

# Canadian blogger makes a mess in the kitchen

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**By T. Susan Chang**

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If there's any stereotype about bakers or pastry chefs it's that they're precision workers, like surgeons with measuring spoons. Canadian blogger Charmian Christie has built a following on [onthemessybaker.com](http://onthemessybaker.com) by turning that notion on its head. Her recipes are forgiving and full of tips for the unsure cook. Her app, Kitchen Disasters & Fixes, acknowledges that anything can go wrong, and will, yet not all is lost.

Now in "The Messy Baker," Christie offers her secrets and specialties in a volume. A stuffed focaccia is not unlike a pizza, though it's got more rise and airy crumb. Dried tomatoes and handfuls of Parmesan deliver jolt after jolt of umami, while arugula and cilantro make it green enough to count as a one-stop dinner.

Burnt caramel and sea salt sticky buns are an over-the-top indulgence. But they have probably twice as much sauce as they strictly need, and just as the book's title promises, they're very, very messy. Still, no one is likely to complain, and the flaky sea salt finish is a brilliant addition. Cherry and chipotle brownies are just faintly smoky and spicy, but that's a good match for the dark and fruity contribution of the cherries. It's a firm sort of batter, but it bakes up into a brownie with decent chew.

Two experiments with scratch doughs give mixed results. I've made puff pastry (both regular and blitz) many times, but Christie's method for "cheater's puff pastry," while ingenious and fun, yields a dough with little rise. So what it lacks in flakiness it makes up for in crispness; the base ably supports a savory tart of buttery leeks, chur mushrooms, and Gruyere.

"No-fail pastry," a vinegar-based short crust, goes with a batch of raspberry "butter tarts," the Canadian special whose filling is a bit like pecan pie, minus the nuts. The dough doesn't yield its target number unless rolled thinner than the designated 1/8 -inch (and the scraps rerolled). I end up with tart crusts so thin I retrieve some of them from the pan in crumbles, yet that means they also melt in the mouth.



THE MESSY BAKER

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I have better luck with phyllo (be sure to check your package for sizing: Christie uses 14-by-18-inch sheets; my market carries only 9-by-14-inch). Her Moroccan lamb bundles conceal an aromatic mixture of meat, dried fruit, warm spices, and cilantro. They're hard to resist wrapped into blunt rolls with shattery jackets. Spinach and dill pockets are a slightly dryer, cheesier spanakopita, and easy to pull together for a dressed-up appetizer.

Here and there are flourless recipes, like standard-issue roasted cauliflower, with fairly restrained smoked-paprika spicing. And a couple of recipes never see the inside of an oven at all, proving that "The Messy Baker" is just as comfortable with the stovetop as the oven.

Zucchini fritters would be a pity to miss out on, as their fresh green flavor is set off wonderfully by dill, mint, and garlicky tzatziki sauce. And chocolate-orange gingersnap drops are one of those ridiculously easy desserts you're almost embarrassed to make — little more than store-bought ginger snaps, orange peel, and chocolate, melted together and chilled in the fridge. Mine suffered a subtraction disease; no matter which shelf I hid them on, each time I checked on them there were fewer.

Christie has a relaxed approach to baking, which means that the occasional kerfuffle over details is unavoidable. There's no salt in the recipe, should we add some anyway? Shouldn't the edges of the puff pastry dough be trimmed? Is "dried coriander" Canadian for "coriander seed"? Perhaps for the very reason that Christie doesn't get worked up over the small stuff, my results rarely turned out looking like the photographs. They went down easily all the same, and if our plates were crumb-strewn and the counters a disaster, I dare say they were right in keeping with "The Messy Baker" spirit.

*T. Susan Chang can be reached at [admin@tsusanchang.com](mailto:admin@tsusanchang.com).*