

Cooking for the community: Rosie Sykes on her life with food



It's four o'clock in the afternoon, and all Rosie Sykes has eaten is two mini Snickers from a box of Celebrations. This might seem strange for someone who has based their whole adult life around food, but as she tells me, "All chefs don't eat really." In a highly successful career which has included working under some of the country's top Michelin starred chefs, as well as being a menu consultant, she can be forgiven for not wanting to cook when she gets home. "When I'm on my own I just eat toast, I might boil an egg. I never make an effort for myself."

I meet Sykes at a Community Centre in north Cambridge where she has been cooking all morning. As we talk, she periodically moves cabbage into a roasting dish, an oven tray, a cake tin, so they all fit into the oven. This is a balancing act honed from years of cooking for paying customers, but Sykes is now putting her skills to different use, making meals at the Food Redistribution Hub run by [Cambridge Sustainable Food](#). Sykes had been on the board of Cambridge Sustainable Food when, three years ago, she was looking for a change.

"At that time, I was really unsure about what I wanted to do. I got really great reviews when I had my own restaurant. I've written a couple of books. I had columns in *The Guardian* for years. I wasn't really any longer bothered about my profile, and I was at a point in my life where I knew I wanted to do something better and more. That was helping other people." The hub does not require users to have a referral, as is often the case with food banks, and uses food donated by local community farms or surplus food from supermarkets. The food she is cooking will be frozen to be given to children during half term. There is enough that every child will be able to take a hot meal and some cake not just for themselves, but for their families at home.

Sykes laughs easily, wearing jeans and polka dot pink crocs instead of traditional chef's whites, with her miniature dachshund Florence bounding around her feet. She is clearly in her element, not only in a kitchen, but relaxed in this modest setting with no one trying to ruin her *mise en place* as an intimidation tactic. "A lot of people just aren't prepared to take that amount of shit" anymore, she says of the casual bullying many chefs endure.

And working in such environments takes a toll on your personal life. With her back turned as she does washing up at the sink, she tells me how she "wasn't the most faithful" in her marriage to her ex-husband, who was often away himself, on tour as a set designer for bands. "That's what it's like in kitchens," she explains. "You form such close bonds with people. And it almost doesn't feel like you're being unfaithful, because it's like a different world."

And indeed, her life now is, in many ways, a world away. Sykes' partner Barney Haughton is a fellow chef who runs the not-for-profit cookery school the [Square Food Foundation](#) in Bristol. Seeing how his project operates helped ignite her passion to use her culinary skills for others, as well as being the beginning of their relationship. When they had known each other less than a week Haughton, 20 years her senior, invited her to go to Italy with him to teach cooking for a couple of weeks. "I thought he's too set in his ways, and this is not what I signed up of. And he said 'look let's just go to Italy together'" and we did, and it has worked out," she tells me with a smile.

While she always loved cooking, becoming a chef was not the most natural path for Sykes. The daughter of eminent lawyer Richard Sykes, her memories of baking "with my mother and our housekeeper" while her four older siblings were away at boarding school hint at a privileged upbringing. It was in the school holidays, with parents away travelling and siblings left in charge, that Sykes established her talent for cooking. "I remember having a dinner party for 35 people, I must have been about 17, and making a big table out of two table tennis tables pushed together. I made a six-course meal, I just loved it."

Sykes went to university to study Spanish, and after a year studying in Spain ("My food education") she came back to England for her final year and started catering. Her most notable event? "The brother of a friend of mine was an art dealer," she says. "He had known Princess Diana all his life, and she used to come round and visit. It was all very exciting when she came round because there would be an ambulance outside in case I poisoned her!" I wonder if she, at 20 years old, found cooking for one of the most famous women in the world daunting. "No, not at all. In those days I didn't worry about anything. I'd probably be more worried now, but I don't think I've ever been that sort of person."

Florence the dachshund barks, wanting to be fed herself, and I take the hint to leave, telling Sykes I hope she manages to eat some toast when she gets home. She tells me not to worry, she's meeting friends for supper. As Sykes finishes the washing up, I notice how content she is. It seems in many ways Sykes has gone from all the sex, drugs and rock and roll of her previous career and relationship to this quieter but more balanced way of life. "I suppose the reason the joy is in cooking is that it's all about nurture, and it's all about making people feel happy and fulfilled," she says. And through nurturing others, Sykes seems happy and fulfilled herself. Even without a Michelin star.