

MY LIFE ON A PLATE

Corned beef hash, sheep's testicle mousse and more
– **Grace Dent** recalls the dishes that have defined her as she becomes the new co-host of *Celebrity MasterChef*

I'M OVER THE MOON about presenting the new series of *Celebrity MasterChef*. I was utterly surprised to be asked. For me, this was taking on the mantle of a show that I've watched religiously from the moment it began in 1990.

In this country, we treat food very seriously. Yes, it's an entertainment show but, at the heart of it, it's about the joy of food, the science of food, the precision of food...

I think when you ask people who work in television what it's like, they always say the same things about how thrilled they are, but I genuinely am – I've lived and breathed this show for ever, and now I'm front and centre!

▲ I'M REMINDED OF HOME BY... corned beef hash

Specifically corned beef hash made in a pressure cooker. I remember standing in our kitchen on Harold Street in Currock, Carlisle, in the north west of England in 1978 and my mother opening up the pressure cooker and spooning this corned beef hash with carrots, onions, peas and potatoes into bowls. If it wasn't runny enough, we'd have it with ketchup. Now, when I'm with Anna Haugh [Dent is presenting this series with John Torode, but from next year Haugh will be her *MasterChef* co-host], every time someone uses a pressure cooker, I turn to her and say, "1970s childhood!"

► THE FIRST DISH I LEARNT TO COOK WAS... asparagus risotto

I've cooked since I was a child, but the first fancy thing I learnt to cook was an asparagus champagne risotto with aged Parmesan – which was very, very glamorous in 1998. Back then I was living in Camden, in a big, shared house with five incredibly ambitious women who all worked in the media. Whenever I had a date night, I would try to woo whoever was coming round for dinner with my risotto. When I cooked on the *MasterChef Battle of the Critics* Christmas special in 2023, I made this dish. I knew two things – firstly, that if you can master that risotto with depth and manage to get it out on the plate, people are always impressed. And secondly, I knew it was possible in that amount of time, because I'd done it with rollers in while trying to choose a dress.

► MY DEBUT AS A RESTAURANT CRITIC WAS REVIEWING... curried goat and jerk chicken

It was 1996 and I was working at *Marie Claire*. They allowed me to edit a page called The London Section and it was the first time I'd written a restaurant review. I ate curried goat and jerk chicken at Mango Room in Camden. At that time, I hadn't actually eaten much Caribbean food. I'd lived in Carlisle, and then Scotland, so to come down to London was incredible. It was like I was suddenly living in technicolor.

I loved it, but that's when I realised how hard it was to be a critic. I really liked people like Michael Winner who did Winner's Dinners in *The Sunday Times*. I thought he had a wonderful job, because all you do is go and eat dinner and then say what you think – but writing that review made me realise that you go into a place like Mango Room and it's a small, independent restaurant and the staff's heart and soul. The money you spend pays for people's children's food, so you have to take it seriously.

► MY MASTERCHEF HIGHLIGHT IS... saucy steak with potatoes and buttery vegetables

I didn't have time for emotion during filming – I was too busy presenting to think about home or my family or anything else. Then one of the celebrities brought up this venison dish that was autumnal, and I just cried.

But all of them were amazing – they all brought their personalities. I remember one celebrity coming on and I don't think she'd really cooked that much until she arrived. She completely lacked confidence in herself. Everything she did cook was mega-healthy, I don't think she ever allowed herself butter and sugar. But we got her cooking incredible steak and potatoes with sauces and buttery vegetables. From that moment, you could see her just come to life.

AS TOLD TO STEVE O'BRIEN

◀ I'LL NEVER FORGET THE TASTE OF... sheep's testicle mousse

How did it taste? Exactly as it sounds. The restaurant world celebrates nose-to-tail eating, and I often have to eat things I don't like – they want me to eat part of the spleen or the duodenum canal and it's, "Isn't this delicious, it's part of the bowel?" It happens all the time, so I spend my life faintly smiling at valves that have been stewed in wine. Part of my job is to be adventurous, but I do spend a lot of my time thinking, "Are we being serious here?" The bit I will never be OK with is the amount of money that needs to be spent in some restaurants. When I pay £650 for two people, there will always be a part of me that thinks, "I could have given that money to [youth club charity] the Rock Youth Project in Currock."

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GEORGINA LUCK