



# THE SKINT FOODIE

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Blogger The Skint Foodie had it all – money, fast cars, family, friends, a big house. Then he lost it all. The only thing he had left? A love of good food...

Tony once had a high-rolling life of business-class flights, fast cars and designer fashion, but he lost it all to depression, alcoholism and bankruptcy. The only thing that saved him was his love of food. Today, Tony blogs about how to eat deliciously well for not very much money, which has won him thousands of fans and rave reviews from food critics, and he has the UK's biggest publishers after him for a book deal.

All this praise has been a surprise for Tony, aka The Skint Foodie, who prefers to stay anonymous for now. He began writing his blog to pull himself out of the black hole of depression and alcoholism that cost him his career, his family and his home, and plunged him into poverty.

His blog post marking the one-year anniversary of The Skint Foodie shows a picture of his kitchen during one of his worst spells. The worktop, floor and table are piled with dirty plates, takeaway boxes and rubbish. It's a graphic image of what was going on in his head at the time. 'It was an appalling maelstrom of fetid despair and terror,' he says now. But he doesn't want pity for his dreadful state. 'It was all of my own making,' he says.

Tony, who worked in corporate communications, tells his story in the same way he writes his blog – eloquently and with plenty of black humour. His descent into hell started with five-hour alcohol-filled lunches and drinks after work. 'For years I was a really good drinker, but a happy drunk,' says Tony. 'But there comes a point when it bleeds over into alcoholism. For a long time, it didn't affect my work, but it did affect my home life. When that unravelled,



The Skint Foodie, aka Tony, was used to spending hundreds of pounds at Borough Market (left) but now he creates delicious dishes on a tight budget

the brakes were off. It got to the point where I would be drinking until 6am with a client meeting at 9am. I started lying, making excuses why I couldn't make the meeting.'

He doesn't talk about his family, except to say he has no contact with them, and doesn't expect to for a long time, if ever, because of the hurt he's caused them. He thinks they know he's The Skint Foodie, but he's not sure.

In late 2004, he tried to commit suicide. 'I ran a bath, planned it meticulously... or so I thought,' he says. 'But I got so drunk on vodka beforehand, I didn't do it right. I woke up hours later as wrinkled as a prune.'

A friend, concerned something had happened, called the police. 'I fell from grace so spectacularly and embarrassingly, a lot of people disappeared,' he says. 'A handful stayed, but I abused those relationships. When I was better, I did try to meet up with some of them, but it was embarrassing for all of us. Their life wasn't my life any more.'

The suicide attempt jolted Tony out of his

drunken existence and for some months, he went to AA meetings and therapy. 'But I was skating on thin ice,' he says. He crashed again and it cost him his job. For two years, Tony virtually disappeared. 'I lived in my flat and boozed,' he says. 'It was one long act of self-harm.' With no money coming in, he couldn't pay his £250,000 mortgage repayments, and his flat was repossessed.

However, his doctor referred Tony to his local community healthcare. As well as getting him the benefits he was entitled to, they found him a hostel place and arranged storage of his possessions. So when a council flat in south London became available, Tony moved in with all his stuff.

Which is how his Le Creuset casseroles and stainless-steel pots come to be neatly stacked on a shelf, while a state-of-the-art coffee maker brews his current favourite bean, Guatemala El Bosque Amatitlan Red Bourbon. His fridge contains sourdough ▶

**MOZZARELLA, PEACH AND PROSCIUTTO SALAD**

Serves: 1  
Cooking time: 5 minutes  
1 peach, just ripe but still fairly firm, cut into 6 segments  
3 dsp olive oil  
1 dsp lemon juice  
Handful mixed leaves  
Leaves from a sprig or 2 of mint  
2 slices of prosciutto, roughly torn  
A small ball of mozzarella, roughly torn  
Olive oil, for drizzling

Salt and pepper  
1. Griddle the peach segments on both sides over a fairly high heat until they are just beginning to caramelise.  
2. Make a dressing using the olive oil, lemon juice, salt and pepper. Dress the leaves and mint with it. Add the peach segments and prosciutto and mix.  
3. Scatter over the mozzarella, drizzle with a little olive oil, sprinkle pepper over and serve.

# WEEK IN WEEK OUT

bread, Comté cheese, capers and Dijon mustard.

Today Tony is better, but not cured. In the past four years, he's suffered a number of depressive episodes, when he falls back into alcoholic despair. 'But then I come up for air and brush myself off,' he says.

'I shower, eat some fruit or a salad. I physically crave the good stuff – the relationship between food and mood is not given much prominence in mental health, but for me the two are inextricably linked.'

It was during a good spell last July that he started blogging as The Skint Foodie with 200 recipes. 'When you're isolated, on benefits, and unemployable, you don't have a lot of control over your life,' he says. 'One of the worst things is working out how you define yourself. It's usually by your career and the people you love. If you don't have either of those, you feel worthless. But one area where I could have creative control was cooking and eating, making the best of my limited resources.'

Having regularly spent hundreds at London's foodie heaven, Borough Market, Tony had to learn

## 'MY MISSION STATEMENT IS TO EAT AS WELL AS I CAN ON LIMITED MEANS'

to live on much less. He cut out all expenditure except bills to give him as much as he could for food – £45 a week. 'I'd never budgeted before,' he says. 'I'd bought something every day of my life and never cared what it cost. Neither had I counted the cost of the food I threw away.'

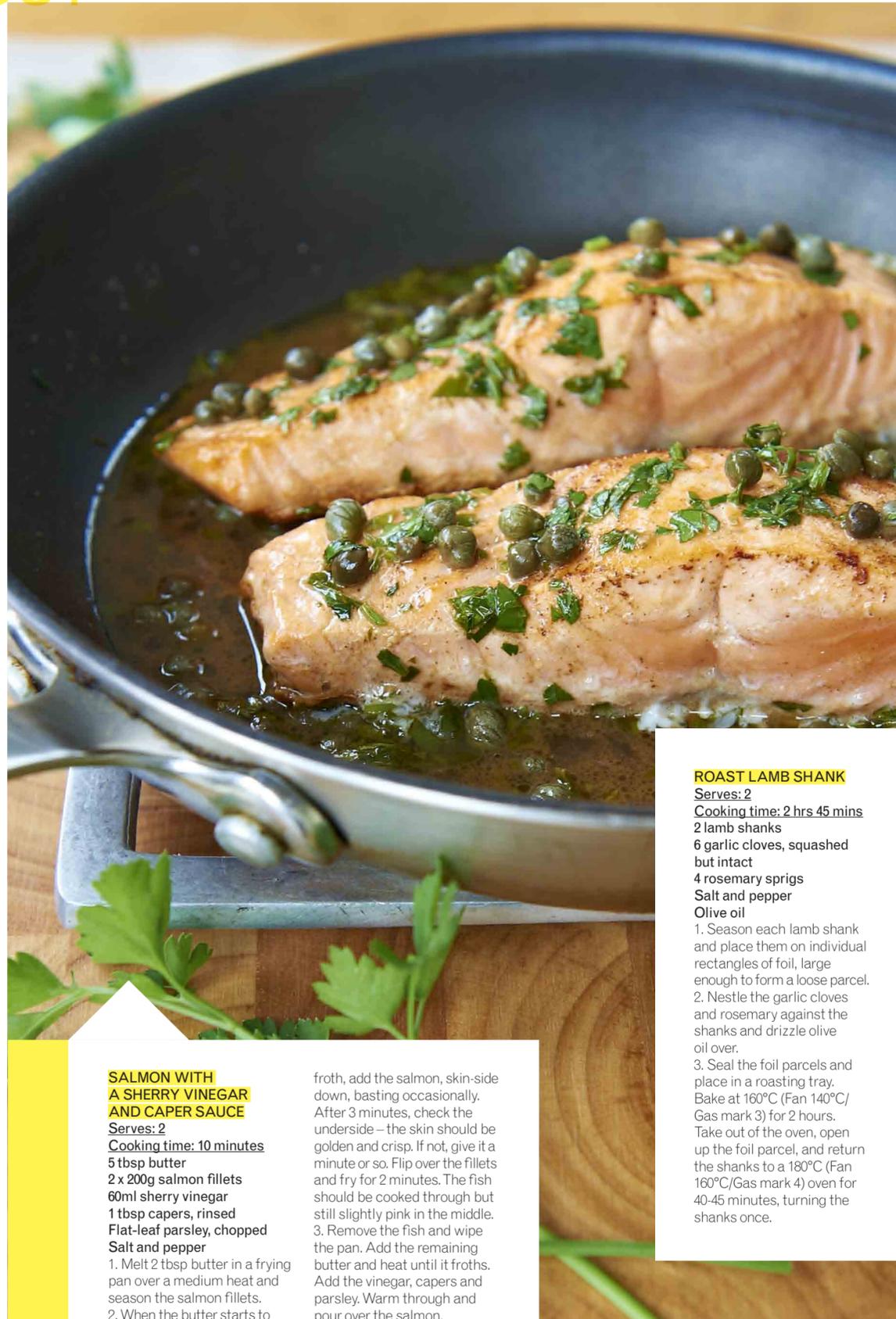
He found existing advice on eating for less unhelpful. 'It's not useful to be told to go foraging or to grow herbs,' says Tony. 'I was interested in working out what Joe Bloggins, aka me, could do with a daily trip to Asda and the odd one to the local shop. My mission statement isn't to eat cheaply or to make expensive dishes cheaply, but to eat as well as I can on limited means.'

And this he does. His lunch today is a mortadella and Comté toastie. For dinner, he might have squid with avocado and tomato salsa. He budgets his expenditure and plans his week's meals in advance – from Thursday, when he receives his benefit payment – buying only what he needs.

Food is the greatest pleasure in his life. 'For me, all aspects of making a meal for myself are rewarding – shopping for food, the making of it and then eating it.'

Three days a week, Tony volunteers at The Maudsley Hospital, helping to set up a mental health recovery support system. This, and the reaction to his blog, has given him positive contact with the outside world. 'I still find social interaction difficult. I've got used to being a hermit, thinking people are better off without me,' he says. 'Volunteering and the blog are my attempts to get involved because one day, in the not-too-distant future, I'll present myself to the world again.'

For more recipes, see [theskintfoodie.com](http://theskintfoodie.com)



### SALMON WITH A SHERRY VINEGAR AND CAPER SAUCE

Serves: 2

Cooking time: 10 minutes

5 tbsp butter  
2 x 200g salmon fillets  
60ml sherry vinegar  
1 tbsp capers, rinsed  
Flat-leaf parsley, chopped  
Salt and pepper

1. Melt 2 tbsp butter in a frying pan over a medium heat and season the salmon fillets.  
2. When the butter starts to

froth, add the salmon, skin-side down, basting occasionally. After 3 minutes, check the underside – the skin should be golden and crisp. If not, give it a minute or so. Flip over the fillets and fry for 2 minutes. The fish should be cooked through but still slightly pink in the middle.  
3. Remove the fish and wipe the pan. Add the remaining butter and heat until it froths. Add the vinegar, capers and parsley. Warm through and pour over the salmon.

### ROAST LAMB SHANK

Serves: 2

Cooking time: 2 hrs 45 mins

2 lamb shanks  
6 garlic cloves, squashed but intact  
4 rosemary sprigs  
Salt and pepper  
Olive oil

1. Season each lamb shank and place them on individual rectangles of foil, large enough to form a loose parcel.  
2. Nestle the garlic cloves and rosemary against the shanks and drizzle olive oil over.  
3. Seal the foil parcels and place in a roasting tray. Bake at 160°C (Fan 140°C/Gas mark 3) for 2 hours. Take out of the oven, open up the foil parcel, and return the shanks to a 180°C (Fan 160°C/Gas mark 4) oven for 40-45 minutes, turning the shanks once.

The Skint Foodie has proved cooking doesn't have to be costly



### LITTLE ALMOND CAKES

Makes: 20

Cooking time: 20 minutes

3 egg whites  
125g caster sugar  
30g plain flour  
100g ground almonds  
100g melted butter  
75g raisins  
Icing sugar, for dusting

1. Preheat the oven to 190°C (Fan 170°C/Gas mark 5). Whisk the egg whites and caster sugar together until frothy but not stiff. Beat in the flour, then the ground almonds, then the melted butter. Fold in the raisins.  
2. Grease 20 holes of a 24-hole non-stick mini muffin tin with melted butter and spoon the mixture into them. Bake for 18-20 minutes – but start checking them after 15. Remove from the oven and dust with icing sugar. Cool in the tray – they'll pop out without any trouble.

### ELDERFLOWER BURN'T CREAM

The classic flavouring for burnt cream (crème brûlée) is vanilla, but I didn't have any. I always have elderflower cordial, though, and I now prefer it for this. It adds a delicate, fresh note.

Makes: 4 x 100ml ramekins

Cooking time: 45 minutes

3 egg yolks

20g caster sugar  
250ml double cream  
2 tbsp milk (3 tbsp if your cream is especially thick)  
3 tbs elderflower cordial  
4 heaped tsp demerara sugar  
1. Preheat the oven to 150°C (Fan 130°C/Gas mark 2). In a bowl, whisk the egg yolks and caster sugar together. In a small pan, heat the cream, milk and cordial, stirring constantly, until just about to simmer. Remove from the heat and pour into the egg/sugar, whisking all the time.  
2. Place 4 ramekins in a roasting tray and pour the custard into them. Open the oven door, slide the tray on to the middle shelf, then pour cold water into the tray until it comes about halfway up the sides of the ramekins. Bake for 40 minutes. Remove from the oven and allow to cool completely, then chill in the fridge for an hour or so.  
3. When you're ready to serve them, heat your grill to blistering hot, sprinkle the tops with demerara sugar and slide the ramekins under the grill for a minute or so. Keep watching and remove the moment the tops are nicely golden and blistered. Allow time for them to cool (and the burnt sugar to form a brittle shell) before scoffing with the almond cakes.