# The Goods Shed

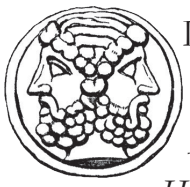
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## Leftovers



Leftovers, endings and beginnings in one, are a curious business. And the way magazines and websites write about them you'd think they were a business: *Here, six top chefs and food writers offer their creative and unusual tips on how to use up your Christmas leftovers* and *Don't let your leftovers go to waste, turn them into something surprising and delicious with a great selection of leftover recipes at JamieOliver.com*.

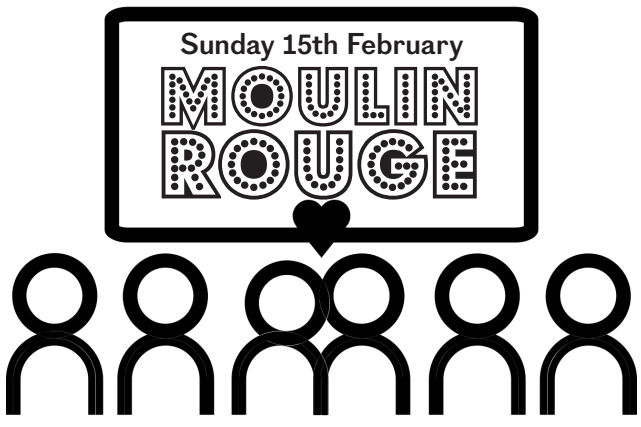
Now you'll pardon me, I'm sure, but food that's "creative and unusual" or, even worse, "surprising" makes me wary. Also, I often find the things that these Top Chefs list as "leftovers" to be a rather perplexing collection—roast potatoes being a prime example at this time of year—I have never been blessed with a surfeit of these that couldn't be solved by leaving them in plain sight on the kitchen counter.


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The other face of leftovers stands on "waste not, want not" morality. And however much that is a sensible doctrine, it's also solemn, and somehow ends up sounding rather dull and holier-than-thou, *cooking with food that you might otherwise simply throw out*[1] or, worse, stupid: "One evening, as I stared into my refrigerator, which was packed with food after a photo shoot, I thought, 'Man, there is nothing in here to eat.'"[2]

One of the problems here is the recipe-inspired fiction that every cook starts every meal afresh with an empty cupboard and a shopping list. This illusion is compounded by supermarket "ready" meals and television shows where the wine you're going to use is already poured into a glass (not your own) and every other ingredient is pre-laid out in matching dishes—not one of which contains a stingy portion of stew, or a substantial clump of yesterday's broccoli.

It's the liberating recognition that meals don't appear in life one-at-a-time that turns leftovers into ingredients in their own right. This key observation is exemplified by the queen of continuous cooking, Tamar Adler. Her book *The Everlasting Meal*[3] is a 238-page love story to the endless cycle of bits and pieces that live from one meal to the next in and out of our fridges and cupboards. She even runs "bring your own" cooking classes: attendees are asked to show up with "fading vegetables, old herbs, jars half full of whatever, leftover pasta" from which they then create a meal from scratch.
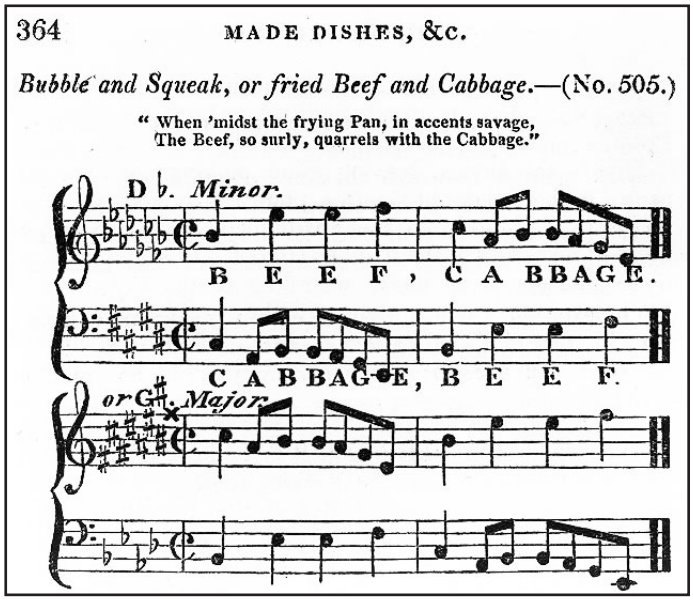
### Ingredients in their own right.

Whilst it is hardly practical to give a recipe for everyday leftovers, there are some meals that **must** be made from something you have already cooked (and, it follows, if you've already cooked

it, you've probably already eaten it once). Think of Bubble and Squeak, Ribollita or Fried Rice. You can't go to the shops and buy the ingredients for these dishes: you can't buy cooked cabbage or stale bread, you have to have them on hand. And, when freshly-cooked, rice is totally unsuitable for Fried Rice: "The rice is too delicate and soft to fry and it will go very sticky if more heat is applied". [4]

## Evolution of a dish of leftovers

Bubble and Squeak (as I have ever known it) is a comfortable mixture of cooked vegetables, mixed together and then fried. Surprising, then, to find it has not always been this way. Originally Bubble and Squeak, an English dish, was made from slices of leftover beef carefully reheated in a frying pan. These were kept warm and then some cooked cabbage was fried up in the same pan, in the same fat—so taking on some of the beefy flavour. The cabbage was served with the slices of beef on top. There are descriptions of this from the eighteenth century, and William Kitchiner (in the *Cook's Oracle*, 1829) gives a little tune to illustrate the sound of the bubbling and squeaking of the two ingredients.


364 MADE DISHES, &c.

*Bubble and Squeak, or fried Beef and Cabbage.*—(No. 505.)

"When 'midst the frying Pan, in accents savage,
The Beef, so surly, quarrels with the Cabbage."



Colcannon was a sort-of similar Irish dish of potato and cabbage freshly cooked and mashed together with milk and butter (often flavoured with onion), served particularly at Halloween (sometimes with charms in it, like Christmas Pudding).

As time progressed, it is clear that these dishes mingled. *Cassell's Universal Cookery Book* (1901) has an entry for Bubble and Squeak (in the COLD MEAT AND SCRAP COOKERY section) which describes the beef and cabbage recipe exactly, but then continues ...

> A small proportion of mashed potato is sometimes put in with the cabbage and a shredded onion is liked by some, or a few chives may be used. A very nice dish, similar to the foregoing, is made by frying the meat, and making mashed potatoes and boiled cabbage up into little flat cakes; they are then rolled in crumbs and fried brown.

Equally, Darina Allen (in *Traditional Irish Cooking*) allows that "Any leftover colcannon may be formed into potato cakes or farls and fried in bacon fat until crisp and brown on both sides".

To confirm (or clarify) the confusion, my modest collection of Radiation Cook Books (handed out with "Regulo-Controlled" gas cookers made by a company called New World) has no entry for either dish in 1930. In 1935 a recipe called "colcannon" appears, which is repeated word-for-word in 1941 and 1951. In 1958, colcannon is gone from the index. However, the same recipe appears as "Bubble and Squeak", simply with the addition of "margarine" in the ingredients list.

> INGREDIENTS: Cold cooked potatoes, Cold cooked cabbage, Salt and Pepper, Butter or bacon fat
>
> METHOD: Pass the potatoes through a masher or beat up well. Chop the cabbage finely and mix with the potatoes, salt and pepper. Heat the butter or bacon fat in a frying-pan. Turn the vegetable mixture into this, smooth over and flatten with a palette knife. Cook on the hotplate. When nicely browned underneath cut across, turn over and brown the other side. Allow to heat thoroughly.

And that, essentially, is my own way with Bubble and Squeak. In my opinion, it is at its best with sturdy, dark greens instead of cabbage, and I work to engineer my leftovers in that direction. Sometimes it sticks to the pan. If so, scrape up the crusty bits and put them on top. Returning to its origins, this is nice with slices of beef. Looking forwards in modern interpretation, I like it accompanied by fried eggs.

**1.** subtitle of Kate Colquhoun's, *The Thrifty Cookbook: 476 Ways to Eat Well with Leftovers*, Bloomsbury 2010 **2.** Andrew Scrivani writing in the *New York Times*, April 10, 2012 **3.** Tamar Adler *The Everlasting Meal*, Scribner 2011 **4.** Tom Norrington-Davis *Just Like Mother Used to Make*, Cassell, 2004