vegetables were available at her local Balmoral supermarket, and “lots of lentils!”. Take her Restrained Cauliflower Soup. There’s no stock or garlic used, she says. “I’ve always been a lazy home cook, the champion of the 15-minute meal, and

“I’m always reaching for the soul of the thing, extracting maximum flavour”

now we all have to make do with a lot less. I’ve learned to simplify things.”

She advises that the next time I prepare baby spinach, I throw a handful over steaming rice to allow it to just-about wilt and then serve it with sea salt and flaxseed oil, nothing else.

Instead of breaking broccoli into florets, she slices it into thin shapes “like the cross-section of a tree” to increase the surface area, then allows it to “cook”



VIETNAMESE LAMB SHOULDER



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BROCCOLI SALAD



Karen loves serving spinach wilted over warm rice, drizzled with flaxseed oil.



MELTING CARAMELISED CABBAGE



Karen with her son Ben..

in a dressing made with sesame oil, red wine vinegar, cumin and chilli. Cabbage, she says, will caramelise and exude a delightful nuttiness if you roast it slowly in the oven. She slathers a lamb shoulder in a Vietnamese-inspired marinade of fresh lime juice, fish sauce and garlic (from her third cookbook: book *Set a Table**), which also slides into the oven. This dish is reminiscent of The Kitchen and Karen's general approach to cooking. "I'm always reaching for the soul of the thing, extracting the maximum flavour out of every ingredient," she says.

Karen's career in the kitchen is entirely happenstance. At university, she pursued studies in social work (dropping out after two years) and taking up a secretarial course, which is, she says "one of the most useful things I ever did". She didn't cook much until a stint in the US in the 90s and later for a friend's deli in west London, where a long-haired Karen would rollerblade down King's Road to join a contingent of foreign cooks in whipping up new dishes for the popular space. Her mother, she says, was a powerhouse in the kitchen, exploring flavour with a sense of adventure and imparting practical wisdom, such as how to properly cream butter and sugar, and why one should add a pinch of sugar to a can of tomatoes. "She sought out the simple but delicious, like good pastry or fish and chips, or the best Portuguese rolls or ice cream that you could possibly find in the early 80s. My mom just had a sense for what was good," she says.

KAREN'S HERITAGE CAN BE TRACED somewhere between her father's home town of Genadendal (a Moravian mission station in the Overberg 90 minutes out of the city) to her mother's just on the outskirts of the Bo-Kaap ("Oh, she was a real city girl!"), her childhood spent in Heathfield, Fairways and Zeekoevlei on the Cape Flats, and her current home and businesses in gentrifying Woodstock.

"I've grown up with my roots in this fractured, painful place but I was determined to break through any restrictions placed on me. I've only come around to understanding my racial identity later in life," she says. Karen adds that many South Africans thrive on stereotypes: "I'm coloured but I sound

white. I'm a coconut to some. And some people can't understand how I could be the one who decorated the restaurant, for example. "Surely it was a white woman, you can see them think," she says. "But all of this, it's me. My parents instilled in my brother, Gavin, and I that we could achieve anything. But identity and race – it's so different for my children; they are fortunately unencumbered. So we have to remind them that not long ago their father and I would not have been allowed to marry or to even sit together." It's also because of her children that Karen says she's forced to interrogate her own prejudices every day.

While her customers have missed her famous hugs, Karen, under the tutelage of Ben – who she says "happily lives his life online" – has been broadcasting her meal prep videos on Instagram, a move she's come to enjoy greatly. "The main thing for me is to be useful and this is

"I believe in the connection built around sharing at the table"

one way I can still share my skills and my knowledge," she says. She hopes to embark on a mentorship project with her skilled staff to assist others who want to get into the cookery space.

For those who never ate at The Kitchen, and for those mourning its loss, perhaps it's Karen's children who best describe their mother's food through the feelings it evokes: "I feel rejuvenated. Mum's food is Netflix-worthy," says Ben. "I feel tranquil and peaceful after eating her food," says Maggie.

As for the future, Karen doesn't envision a restaurant happening anytime soon, but she is dreaming big – large tables outdoors in the fresh air and sunshine, where neighbours gather and share simple, nutritious food, and where connection is once again revitalised and diners feel safe enough to live unmasked. **W**

**Jacana is offering Set a Table at a special price of R200. All proceeds go to Karen's staff. Order at shop. karen@dudley.co.za. Find Karen on Facebook (Karen Dudley), Twitter (@lovethetkitchen) and Instagram (@CapeTownK)*

Karen's special menu

- RESTRAINED CAULIFLOWER SOUP
- VIETNAMESE LAMB SHOULDER
- SESAME-CURED BROCCOLI SALAD
- MELTING CARAMELISED CABBAGE
- BAKED BRINJAL WITH CARDAMOM-AND-DATE BUTTER
- POUFFE DOUGHNUTS (A BIT LIKE POFFERTJES, BUT BETTER!)



POUFFE DOUGHNUTS WITH BUTTER AND GOLDEN SYRUP

"One of the best things in the world are the poffertjes from the Dutch stand at the Community Chest Carnival at Maynardville. It is really all about the butter and powdered sugar. And those light-as-air mini-pancakes. I am very proud of this recipe. Though not the same as poffertjes, they are cloud-like doughnuts that, when dotted with butter, drizzled with Lyall's golden syrup and dusted with powdered sugar, hit all the right pleasure zones!"

Serves 6 (behaving well) or 4 (for supper!)

EASY

GREAT VALUE

Preparation: XX minutes,

plus 30 minutes' resting time

Cooking: XX minutes

plain yoghurt 320 g
free-range eggs 2, lightly beaten
salt a good pinch
plain flour 200 g
bicarbonate of soda 1 t
water 2 T (if the mixture seems too stiff)
oil 2½ cups, for deep-frying
golden syrup, for drizzling
icing sugar, for dusting

1 Mix all ingredients except the oil together in a big bowl using a wooden spoon. Add the water if your mixture seems too stiff. Allow the mixture to rest for 10–30 minutes.
2 Heat the oil in a wok or suitable pan and fry dessert-spoon sized dollops of the mixture into the oil, 5 or 6 at a time. Fry for about 2 minutes on each side until golden and cooked through. Watch that the oil does not get too hot. **3** Drain on kitchen



Clockwise from left to right:
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dolestrum harundi



paper. Transfer to a platter where you can drizzle them with golden syrup and dress with blobs of butter and finally dust with icing sugar before devouring.

RECIPE INFO

WINE:

VIETNAMESE LAMB SHOULDER

Serves 8

EASY

GREAT VALUE

Preparation: XX minutes

Cooking: XX minutes

sunflower oil 4 T
onions 2, halved and sliced
celery (use the leaves too) 2 sticks, sliced
medium carrots 2, scrubbed and sliced diagonally
garlic 8 cloves, minced or finely grated

fresh ginger 1 x 8 cm piece, sliced
lamb shoulder on the bone roughly 2.5 kg
salt, to taste
white pepper 2 t
ground coriander 1 T
star anise 1
lemongrass 1½ stalks, crushed (optional)
orange peel 5 long strips
honey ¾ cup
fish sauce ¾ cup
whisky or bourbon ½ cup (optional)
soya sauce 6 T
chicken stock 2 cups
lime juice ¼ cup (add more to taste to finish)

1 Preheat the oven to 180°C. In a heavy-based ovenproof casserole with a lid, fry the onions and celery in the sunflower oil over a medium heat for 5 minutes. Add the carrots, garlic and ginger and sauté for a further 10 minutes until golden brown. If the mixture feels a bit dry, drip in 1 or 2 T

water to help it along. You want a fragrant and hearty base for your braise! **2** Season the lamb all over with salt and 1 t white pepper, then nestle it into the vegetables. Add all the remaining ingredients. Place a circle (or oval) of baking paper on top of the casserole. Cover the dish with the lid of the casserole dish. You could use a double layer of foil to cover the casserole tightly. Bake for 1 hour, then reduce the heat to 160°C and cook for a further 2 hours. The lamb should be meltingly tender. You could tear chunks from the bone, scoop out the vegetables and pour over extra sauce. At this point, once your casserole has cooled completely, you could refrigerate it and let it rest overnight. This, of course, has the best results. When you are ready to serve, spoon off any excess fat and reheat gently at 180°C for 30 minutes.

RECIPE INFO

WINE:

SESAME-CURED BROCCOLI SALAD

"Melissa Clark's recipe for this broccoli salad had me intrigued because, boy, do I have a slew of broccoli salads in my repertoire! The method of the vinegar and oil 'curing' the raw broccoli to a bright green has seduced me. I could eat the whole bowl!"

Serves 6 to 8

EASY

GREAT VALUE

Preparation: XX minutes,

plus 1 hour's standing time

Cooking: XX minutes

red wine vinegar 2 t
Maldon salt 1 t, plus more to taste
broccoli 2 heads, sliced as thinly as possible
olive oil ¾ cup
garlic 4 large cloves, minced
cumin seeds 2 t
sesame oil 2 t
chili flakes a large pinch

1 Mix the vinegar and salt in a large heat-proof bowl. Add the sliced broccoli and toss to combine. **2** Heat the olive oil in a pan over a medium-high heat. Add the garlic and cumin seeds and cook, stirring continually, until fragrant, for about 1 minute. Do not let the garlic burn. If necessary, remove the pan from the heat and let the garlic and cumin cook in the residual heat of the oil. **3** Stir in the sesame oil and the chilli flakes, pour the mixture over the broccoli and toss well to coat. Allow the salad to sit for at least an hour at room temperature for the flavours to develop and the broccoli to "cure" in the flavoured oil. The salad can be refrigerated for up to 48 hours. Before serving, taste and adjust the seasoning to see if you need more salt or black pepper. Serve at room temperature.

RECIPE INFO

WINE:

MELTING CARAMELISED CABBAGE

Serves 4 to 6

EASY

GREAT VALUE

Preparation: XX minutes

Cooking: XX minutes

olive oil 4 T



BAKED BRINJALS WITH
CARDAMOM-AND-DATE BUTTER

medium onions 2, chopped
garlic 3 cloves, minced
ginger 1 x 2 cm piece, minced
ground coriander 1 t
ground cumin 1 t
fennel seeds 1 t
chilli flakes ½ t
tomato paste 4 T
ripe fresh tomatoes (preferably plum) 5, diced or (1 x 400 g can chopped tomatoes)
sugar or honey 1 T
soya sauce 2 T
salt 1 t
white pepper, to taste
vegetable oil 4 T
medium cabbage 1, sliced into 8 wedges with the core intact (it keeps the wedges together)
water ½ cup
Greek yoghurt ½ cup, for serving
dill, a few sprigs, picked, for serving

1 Fry the onion, garlic and ginger in the olive oil over a medium-high heat until the onion is translucent, about 8–10 minutes. Add the coriander, cumin, fennel and chilli and fry for a further 5 minutes, stirring regularly. Add the tomato paste, fresh or

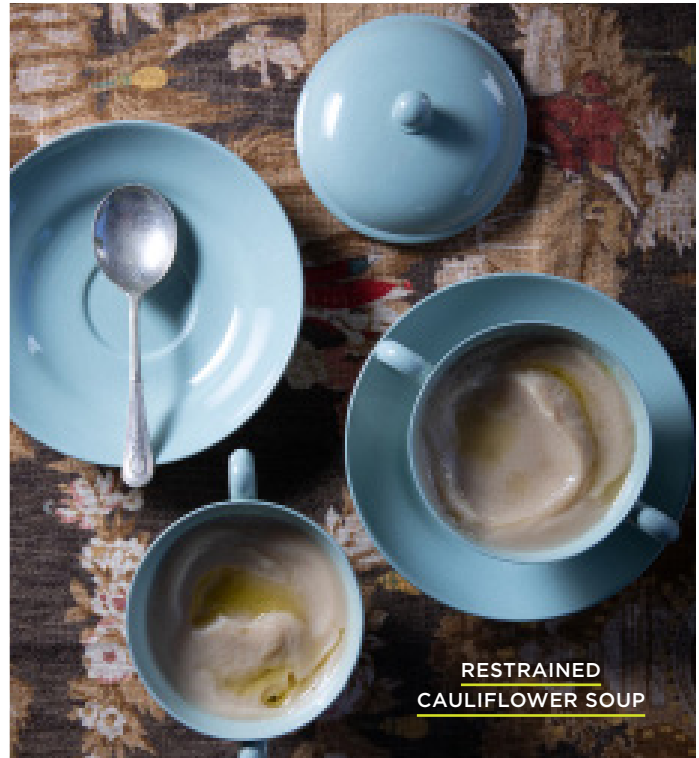
canned tomatoes, soya sauce, sugar, salt, and pepper. Let the sauce bubble away for a further 15 minutes over a low heat until it thickens slightly. Pour the tomato sauce into a baking dish (preferably with a lid) that you will use for the caramelised cabbage. **2** In a large pan, heat the vegetable oil and fry the cabbage wedges, cut side down, over a high heat until they caramelise on the edges, about 3–5 minutes on each side. You will need good tongs to turn them. If the wedges disintegrate slightly, use your tongs to piece them together into the dish on top of the tomato sauce. **3** When all are done, pour the water around the cabbage wedges and drizzle the dish with splash of olive oil. Season the whole dish with salt and pepper. **4** Put the lid on the dish or cover tightly with foil and bake for 30 minutes at 180°C. Remove the lid or foil and bake uncovered for a further 10–15 minutes. The cabbage will be incredibly soft and yielding. Serve with the yoghurt, dill, and a drizzle of your favourite chilli sauce if you are so inclined.

RECIPE INFO

WINE:



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RESTRAINED
CAULIFLOWER SOUP

BAKED BRINJALS WITH BLACK CARDAMOM-AND-DATE BUTTER

"In this dish, inspired by Diana Henry, brinjals are baked whole and then become receptacles for a glorious black cardamom and date butter."

Serves XX

EASY

GREAT VALUE

Preparation: XX minutes

Cooking: XX minutes

medium-large brinjals 6
vegetable oil 2 T

For the butter:

black cardamom 6 pods, split open and seeds removed (you can use green cardamom here if you prefer, but the flavour will be less smoky)

butter 100 g

dates 8, pitted and chopped

garlic 2 cloves, minced

chilli flakes ¼ t (or 1 t chilli oil)

ground ginger ½ t

ground turmeric 1 t

1 Preheat the oven to 180°C. Brush the brinjals with a little vegetable oil and lay on a shallow baking sheet. Prick them a few times with a skewer, then roast for 35–40 minutes, or until completely soft

and a bit deflated. **2** Meanwhile, make the butter. Blitz the cardamom seeds in a coffee grinder or grind in a mortar and pestle. Place the cardamom in a food processor with the remaining ingredients and pulse until all the ingredients are mashed together. Shape into a log on a sheet of baking paper and twist the ends to close. Chill until needed. **3** Split the brinjals down the middle and fluff up the flesh using a fork. Insert slices of the cardamom butter into the brinjals and allow to melt.

RECIPE INFO

WINE:

RESTRAINED CAULIFLOWER SOUP

"I have adapted a 'genius' recipe from Paul Bertolli for a family of four. In the quiet of my lockdown kitchen, I showed unusual restraint in following his recipe EXACTLY. Trust me when I say that its beauty is in its unadorned absolute simplicity, which defies customary habit to add stuff (Cream? Spice?) for fear that a dish might not be exciting enough. This time is teaching us that attempts to add too much in an effusive attempt to make things better sometimes masks true beauty and simplicity."

Serves 4

EASY

GREAT VALUE?

Preparation: XX minutes

Cooking: XX minutes

olive oil 2 T

medium onions 2, thinly sliced

fresh cauliflower 400 g, broken into florets

salt, to taste

hot water ¾ cups

extra virgin olive oil, for serving

freshly ground black pepper, for serving

1 Sweat the onions in the olive oil over low heat for 10–15 minutes until translucent without letting them brown. Check a few times and stir so that the onions do not caramelize. **2** Add the cauliflower, salt and ¼ cup hot water. Increase the heat slightly and cover the pot tightly. Stew the cauliflower for 12–15 minutes, or until tender. Add 2 ½ cups hot water, bring to a low simmer, and cook for a further 20 minutes. **3** Purée the soup using a stick blender or in batches in a regular blender until very smooth and creamy. (I strain the liquid from the cauliflower, then pop the cauliflower without liquid into the blender and then add the liquid in a slow stream to with the motor running. This makes for a very velvety soup.) **4** Let the soup stand for 20 minutes. It will thicken slightly. Thin it with the remaining water and reheat. Serve hot, drizzled with a thin stream of extra virgin olive oil and black pepper.

RECIPE INFO