

# **Toast**

Year 9 reading task

Pupil reading booklet

Assessing pupils' progress in English at  
Key Stage 3

Food cards

<p><b>honeydew melon</b></p>	<p><b>wonderful, fat golden chips</b></p>	<p><b>slices of home-made ginger cake</b></p>
<p><b>little anchovy puffs fresh from the oven</b></p>	<p><b>salmon with dill sauce</b></p>	<p><b>chicken liver pâté</b></p>
<p><b>fat olives the colour of a bruise</b></p>	<p><b>onion soup</b></p>	<p><b>chicken baked with Pernod and cream</b></p>
<p><b>lamb with rosemary and apricots</b></p>	<p><b>veal paupiette the size of a Cornish pasty and with dark, sticky sauce flecked with matchsticks of tongue, parsley and gherkins</b></p>	<p><b>pommes dauphinoise – potatoes thinly sliced and baked in cream with the subtlest hint of garlic</b></p>

White wine came in tall glasses with long, thin stems, tiny beads of condensation frosting the outside; little anchovy puffs arrived fresh from the oven with a dish of fat olives the colour of a bruise. We sat on chairs at either side of the fireplace, admiring the tapestries, the jugs of lilies and the polished panelling. The handwritten menu offered familiar things: chicken liver pâté and onion soup, but also things that were new to me: chicken baked with Pernod and cream, salmon with dill sauce, and lamb with rosemary and apricots. I chose chicken with tarragon sauce. Andy had the veal paupiette, which arrived the size of a Cornish pasty and with a dark, sticky sauce flecked with matchsticks of tongue, parsley and gherkins. The food was like that Joe Yates had talked of, food from another world.

Then something came along that was to change everything. It was the simplest food imaginable, yet so perfect, so comforting, soothing and fragrant. The dish contained only two ingredients. Potatoes, which were thinly sliced and baked in cream. There was the subtlest hint of garlic, barely present, as if it had floated in on a breeze. That pommes dauphinoise, or to give its correct title pommes à la dauphinoise, was quite simply the most wonderful thing I had ever tasted in my life, more wonderful than Mum's flapjacks, Joan's lemon meringue, and a thousand miles away from anything I had made at college.

Explore connections between the three texts by filling in the grid.

What is the chapter title?	Pommes Dauphinoise	Toast 1	Christmas Cake
How old is the narrator?	About 20? He's at catering college.		
What do we know about his family?			
What is his interest in food and cooking? The way he appeals to our senses?		He describes an early memory of his mother burning toast. His description of hot buttered toast shows that he was already interested in food.	
What do we notice about his sense of humour?			He mimics the person ordering tea at the seaside hotels (four-coffees-with-cream-and-four-slices-of-coffee-cake-if-you-would).

# Text

## Toast 1

My mother is scraping a piece of burned toast out of the kitchen window, a crease of annoyance across her forehead. This is not an occasional occurrence, a once-in-a-while hiccup in a busy mother's day. My mother burns the toast as surely as the sun rises each morning. In fact, I doubt if she has ever made a round of toast in her life that failed to fill the kitchen with plumes of throat-catching smoke. I am nine now and have never seen butter without black bits in it.

It is impossible not to love someone who makes toast for you. People's failings, even major ones such as when they make you wear short trousers to school, fall into insignificance as your teeth break through the rough, toasted crust and sink into the doughy cushion of white bread underneath. Once the warm, salty butter has hit your tongue, you are smitten. Putty in their hands.

## Christmas Cake

Mum never was much of a cook. Meals arrived on the table as much by happy accident as by domestic science. She was a chops-and-peas sort of a cook, occasionally going so far as to make a rice pudding, exasperated by the highs and lows of a temperamental cream-and-black Aga and a finicky little son. She found it all a bit of an ordeal, and wished she could have left the cooking, like the washing, ironing and dusting, to Mrs P., her 'woman what does'.

Once a year there were Christmas puddings and cakes to be made. They were made with neither love nor joy. They simply had to be done. 'I suppose I had better DO THE CAKE,' she would sigh. The food mixer – she was not the sort of woman to use her hands – was an ancient, heavy Kenwood that lived in a deep, secret hole in the kitchen work surface. My father had, in a rare moment of do-it-yourselfery, fitted a heavy industrial spring under the mixer so that when you lifted the lid to the cupboard the mixer slowly rose like a corpse from a coffin. All of which was slightly too much for my mother, my father's quaint Heath Robinson craftsmanship taking her by surprise every year, the huge mixer bouncing up like a jack-in-the-box and making her clap her hands to her chest. 'Oh heck!' she would gasp. It was the nearest my mother ever got to swearing...

However much she hated making the cake we both loved the sound of the raw cake mixture falling into the tin. 'Shhh, listen to the: cake mixture,' she would say, and the two of us would listen to the slow plop of the dollops of fruit and butter and sugar falling into the paper-lined cake tin. The kitchen would be warmer than usual and my mother would have that I've-just-baked-a-cake glow. Oh, put the gram on, will you, dear? Put some carols on,' she would say as she put the cake in the top oven of the Aga. Carols or not, it always sank in the middle. The embarrassing hollow, sometimes as deep as your fist, having to be filled in with marzipan.

Forget scented candles and freshly brewed coffee. Every home should smell of baking Christmas cake. That, and warm freshly ironed tea towels hanging on the rail in front of the Aga. It was a pity we had Auntie Fanny living with us. Her incontinence could take the edge off the smell of a chicken curry, let alone a baking cake. No matter how many mince pies were being made, or pine logs burning in the grate, or how many orange-and-clove pomanders my mother had made, there was always the faintest whiff of Auntie Fanny.

Warm sweet fruit, a cake in the oven, woodsmoke, warm ironing, hot retriever curled up by the Aga, mince pies, Mum's 4711. Every child's Christmas memories should smell like that. Mine did. It is a pity that there was always a passing breeze of ammonia.

Cake holds a family together. I really believed it did. My father was a different man when there was a cake in the house. Warm. The sort of man I wanted to hug rather than shy away from. If he had a plate of cake in his hand I knew it would be all right to climb up on to his lap. There was something about the way my mother put a cake on the table that made me feel that all was well. Safe. Secure. Unshakeable. Even when she got to the point where she carried her Ventolin inhaler in her left hand all the time. Unshakeable. Even when she and my father used to go for long walks, walking ahead of me and talking in hushed tones and he would come back with tears in his eyes.

When I was eight my mother's annual attempt at icing the family Christmas cake was handed over to me. 'I've had enough of this lark, dear, you're old enough now.' She had started to sit down a lot. I made only marginally less of a mess than she did, but at least I didn't cover the table, the floor, the dog with icing sugar. To be honest, it was a relief to get it out of her hands. I followed the Slater house style of snowy peaks brought up with the flat of a knife and a red ribbon. Even then I wasn't one to rock the boat. The idea behind the wave effect of her icing was simply to hide the fact that her attempt at covering the cake in marzipan resembled nothing more than an unmade bed. Folds and lumps, creases and tears. A few patches stuck on with a bit of apricot jam.

I knew I could have probably have flat-iced a cake to perfection, but to have done so would have hurt her feelings. So waves it was. There was also a chipped Father Christmas, complete with a jagged lump of last year's marzipan round his feet, and the dusty bristle tree with its snowy tips of icing. I drew the line at the fluffy yellow Easter chick.

Baking a cake for your family to share, the stirring of cherries, currants, raisins, peel and brandy, brown sugar, butter, eggs and flour, for me the ultimate symbol of a mother's love for her husband and kids, was reduced to something that 'simply has to be done'. Like cleaning the loo or polishing the shoes. My mother knew nothing of putting glycerine in with the sugar to keep the icing soft, so her rock-hard cake was always the butt of jokes for the entire Christmas. My father once set about it with a hammer and chisel from the shed. So the sad, yellowing cake sat round until about the end of February, the dog giving it the occasional lick as he passed, until it was thrown, much to everyone's relief, on to the lawn for the birds.

## Smoked haddock

I may have rolled the pastry for a mince pie or fingered the butter, flour and sugar crust for a crumble, but at nine years old I had yet to cook an entire meal. My cooking had been confined to things I could do unsupervised, safe things. So protective had my mother been of her son's precious fingers I had yet to turn an oven on or light the gas...

Since my mother had gone, my father's evening meals had been an almost steady stream of toasted cheese and Cadbury's MiniRolls. He had his pipe, of course, but I wasn't sure if that constituted a meal or not. He would come in, weary and smelling of oil, and then fiddle around making my tea. Every meal was seasoned with guilt. His. Mine. 'You might at least do the plates.' He said it just once. From then on I washed up after every meal, standing on a stool to reach into the deep steel sink.

I was never sure if he expected me to make my own tea as well. There was nothing said. Just his disappointment hanging in the air like a deflated Yorkshire pudding. His favourite meal – tripe and onions – was a recipe known only to him. His way with the venous and quivering sheets of blubber was a mystery I had no intention of unravelling. Smoked haddock, his runner-up, held no such trepidation. It looked as easy as making a cup of tea.

If a boy saves his pocket money up for three days he can buy enough smoked haddock to feed a tired and hungry man. My savings weren't quite enough, I was a few pennies short, but the man in MacFisheries gave it to me anyway. 'It goes under the grill, doesn't it?' He came round to the front of the counter and put his arm around my shoulders. He told me to warm the grill first, to rub some butter on the fish and cook it for about ten minutes. Then he warned me not to get fancy with it. He led me out of the shop, still with his arm around me. 'He'll enjoy that, your dad.'...

A fillet of smoked haddock takes about five minutes to cook under a domestic grill. You rub it with butter, shake over some black pepper, but no salt, and let the flames do the rest.

The haddock lies saffron yellow under the grill. The butter glistens on the fat flakes of fish. All is plump, sweet and juicy. It never looked like this when Mum cooked it.

Where is he? He is always here by six o'clock. It's now ten past. I cut two slices of bread and butter them. I have never known him eat more. Twenty past, half past. Where is he? The haddock is starting to curl up at the edges. The butter has set to a grainy slime, the fish is now dull with a milky residue that has trickled down and into the grillpan.

The fish is turning the colour of a pair of old stockings, the edges have buckled like a dead frog in the sun. My father's beloved smoked haddock is stone cold.

I hear the purr of my father's new Humber in the driveway. His fish looks more like roadkill than supper. Perhaps I should just chuck it in the bin so he won't know. Then he wouldn't feel bad about being late. But the pong hanging in the kitchen will give me away. Damn Auntie Fanny, if she hadn't just died I could blame her.

My father comes in, his face a bit red, his hair newly cut. Aftershave. His piece of fish is now on the table, sandwiched between two glass plates. 'Where have you been? It's ruined.'

'No it's not, it's just how I like it.'

As he sits down and starts to eat I leave the room. It was supposed to be such a treat. Why be late tonight of all nights? He hasn't had smoked haddock for tea since Mummy died. Suddenly, the tears come from nowhere, they just well up. A great hot wave. Later, I walk into the kitchen to see if he has finished. He is sitting with his head in his hands. He's crying.

## Pommes Dauphinoise

When my father was alive our eating out had been confined to the Berni Inn in Hereford. We usually skipped starters (I think we once had the honeydew melon but Joan said it wasn't ripe) and went straight to steak, fat ones that came on an oval plate with grilled tomatoes, onion rings, fried mushrooms and wonderful, fat golden chips. We drank lemonade and lime except for Joan who had a Tio Pepe, and then had ice cream for afters. Sometimes my aunt would take me to the Gay Tray in Rackham's store in Birmingham where we would queue up with our gay trays and choose something hot from the counter, poached egg on toast for her, Welsh rarebit and chips for me. There had been the odd afternoon tea taken in seaside hotels (two-toasted-teacakes-and-a-pot-of-tea-for-two, please) and tea taken at garden centres (four-coffees-with-cream-and-four-slices-of-coffee-cake, if you would) and, once, a memorable tea eaten in Devon with slices of home-made ginger cake, scones, cream and little saucers of raspberry jam. But that was it really. Eating out was something other people did...

*During his last year at catering college, Nigel meets Andy Parffrey. They become friends and Andy introduces Nigel to new foods and new restaurants, one of which is Thornbury Castle...*

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