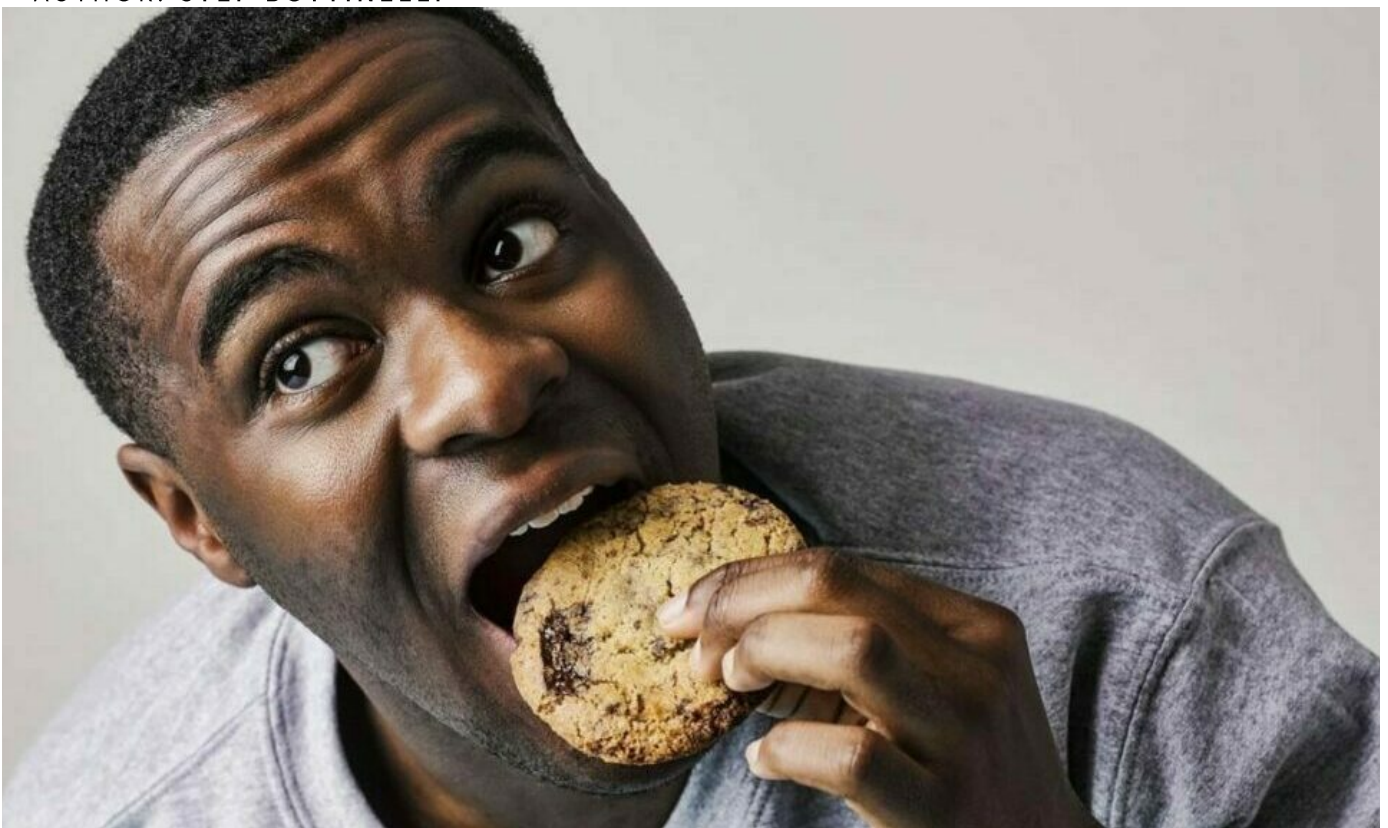


Dining Table Tales with...Liam Charles



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Liam Charles was born in Hackney, London. In 2017, at the age of 19 and while studying Drama and Theatre Arts at Goldsmiths University, he took part as a contestant in *The Great British Bake Off*, presented by Paul Hollywood and Prue Leith. Although he didn't win and was eliminated in week eight, he won the public's hearts with his great bakes and cheeky personality. Since appearing on *GBBO*, Liam has fronted his own cooking show on Channel 4, *Liam Bakes*, published two books, *Cheeky Treats: 70 Brilliant Bakes and Cakes*, and *Liam Charles Second Helpings: 70 wicked recipes that will leave you wanting more*, and has co-presented *Junior Bake Off* with Prue Leith and *Bake Off: The Professionals* with Cherish Finden, pastry chef Pan Pacific, Benoit Blin, pastry chef at Raymond Blanc's Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons, comedian Tom Allen, and now with presenter Stacey Solomon. [***Bake Off: The Professionals***](#) is currently airing on Channel 4.

You started baking when you were 16 and three years later, at 19 you took part in *The Great British Bake Off*. What gave you the confidence to apply to *GBBO*? What made you realise you were good enough to be a contestant on the show?

That's good question. I think it's down to my head of year in sixth form. When I started to bake, I'd bake on the weekends and I'd bring [the bakes] to school for people to try, and [head of year] Mr. Carpenter saw that I really had – and have – a massive passion for it. He did say to me one day: "*Would you ever like consider going on the show?*" I always loved the show, but I never thought [about applying]. But [I thought] it'll be cool – because I absolutely adored the show. Even when I used to bake in my early years, if I was making biscuits, I'd watch Biscuit Week to get in the mood for that particular bake. I definitely put that down to him, and also the reception that I got from people who really enjoyed my bakes.

The support you received in school started the journey you are on now. How important do you think is to teach Home Economics in school?

I think it's really important because, especially now everyone...[does] what's convenient. It's about ordering food in. To be fair, cooking and baking are a life skill. If you can't cook, or if you can't make one thing, it's a bit shocking, do you know what I mean? It's definitely one of those things that you need in your life. You don't have to be amazing at it. But if push comes to shove and money is tight, at least, you know the fundamentals of cooking and baking so you can rustle yourself up something to eat. It's a great skill to have. If you have a dinner party, or you are with your friends and they decide to order a takeaway, I can go in the kitchen and make something. It's a bit of a superpower to have. Yeah, I think it's super important. Super important.

You mentioned being able to cook when money is tight. With the food prices rising, environmental and food security issues, are there any ingredients that perhaps you use less of? Or maybe you've swapped with other ones?

I'm more conscious about the sugar that I use in my bakes – like refined sugar. Don't get me wrong, I still use it because refined sugar is probably the Holy Grail, but where I can substitute, refined sugar for brown sugar or alternatives like agave syrup. Things like that. Just like small things like substituting your sugars definitely does go a long way and I do feel that the flavour is more wholesome when you do use, I don't know, honey. Okay, honey is not the best alternative, but agave, maple or brown sugar [are]. It's less of a strain, but also, they are a more of a flavour enhancer. And even though I eat everything pretty much, I'm a lot more mindful when it comes to eating meat and fish. When I was a kid, like I could eat chicken, pork and beef in one day. Of course eating animals is not the ideal, if I do have a chicken dish for lunch, I make a conscious effort not to have it for dinner. So if I can have a veggie based meal, I'll try to do that. Just mix it up a bit.

In 2019 you took part in the Wind Rush Festival baking day in Hackney. How important is it

give back to my school or the borough, I definitely do it. It'd be easy for me, [someone] who has some sort of social media presence or [is in the] limelight to forget what was there before, but I've great people around me and I like to think I'm relatively grounded. I always go back. It's never a chore. It's always nostalgic, it's always great to go back my school, or do something in the local area. I don't want to lose touch. I don't want to be out of touch with my local area. What's the point of living there if you don't know what's going on?

When you were a contestant on *GBBO* you often mentioned your nan, your uncle and your mum on TV. It was really endearing, and it gave the viewer a real flavour of who Liam is. Who's inspired you the most in your life?

Food-wise, my nan is one of the best cooks I know. I think my family definitely plays a massive role, in particular my uncle, because he is very artistic. From a young age, he told me:

"Whatever you want to do in life, just do it. If it fails or succeeds, you have one life, so you have to just sort of go for it."

And if we're talking like mainstream cooking, you have people like **Christina Tosi**. She's a pastry chef from America – classically trained. She knows everything about pastry, but her cooking style is very nostalgic and wholesome. She'll make something incredible with a packet of crisps, pretzels and chocolate. I feel like I can really relate to her because I do love cooking with stuff like that. And I love **Dominique Ansel**. His whole approach to baking for me is sensational. I wrote part of my dissertation about him. I was a drama student and I was looking at the comparisons between the theatre and the restaurant. There are links [between the two]. For example, the stage manager in theatre can be like the manager of a restaurant – how they both keep things ticking over. And then you have lighting and sound and how they affect the whole performance of gastronomy.

You are currently presenting *Bake Off: The Professionals*. Were you intimidated when you started working with Cherish Finden and Benoit Blin in the beginning?

To be fair...no [laughs]. I wasn't intimidated, because I wasn't there to do their job. They are some of the best pastry chefs, hands down. I was there to bridge the gap between amateur baker, and professional bakers, in our hosting sort of remit. I think I was nervous in the sense of...I feel like [when I was a contestant] in *GBBO*, a lot of people protected me because I was 19. I was baking, I was still part the mass majority, the public. Now I'm seen as some sort of personality/host/presenter. People can say anything they want. So I think the first year for me was nerve-wracking because of the transition, and obviously dealing with the potential trolling, or people saying something that I didn't particularly like, but after that – the second year on – it's been great.

What do you think Cherish, Benoit, Paul Hollywood and Prue Leith have taught you and what have you taught them?

whole baking thing. Their experience of 20-plus years in the game is just like, wow: hard work does really, really, really pay off. They've taught me about flavour combinations in terms of baking and little tricks and tips here and there in the food trade.

Paul and Prue... They taught me that hard work does really pay off and the more experience you have in the game, the better you become.

I think what I've probably taught them that you can never underestimate a 24-year-old. I think that's definitely what I taught them, especially Prue. Because she knew me first as a contestant, working with her on *Junior Bake Off* was a completely different ballgame. She said to me, "*Liam, I was really worried at the start of the show, because I knew you're a great baker, but I didn't know how deep your knowledge would be. So I didn't want to undermine you. I didn't want to come across as too much. But, you know so much and you hold your own so well.*"

Benoit has a kid my age, Cherish has a kid who's a little bit younger than me. I don't teach them purposely, but I talk differently to them [than their parents do]. Things that I say they'll pick up on it, and then they use it in their lingo, and it's hilarious. So, that culture, their culture, my culture, interweave into one beautiful thing. It's good fun.

You're having a stellar career. You were a contestant on *The Great British Bake Off* then you published two books, you had your own show on *Channel 4*, a baking column in *The Guardian*... When you were given the chance to work on these projects, was it nerve-wracking? Did you think, 'I don't know if I can do it'?

The books were fine, because I just came off of the back of writing a dissertation – it's pretty much the same thing if I'm being honest. Having my own show was a little bit nerve-wracking. I feel like 2018 was like...[makes an explosion sound]. I know how to deal with it now. But 2018 was: book-professionals-own show – all in one year. It was a bit nerve-wracking because I had no ensemble, it was all me in it. Of course my friends and my family would have cameos on the show, but I'm spearheading the show. When I recorded it, it was great. When the first episode aired, I was like, "*Oh, I don't know what people will say about the show*". I was s***** bricks if I'm honest. But when it was on, the reception was great. So I was like, "*okay, cool*".

I'm more worried during the process. Especially with *The Professionals*, the first show, I was trying to find my feet. My co-host at the time was Tom Allen. He's a seasoned comedian and striking the balance and bridging the gap between the professional baker and the home baker and also having this sort of comedic timing – obviously it's not my job to be a comedian but I have to be lighthearted – was difficult because I'm basically meant to be the funny foodie. It was hard to strike the balance.

Do you find it strange to watch yourself on TV?

I have never told anyone this, but I don't really watch myself anymore. I watched the first, second and probably half of the third series. Not to enjoy it but to self edit. After a while, I thought to myself: "*What is the point of doing that? It's already out on TV.*" If anything, I'll watch

Food is so popular with younger people. What advice do you have for somebody who wants to pursue a career in food?

I think the only advice I can give someone who wants to pursue a career in food is: it's just all about trial and error. Be yourself. Do not follow a trend. Find your own identity, because trends will be there one day and then they'll die. But if you have your own identity, you will be here beyond that trend. Find yourself in food. It might take two weeks, it might take a year, but at least you know how to express yourself through food. Don't jump on the bandwagon because you'll get lost. That's my only advice. And go to loads of restaurants and eat loads of food!

What's your best food memory?

It was Mother's Day, years ago. I didn't have a deep fat fryer. I didn't have the equipment to make doughnuts, but I really wanted to make doughnuts. Oh yeah, that's a walk in the park! Enriched dough... fry it...fine. I was probably 17. The state I left the kitchen in! It was outrageous. And my mum had to clean it up. But I said to myself, from that day on, "*I need to learn how to perfect doughnuts.*" So I spent probably a year and a bit [perfecting doughnuts]. That was the thing that I was making most of. The recipe for the doughnuts is in my first book. I think that's my happiest, proudest food memory. I've got loads, but that's the one that always stuck out for me.

What's the best food or the best meal you've ever had?

I'm biased, but my nan's cooking is definitely up there. But away from family. So there's a place in Hackney called Mangal 2. It's run by two young guys and everyone raves about it. It's kind new-gen Turkish food. I went there a couple months ago, and I think it's probably some of the best food I've had in the last couple of years.

And your worst food memory?

Oh, my. I couple of years back I tried to make a custard tart with rhubarb compote. You know, a classic. When I take out the custard tart, the pastry is beautiful, there's a bit of a wobble in the middle. I am absolutely buzzing to eat this thing. I cut into it, it's fine... but this tastes like scrambled egg. So bad! It was absolutely horrid. Probably the worst thing I've ever eaten that I've made.

And your worst meal?

I don't want to bash the restaurant.... There's a new place in Tottenham Court Road. I love chicken wings, any type with chicken wings: grilled fried, roasted – you name it. So I got these wings, ghee infused chicken with different spices. What could happen? When they came out they looked a bit weird to be honest. I promise you it was the most disgusting thing I've ever

What's your favourite food?

Because there's so much variety I have to go with Caribbean food because there's rice and peas, jerk chicken, macaroni cheese, dumplings, fish fritters...you've got everything. You can have that food for breakfast lunch or dinner. Some of my favourites at the moment are dumplings, prawn dumplings, dim-sum... I love them so much. Turkish food is always something I go to, too.

You're so busy at the moment. Do you still have much time to cook and bake?

It comes in periods. There will be a month and a half where I haven't cooked or baked. Then I will have two weeks of downtime and make loads of stuff. Yesterday I made a raspberry white chocolate cheesecake. I made these Korean fried chicken wings, which are great. My dad has this thing with his friends called Tuesday Club, like *Come Dine With Me*, so every two weeks, they go to each other's house and cook for their friends. My dad wanted me to help him with the starter and the dessert, so I did that.

What do you enjoy the most, presenting or writing?

I love the fact that I can do a bit of everything. Because if it was just one thing, I'll get kind of bored. It's good that there's a remit of my life where I do presenting, a remit where I do the writing. And then there is a part of my life where I just love coming home and cooking with no time limit and just do whatever I want. So the balance between the three is great.

What's next for you?

I just finished a new show. Completely nothing to do with baking or cooking, left of field. It was great [filming it]. It was really fun. I can't say what it is, but people will be shocked. They will be shocked that I'm actually good at the thing that [this show] is about. I just wrapped that last week. And then I did an app with Hellman's. Hellman's are launching an app and I'm kind of... one of the main people on this app, which is jokes – really fun. Then in July, we start to film *Junior Bake Off* again, and by the time that happens, in August there's Notting Hill Carnival, my birthday, but in September I might take a month off and see what happens.

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