

EATING & DRINKING

IN MY PANTRY

Robyn Eckhardt

In Italy's Piedmont, the cookbook author is provisioning prudently, cooking shrewdly and eating very well

FOOD HAS LONG been the lens through which Robyn Eckhardt views the world. Together with her husband and collaborator, photographer David Hagerman, the Michigan-born cookbook author has spent decades living in China and Southeast Asia, where she established her blog, Eating Asia. She's also traveled Turkey, familiarizing herself with the cuisine for her cookbook "Istanbul & Beyond," published in 2017. Now Ms. Eckhardt and Mr. Hagerman make their home in a small agricultural village in northern Italy's Piedmont region called Carpeneto.

"One of the reasons we moved here is because the ingredients are so incredible—it really is possible to eat 'kilometer zero,'" said Ms. Eckhardt, using the Italian term for food produced, sold and eaten locally. Though the coronavirus crisis has changed the way she buys food—limiting trips to the market, wearing gloves and a mask, vigorously washing produce and outside clothes once home—getting enough to eat is no worry. "There are farmers all around us," she explained. "They say, 'You know, things don't stop growing because of a pandemic.'" Here, Ms. Eckhardt offers a peek into her pantry, with tips on smart stocking and making the most of what you have.

The staples I can't live without are: legumes, like borlotti beans, chickpeas, cannellini. Grains—farro is my favorite. Also bulghur, freekeh, wild rice I bring from the States, and brown basmati. I have to have a couple pasta shapes, usually

a noodle type thing and some sort of hollow tube. And popcorn, for Netflix bingeing.

I organize my ingredients: in categories. I have a couple shelves devoted to Asian grocery items, like preserved dried black beans and rice noodles. One shelf is for canned goods, one for things I've canned myself—I do a lot of that in the fall, tomato sauce, apple sauce. On top of the counter, all the jars of beans and grains are in one corner, and by the stove, Asian sauces and condiments are on one side, more Mediterranean items, like olive oils and vinegars, are on the other.

What you'd learn from looking in my pantry is: a lot about the stages of our expat life. Living in Asia and spending time in Turkey and now being here. Our diet is mostly Mediterranean, but I need my China fix once or twice a week.

Some foods I've learned to live without are: most Mexican ingredients. A variety of dried chiles. I do bring back chimayo chile powder from New Mexico, where my mom lives, but no tortillas. No epazote. No any of that. I actually wouldn't say I've learned to live without it, but I don't really have a choice.

The most versatile ingredient I use is: tomato paste. You can make a lot of Turkish dishes with tomato paste and some nice red chile flakes. I make a tomato and white bean stew that tastes very Turkish, using Italian pantry staples.

The pantry items I live in fear of running out of are: soy sauce and Chinese black vinegar. And a chile oil I make with Sichuan peppercorns I bring from the U.S. I'm almost out, and I'm going to be very sad.

The hero of my pantry is: farro or anchovies. Sometimes when I contemplate what to

have for dinner, I think farro—and then, "Oh, farro again." But it always ends up being a great meal. Making farrotto doesn't require as much attention as risotto and it's truly satisfying. And you can do so much with a well-preserved anchovy fillet.

The ingredient I find most challenging to use is: polenta. I have yet to make one that satisfies me. I would love to know the secret to making a fluffy, flawlessly smooth one.

My most cherished stock is: wine I bought from producers within a two-hour drive of my house that is not precious and



DOLCE VITA Clockwise from left: Robyn Eckhardt in her Italian kitchen with Mr. Peanut the cat and George the dog; olive oils in her pantry; dried porcini mushrooms; a corner cabinet with shelves that pull out.



didn't cost an arm and a leg. Every bottle is a memory of the person who made it.

Keeping a well-stocked kitchen is important because: we're not doing much besides sitting in the house, doing laundry and reading the bad news. But at least at the end of the day, I can come into the kitchen, pull out some cannellini beans and throw them in a pot with garlic and bay leaves and sofrito, and they will be delicious. And we will be really happy in that moment.

—Edited from an interview by Gabriella Gershenson

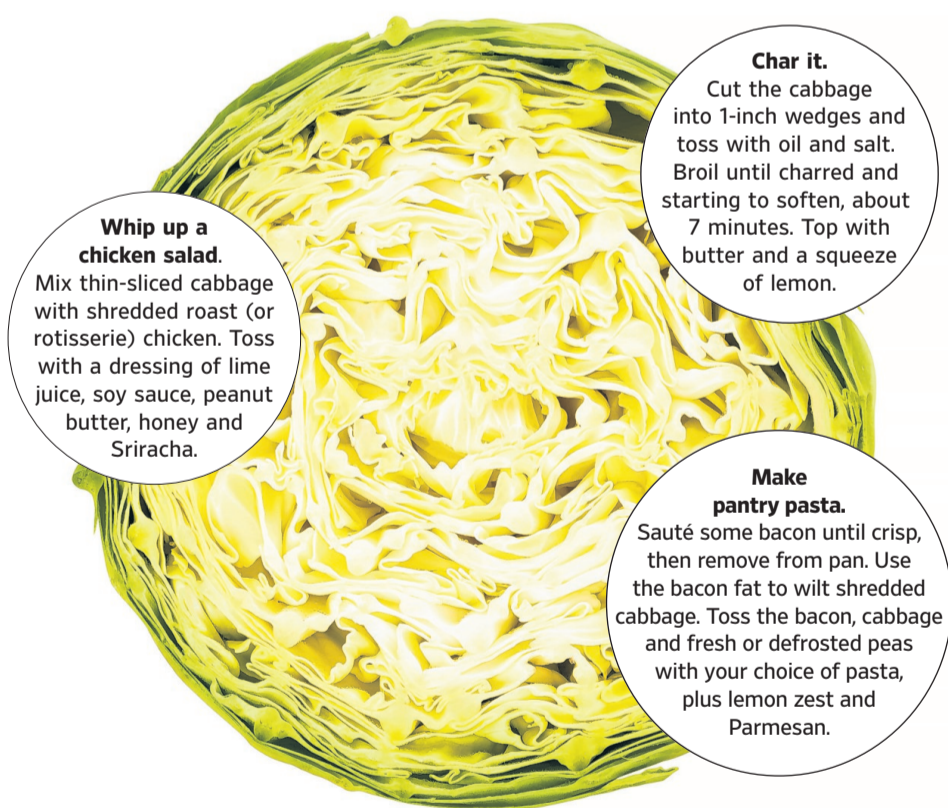


▶ Find Ms. Eckhardt's recipe for tomato and white bean stew at wsj.com/news/life-arts/food-cooking-drink

GAMECHANGER

Use Your Head

Cabbage, trendy? It's happened before—with good reason



Whip up a chicken salad. Mix thin-sliced cabbage with shredded roast (or rotisserie) chicken. Toss with a dressing of lime juice, soy sauce, peanut butter, honey and Sriracha.

Char it. Cut the cabbage into 1-inch wedges and toss with oil and salt. Broil until charred and starting to soften, about 7 minutes. Top with butter and a squeeze of lemon.

Make pantry pasta. Sauté some bacon until crisp, then remove from pan. Use the bacon fat to wilt shredded cabbage. Toss the bacon, cabbage and fresh or defrosted peas with your choice of pasta, plus lemon zest and Parmesan.

CABBAGE IS ONE of those frumpy vegetables that had a brief but bright star-turn a few years back. Chefs of great renown began singing its praises and placing it at the center of the plate. More than a few journalists, inevitably, called it "the new kale." The spotlight, inevitably, moved on.

Now cabbage is back. With so many people stuck at home and cooking, a vegetable that stores well and is inexpensive, very versatile, and packed with vitamin C and calcium is one you want to get to know.

According to Aliza Green's indispensable book "Starting With Ingredients," cabbage was highly prized by the ancient Egyptians and the Greeks, making it the earliest cultivated member of the Brassica family. (Cousins include cauliflower, broccoli


Variety Matters Green and red cabbage, with thick, smooth leaves, are widely available and a good fit for fresh and braised recipes. **Savoy**, with its frilly green leaves, has a softer flavor and is tender even when raw. **Napa**, an oblong Asian variety, is delicately flavored and ideal for slaws or in miso soup.

How to Buy and Store

Choose a head that is heavy for its size with crisp, firmly packed leaves. Whole heads, wrapped in plastic, will keep a week or longer in the fridge.

and Brussels sprouts.) Preserved cabbage, a forerunner of what we think of as sauerkraut, fed the builders of the Great Wall of China in the third century B.C.

Fermenting cabbage is still a great option—if you don't mind a bucket of stinky brine in your kitchen. And there are many far less malodorous ways to use this vegetable, too. Cabbage's meaty succulence makes it ideal for braising, with traditional Western companions such as caraway and apple, or Eastern ones such as miso and lime. I also like to use it to bulk out a stir-fry or to offset the carbs in a spring pasta. (Most of the time, my 8-year-old daughter doesn't even know it's there.) The scraps, if you have any, are terrific added to a comforting miso or chicken soup. —Jane Black




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