Iteration 1: Alex Jackson cooks Patience Gray

The Vittles Cookbook Season

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> *You don't need to know that Patience Gray was almost 70 when Honey from a Weed was released to recognise it as an example of late style. There is a sense of urgency about the book, that the knowledge she had been accumulating for decades from trips across Apulia, Catalonia, Provence and the Cyclades, knowledge that doesn't come from book but comes from experience, hardship and repetition, needed to be put down somewhere. It is a strange old book — beyond aspirational in its ambition, it describes a lifestyle, a knowledge of the ground, that was and is slowly vanishing from this part of the world, with little thought given to the considerations of a housewife living in a city or indeed any sense of how the book is economically viable. In some ways the book is Gray stripping herself of everything — basic amenities, the trappings of modern living, her Britishness — to the bare essentials, even if those bare essentials somehow include 3 (three) mortars and pestles.*
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> *Honey from a Weed is therefore a cookbook I love to read more than I actually cook from, although there is a recipe for green sauce that cuts it close with Olney's almost-100%-garlic aioli recipe for the condiment I've made the most. I do see it as a chef's cookbook, not in the way those huge hyper-luxe tomes of some three star Basque restaurant are chef's cookbooks, but after*

> *learning all that technique Gray's pared-back philosophy represents a reset. In some ways it reminds me of those musicians who play extremely technical jazz over at the Vortex in Dalston, next week going over to Cafe Oto to blow air arrhythmically into a muted trumpet. In that sense, I can see how reading Honey From A Weed could be liberating — it might change the way you cook, or might take you out of kitchens entirely.*
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> *It was no surprise to me that Alex Jackson, one of our most thoughtful of chefs, chose Patience Gray for the first iteration of this cookbook season, and this particular recipe. I've always had the feeling that if left to his own devices he would just put beans and bitter weeds on a menu; instead he is now at Noble Rot in Soho, where he works on his own iteration of sorts, translating some of the old-stagers of The Gay Hussar into the 21st century. He has so far (cleverly) avoided putting the cherry soup on on the basis that it is 'unseasonal' — you can't help but feel Gray would approve of the excuse.*

Iteration 1: Alex Jackson cooks Patience Gray

Patience Gray's *Honey from a Weed* is my favourite cookbook. It's a book about "Fasting and Feasting": a cycle of hardship and plenty that was for millennia familiar to the people of the areas of the Mediterranean she tells us about. Gray writes so terribly well about 'basic food', by which I mean recipes that came from real hardship. As she writes of the island of Naxos, "poverty at all times stared one in the face". One aspect of the 'honey from the weeds' of the title is the knowledge of bitter foods, and how to transform them into something delicious, a thing "handed down, chiefly from Mother to child, while stooping to gather the plants".

When I first started cooking professionally I made a Gray-ian soup of mixed wild greens that I think was a fourth-hand recipe, most probably never written down, from my head chef's friend's grandmother in southern Italy: a *molto rustico* broth of cicoria, tenerume (courgette shoots), puntarelle, dandelion and garlic, with a little fried soft salami for fatty flavour. Forgive me, for I knew not what the hell I was doing: the broth was insipid, slightly slimy and irredeemably bitter. I remember a restaurant reviewer coming in that night: not ideal, although quite charitably the only negative thing she said about my soup was that it was served cold.

If I had read Gray before making this dish, I would have known that for the people of the land these weeds were a last resort; something to eat when there was nothing else, for without good olive oil, fresh cheese, ripe citrus, salt pork, croutons or vinegar, these plants tasted disgustingly bitter. In their raw state these leaves are unpalatable, but as Gray knew,

with the touch of an experienced cook the harshness could be tempered. A few chunks of soft fennel sausage, fried at the start to render its fat, a few cubes of potato, salty sheep's cheese, olive oil and a little squeeze of lemon. Starch, fat and acid help to make the bitterness palatable, and suddenly the soup is balanced: delicious.

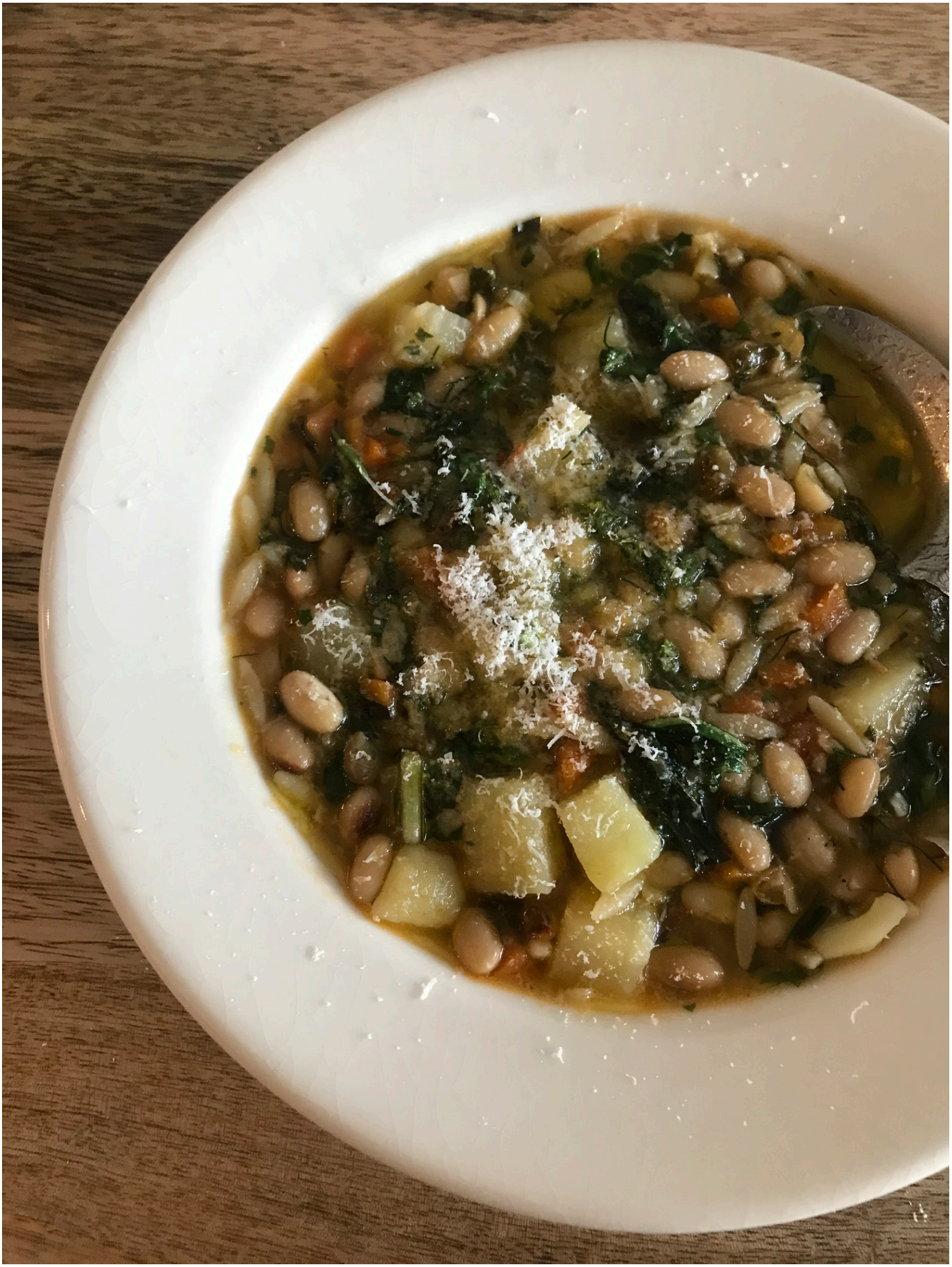
Last November I was lucky enough to be invited to spend a week in Sicily at Anna Tasca Lanza's cookery school for a workshop exploring the theme of bitterness. Its film, *Amaro*, explores the depth of meaning associated with the bitter taste, and the glorious complexity of food culture in Sicily. As Fabrizia Lanza, the director of the school, puts it: "Bitterness is a taste that is as profound in its flavour as it is in its cultural implications". In Sicily, as in many other places, foraged food is the food of the poor, and a deep knowledge of the land comes with a stigma attached. One of the aims of the workshop was to explore the idea of how to tame this bitterness. With Sicily's famous citrus fruits – an acid to cut through the bitter; with fat – a fresh, rich sheep's milk ricotta, and a drizzle of new season green-gold olive oil; with salt – a strong brine to submerge an initially inedible olive, or a weaker one to gently pickle; it's possible to leach out excess bitterness and replace it with a complex umami.

My mum's family is from Mid Wales – at least four generations of smallholders – a people with a long-rooted connection to the country. But apart from a basketful of blackberries or a few field mushrooms I can't ever remember hearing about anything foraged. My grandma was a chef, but there was never so much anything resembling a nettle soup or a dandelion salad on her table. Perhaps for them poverty never extended that far, or perhaps they never cared for it, but perhaps there's a knowledge that we somehow forgot. I spotted a few Bay Bolete mushrooms growing in my uncle's garden once: he said I was welcome to have them, not realising that you could eat them. I cannot help but wonder about what led us down this route: have we lost an understanding that we once had? Fabrizia Lanza had a theory that the industrial revolution, as much as the good it has done for the British, may have been a factor. Mass migration of the rural population to the cities pulled them out of poverty and into work, but machines and factories made us forget what it is to live off the land. They allowed us to leave behind the flavour of bitter weeds and grow a taste for tinned beans instead.

A shame, for what is life without bitterness? And how much more delicious is a meal full of weeds? Thankfully there are still a few eccentrics, cooks, eccentric cooks and general enthusiasts who realise that a walk around the fields of Sicily, the forests of Poland or the towpaths of London can become a little adventure. Thom Eagle, a cook and food writer who joined us on our trip to Sicily, writes of the British and "our general fear of wildness", and we are surely almost alone on the continent of Europe in our alimentary distrust of anything

alien. In her chapter on Edible Weeds, Patience notes that, “Edwardian Englishmen laughed at French governesses for picking wild chervil, dandelions and sorrel in spring for salads, for cutting nettles-heads for soup … Knowledge of these and other plants was for centuries our common European heritage. The English, once familiar with these weeds and their specific virtues, as described in early herbals, are now showing a revived interest in this heritage.”

In that spirit, and once again furloughed, I took myself off for a walk through the Olympic Park and came back with a plastic bag full of weeds – dandelion, nettles, wild fennel and sorrel – and made a soup. I’ve never read anyone write quite so beautifully about boiling beans as Gray does in *Honey from a Weed*, and “La Zuppa di Fagioli seemed right for a crisp Sunday afternoon in November. This is a recipe that tempers bitterness with fats and starch, but also one in which bitterness helps to cut through the rich broth. She encourages the addition of the bone from a prosciutto, which when simmered for a long time with the beans imparts a deep flavour. I didn’t have a ham bone to hand but, as she explains, any salted and cured pork will do the job nicely; from a few scraps of prosciutto fat to a piece of proper green bacon or some thick slices of Polish smoked sausage from your local polski sklep. All would be equally delicious – I didn’t have any of them this time and it was still pretty good.



Serves 2, with leftovers

½ packet dried white beans (soaked overnight)

Some kind of salted or cured pork – scraps of ham fat, some diced pancetta/guanciale, a piece of smoked bacon, or slices of smoked Polish sausage, cotechino, butifarra, etc.

1 large onion, sliced into half moons

2 fat cloves of garlic, sliced

1 bay leaf

1 tsp fennel seeds

A celery heart, sliced

1 carrot, diced

1 peeled tomato from a tin, washed of its weird juice

1 potato, diced

A handful of soup pasta, smashed up penne, or broken spaghetti

A big handful of weeds – e.g. dandelion, sorrel, nettles, wild fennel – washed well and roughly chopped

Olive oil, to serve

Cheese, to serve (if you like)

- Soak the beans overnight in cold water. In the morning, drain and wash well, then bring to the boil in unsalted water. Boil for five minutes, then drain, wash and cover with fresh water. Bring to the boil, drizzle in some olive oil, pop in a clove of garlic (no salt) and simmer for around an hour until your beans are soft. This might take longer.
- Meanwhile, if you have some kind of salt pork, then cut it into appropriate shapes and fry it in a lick of olive oil. When some of the fat has rendered, add the sliced onions to the pot with a pinch of salt, the bay leaf and fennel seeds. Slice the celery heart and garlic, dice the carrot, and add to the pot. Fry slowly, for a good half an hour or more, until nice and soft.
- Squish the tomato into the pot with your hand and stir into the soffrito, followed by the potato.

- Next, add your beans to the pot, followed by a good few spoons of their cooking liquid and some water (I usually add half cooking liquid and half water) to cover and then some. Bring to the boil, then reduce to a simmer and cook for half an hour until all is soft and tastes good.
- Add the pasta, cook until al dente, then add the chopped weeds and stir. The soup should be quite thick but add water if you would prefer it thinner.
- Let the soup rest for 5-10 minutes – the pasta will finish cooking off the heat - before serving with a big glug of your finest olive oil and some grated cheese.

> *Alex Jackson is a chef and writer based in London. Formerly the head chef at Sardine, he is now the head chef of Noble Rot in Soho. He was paid for this newsletter.*

aleeshiamtozzi@gmail.c Subscribe