

'I'M A TOUGH JUDGE'

After winning in 2019, Scottish chef Lorna McNee takes her seat on the *Great British Menu* judging panel

COMPLIMENTS TO THE CHEF

Lorna McNee, also pictured below with judges Ed Gamble and Tom Kerridge, plus GBM host Andi Oliver

WHILE IT'S BECOME routine over the years for past winners of BBC2's *Great British Menu* to return to oversee heats and mentor their fellow chefs, none of them has ever been asked to join the show's illustrious judging panel before. Enter Scottish chef Lorna McNee...

"It's just amazing," beams McNee, who in 2019 won the competition with her Wham!-inspired dessert, *Lime & Sunshine: There's Enough for Everyone*, and now returns to the show, alongside chef Tom Kerridge and comedian Ed Gamble. "To go from being a competitor all the way to being a judge, it's unbelievable."

Talking from her home in Glasgow, the 37-year-old is clearly thrilled to be taking the place of restaurateur Nisha Katona.

"My first day was pretty nerve-racking," she admits. "When you've competed in the show, you know how it feels, and it is intimidating. I was nervous for myself – but I was feeling the nerves for them as well."

The contestants will, of course, be looking at the show's newest judge as an example of what winning the *Great British Menu* can do for your career. After McNee's triumph in 2019, she was offered the job of head chef at Glasgow's prestigious Cail Bruich, helping to win the restaurant a Michelin star in 2021.

She clearly has the chef skills required, but what kind of judge will McNee be? She bristles at the suggestion that, as a former competitor, she might pull any punches when critiquing the dishes. "Tom Kerridge and I are both Michelin-starred chefs,

but we're very different in our styles," she says. "We both understand how things should be cooked, but we're possibly looking for different things from people's dishes."

"I understand what the contestants are going through, but it's a competition," she insists. "I'm tough in the way that I judge, because I would expect the best from myself, and I know that they expect the best from themselves as well."

This year, the theme is "Great Britons", with chefs drawing inspiration from notable figures,

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from their areas of the country. Asked who she would pick if she were a contestant, McNee offers up "True Scotsmen!" William Wallace and Rabbie Burns, as well as her personal hero, the late Andrew Fairlie. It was in 2007 that McNee plucked up the courage to tap the celebrated Scottish chef on the shoulder and ask for a job – a moment of bravery that led to her working in his double Michelin-starred restaurant, Andrew Fairlie at Gleneagles, for 12 years.

"He did a lot for the Scottish food scene," she says of the man she refers to as her mentor, "and he trained me to be the type of chef that I am today. He's a true hero, and was sadly taken too early from us."

But before Fairlie, it was TV that inspired McNee to become a chef, watching Gordon Ramsay and Jamie Oliver. Now, she says,



we're in a golden age of cookery television.

"Food has become a massive focus in people's lives, not just in terms of it being fuel," she explains. "People enjoy food and understand it a lot more, and it's great for the hospitality industry – it helps get people's faces out there and helps them get business into their restaurants."

This explosion of cooking shows has, of course, made rock stars out of certain chefs, and various former *Great British Menu* competitors have made the leap from contestant to presenter. So, does more TV feature in the ambitions of Lorna McNee?

"If it's applicable, then yeah. Being a chef, you go to all these different environments and you always learn something new from them. So, if anything else came my way, and I thought it was a good show, I'd definitely be up for it."

FOR THE MOMENT, though, there's no more telly planned, no move to London, not even a book in the offing. Her attention, she says, is exclusively on Cail Bruich and making it "better and better".

"I want to achieve more, I want to get more accolades and I want to make sure my team is strong – that's what it's about," she says. "I mean, I'd love to be on *James Martin's Saturday Morning* – he's a hero of mine. But as it stands for me, it's focusing on the restaurant."

And presumably gaining a second Michelin star? "That would be nice," she smiles. "It's great to have these aims and these places to push to. Though I think we're a while away yet!"

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