

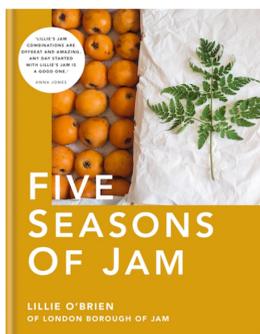
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Books

Unmixed Fruits

By [Deborah Reid](#)

Five Seasons of Jam by Lillie O'Brien, 190 pages, Kyle Books, hardcover, £20 / \$24.99 (2018).



Lillie O'Brien is lavish when it comes to the senses and pleasure and a minimalist on instruction, assuming the reader is familiar with the basics. She's a flavor alchemist whose jams are brimming with New Wave charm. Andrew Marvell's "green thought in a green shade" springs to mind while making her Green Gooseberry & Bay Leaf Jam. Like a spring tonic, the woody, herbaceous bay calms the fruit's mouth-puckering acidity, which in cooking takes on the pink blush of an English rose (due to heat, lemon juice, and the metal of the pan). She melts soft black licorice candy into raspberries, infuses strawberries with anise-scented fennel pollen, and tames sour rhubarb with resinous green cardamom. O'Brien is a trailblazer, and by her actions she encourages the reader to tune into their palate and use the book as a jumping-off point: "Adventure and discovery is what I would like you to take from these recipes, so be playful."

As a young girl growing up in Melbourne, Australia, she says, "I was so excited by the process of trapping flavours and colours in a jar that would then sit untouched for as long as two years before we would twist off the lid and immediately be transported back to their spirit." Now a Londoner, O'Brien grew her skills working as pastry chef at St. John Bread and Wine. There she internalized the ethos of seasonality and drew a connection between waste and recklessness. The evocative photos are like the prelude to still-life paintings. They together with a small measure of the book's character are reminiscent of Fergus Henderson's 1999 classic cookbook, *Nose to Tail Eating: A Kind of British Cooking*.

O'Brien began selling jams at a local market in 2011 and one year later opened the London Borough of Jam in Hackney, east London. The small shop is open only on weekends, but the jams are stocked by tony sellers, such as Harvey Nichols, The Conran Shop, and Violet Cakes, as well as Hart Bageri in Copenhagen, and Japanese fans can shop from a dedicated site in her online store.

She luxuriates in the most prolific part of the preserving year, from mid-spring to late fall, dividing it into four distinct microseasons, to which she tacks on the fifth season of winter. Herbs such as sweet cicely along with nuts, cordials, and spices distinguish her extraordinary jams. Finishing quince jam with rosewater compounds the fruit's exotic allure. It's restorative to scoop a spoonful from the jar on a gray day in January; its crystalline coral pink conjures up a Mediterranean sunset.

Peppered throughout are tips and quirky notes on things like the size of the largest gooseberry on record, from the Egton Bridge Old Gooseberry Society competition — 62 grams (the largest in Ed's garden is 6 grams). Short essays on seasonal ingredients and the people who grow them anchor each seasonal chapter. "Alive" (mid- to late spring) opens with a trip to Brogdale Farm, home of the British National Fruit Collection. O'Brien calls summer a season of "vivid sweetness." The book has an almanac-like aura. "I hope this book will encourage you to get outdoors and start discovering what is around you, making the natural connection between the ingredients that grow together at the same time of year," she says.

When it comes to jam making, she's clear about the terms. "Fruit-driven" flavor owes much to quick cooking in small batches. Sweetness comes from caster, or superfine, sugar, which melts quickly and is more readily available than the unrefined sugar she uses in the jam she sells. There's no sign of commercial pectin, since part of the pleasure comes from the magic that happens when intervention is kept to a minimum. For low-pectin fruit, she adds homemade Green Apple Stock Jelly. Using less sugar is a point she presses — a maximum ratio of three parts to four parts fruit. O'Brien implores the reader to taste the raw fruit first and add sugar accordingly, which might be disconcerting for the novice. For faster cooking and maximum evaporation, she uses wide, shallow French Mauviel copper jam pans. Recipes are kept mostly to four ingredients, and although O'Brien is short on the page, she relishes the time between making and enjoying her labors: "Jam cannot be rushed."

Some fruits, including medlars and Mirabelle plums, may be hard to come by; the same is true of the key ingredients of items with which she stocks her English larder, such as cherry blossom syrup, pickled green almonds, and dandelion vinegar. She skims lightly through the discussion of sterilization and set point. Cooking times are variable, but that's to be expected when dealing with your own local fruit varieties. O'Brien has a knack for describing the cooking process; about jelly she says: "A good indication that it is ready is if you stir the boiling liquid with a wooden spoon and find that the bubbles rise up and look as if they will overflow, the top appearing almost foam-like." (See the photo on the back cover.)

This is not a book solely for experts. With its emphasis on experimentation, it's well suited to any curious, bold cook. O'Brien's jams may be the darlings of the gastro set, but her approach is down to earth and democratic. "There is true spiritual pleasure to be had from jam. It isn't just a twee or fusty undertaking." ●

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