

interviews rachel walker
 photographs pal hansen



PRIVATE PASSIONS

Five famous foodies reveal the culinary hobbies that capture their out-of-hours imaginations

FERMENTER *Darina Allen, founder of Ballymaloe Cookery School, County Cork*

“When I was young, we had a Kerry cow which was milked twice a day. After meals, the milk that was leftover in the jug on the table would be poured into what was called the ‘sour milk jug’ – a big, old brown pottery jug that was kept in the corner. It would acidify, and then we’d use it for the daily soda bread. I know now that was a basic fermentation, but back then we didn’t really give it a label; it was just part of what we did.

“I actively took up fermenting as a hobby about 15 years ago, when I realised that so much knowledge was disappearing. The crutch of best-before and sell-by dates means that we’ve lost the skill of being able to judge when food is safe to eat. I always tell my students to look at an ingredient, then to smell it and taste it. If I were young again, I’d strap on my backpack and go off to Korea and Indonesia, into the Nordic countries and all of the ‘Stans and Russia where the tradition of fermenting is still so strong.

“We know so little, but at least there’s a growing interest again, fuelled by the desperate state of so many people’s guts. I’m sure that the fact everything is pasteurised and processed plays a role, but it’s extraordinary how quickly you can reintroduce good bacteria using fermented foods. At Ballymaloe, we’ve made lots of simple changes. For example, we used to make home-made lemonade every day, which I thought was great. But so much sugar goes into it, so now we offer a fermented drink instead, such as flavoured water kefirs, kombucha, drinking vinegars and shrubs.

“I regularly make sourdough and buttermilk, mead and krauts – simple things which get woven in and out of everyday life. As a hobby, fermenting is a relaxing activity that allows me to switch off. It’s also continually exciting, because I never know what’s going to happen; everything is a constant work in progress.”

cookingisfun.ie »

Darina in the Ballymaloe Cookery School kitchen with water kefir and fermented veg

Sabrina has read the hundreds of cookbooks in her collection from cover to cover



COOKBOOK COLLECTOR *Sabrina Ghayour, British-Iranian chef and food writer*

“I was five years old when I received my first cookbook. An aunt brought over a set of three: *French Cooking*, *Italian Cooking* and *Microwave Cooking*. It seems like a weird choice, but it was the 1980s, there weren’t many children’s cookbooks, and microwave cooking was considered so chic. I started collecting cookbooks straight after that – and when anyone came to visit, I’d proudly go and get them all out to show them off.

“I’ve got nearly a thousand now, and I wouldn’t ever throw any away. My big secret is that I don’t cook from most of them. I do read each one from cover to cover though. If I get four cookbooks, then those four cookbooks stay by my bedside until I’ve been through them – every single page, every single line, every single recipe. It could take two weeks, or it could take two months; it just depends on the pile next to my bed.

“What I find interesting is the knowledge that each cookbook imparts; the light that each one shines on a type of food or region, or a domestic wisdom or culinary tradition that I didn’t previously know about.

“The cookbook collection has taken over my flat. I’ve got two crates, which weigh about 100 kilos each, a bookshelf, which is stacked two cookbooks deep, and huge piles next to my wardrobe. When I was in my teens, I developed a labelling system. But whenever I got close to instilling some order, I’d get more books and I was back to square one – so I stopped trying.

“The cookbooks that are always close to hand are those by Jamie Oliver, Rick Stein and Nigella Lawson. I’m a simple, unpretentious cook. Sure, a roux or a sugar cage has its place, but it’s not what you want to be messing about with on a weeknight. The reason most people buy a cookbook is that they just need help in their home. Although the Jamies or Nigellas might not be considered the coolest or most esoteric cooks, they are firm favourites. Their recipes are accessible and clear, and they always work.”

Sabrina Ghayour’s new cookbook, Sirocco, is published by Mitchell Beazley on 3 May.

MENU ARCHIVIST *Sam Bompas (left), co-founder of Bompas & Parr*

“I used to collect all sorts of things when I was younger; my pockets were a constant jumble of obsessions, from soldier figurines to a collection of woodlice. The menu archive started by accident though, back in 2009, when Harry [Parr, right] and I had been commissioned to transform a gallery into a takeaway pizzeria over Frieze art week.

“We started collecting pizza menus for inspiration. But instead of waiting for them to be posted through our doors, we went out to track them down – and it was fascinating. We discovered that pizza companies often had different menus printed for different post codes – some were rustic, artisanal styles for affluent post codes, and others were more garish, promoting ‘hungry man’ deals. The menus were an amazing historical resource.

“It planted an idea in our mind, and two years ago we started collecting in earnest, with the goal of creating a British Menu Archive. The aim is to build it like the New York Public Library’s menu collection, which has 17,500 menus in a searchable online database. It means anyone can easily strip out information, from the cost of oysters to the way public tastes have changed over time.

“The menus we’ve collected so far come from many different sources. We’ve got a group of booksellers who get in touch if an interesting menu falls into their hands; one of them even has a network of people who go to death sales at fine houses round the country and often stumble across something interesting.

“I think that the most amazing menu in the collection was sent by the curator at The Imperial War Museum. It was written at Stalag Luft III, the Second World War prisoner-of-war camp where The Great Escape took place, and the front cover simply reads ‘Christmas 1944... the last(?)’ We’ve also got a copy of the last menu served on Concorde, which was given to us by British Airways, and some of the beautiful menus from Langan’s Brasserie, illustrated by Hockney. We’ve had hundreds of submissions from the public, which are fascinating. No menu is too humble. If people want to send in their pizza menus, we’ll take them.”

If you’d like to contribute, send menus to British Menu Archive, 17 Rushworth Street, London SE1 0RB or email scans to britishmenuarchive@bompasandparr.com; britishmenuarchive.com »



The British Menu Archive includes menus from The Waterside Inn (left) and Concorde’s last flight (right)

APPLE GROWER

Raymond Blanc, chef patron at the Michelin-starred Belmond Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons

"I used to hate gardening as a child. I grew up in the countryside and we didn't have much money, so my father built a garden to feed the seven of us. While my friends were playing football, my brother and I would turn the earth, pick the stones, and remove the weeds. It was a terrible chore.

"Once summer came, I'd think, 'Brilliant. Done!' But then we'd have to harvest it: top and tail the beans, stack the apples, pears and potatoes in the cellar, then cook, dry, pickle and bottle the rest. I learned an enormous amount about seasons and varieties though. My mum would never send me into the garden for 'some salad' – she might send me out for frisée or burgundy red lettuce. Every ingredient had a particular use; we knew which potatoes were for boiling, for french fries, and for a purée.

"Who would imagine that one day the boy who hated gardening would have an orchard with 1,800 fruit trees? The idea first came to me ten years ago. I wanted to create something beautiful that would outlast me, but I also wanted to recreate a lost landscape. English apples have been reduced to two types:

eating apples and cooking apples. It's very sad that so many heritage varieties have been replaced by hybrids.

"To decide which trees I was going to plant, I cooked with the fruit and logged its response to five different challenges: juicing, eating, stewing, baking and being cooked in a tart. Now I have 105 varieties of heritage apple tree, 19 varieties of pear tree and will soon have 15 varieties of plum. I know this will upset people, but the bramley doesn't score well. Sure, it breaks down in 15 seconds, but you have to add so much sugar to make it palatable. Instead I grow varieties such as adams pearmain and blenheim orange, which break down just as quickly and don't require as much sugar.

"As a chef and restaurateur I already have to fit six lives into one, but I always make time for the orchard. I go out as dawn breaks. I walk round and make lists of what needs doing. I protect it like a mum protects her child. My perfect afternoon would be spent there, pruning. I enjoy shaping a tree; I understand it."

belmond.com/le-manoir-aux-quat-saisons-oxfordshire »

Raymond has planted
105 varieties of apple tree
in his Oxfordshire orchard



MARMALADE MAKER *Thomasina Miers, founder of Wahaca*

“When my grandmother died 15 years ago, my mother inherited her cookbook – a big, covered hardback containing her famous recipes. Since then, we’ve come together each year over seville orange season to make marmalade. It’s this big family project, tweaking her recipe, trying to make the perfect batch.

“Weirdly, I don’t remember my grandmother’s marmalade any more. Maybe the splendiferousness of recent incarnations have overridden any memory. The key is in the sugars. We use molasses, demerara, treacle and preserving sugar, plus a bit of whisky – not so much that you can taste it, but enough to give it a *je ne sais quoi*. It’s unfathomably delicious, unlike any you can buy in the shops.

“Ours is a chunky cut. No matter how finely we slice the rind, it expands as it cooks. If you boil the oranges for half an hour first, then scoop out the flesh, it makes the rind soft and easier to cut. You do get quite hot hands, but we’ve got asbestos fingers.

“My mum and I make 40 or 50 jars to last us the year, but each one is precious as my children and I eat marmalade every morning. My mum guards the jars, which puts her in this power position. She’ll only hand over a few at a time, lest she relinquish her power, and she’s a stickler about getting the empties back after.

“My favourite combination is a slice of toasted, granary bread with melted butter and lots of dark, treacly, sticky marmalade. My daughter does this American-style peanut butter and marmalade version, which my father thinks is complete heresy. I also love a croissant with slabs of cold butter and marmalade. We’re all very particular in our eating habits! But for each one of us, the marmalade brings comfort and pleasure to our breakfast, and fills every morning with that little bit more joy.”

wahaca.co.uk

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