

LIFE ON A PLATE SEASON 4, EPISODE 3: RUBY TANDOH

SPEAKERS

Alison Oakervee, Yasmin Khan, Ruby Tandoh

Yasmin Khan 00:00

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Hi, I'm Yasmin Khan. And you're listening to *Life on a Plate*, the podcast from Waitrose. Throughout the season, my co-host Alison Oakervee and I are going to be talking to a range of fantastic guests from many walks of life and asking them to share their stories through the food memories, dishes and ingredients that mean the most to them.

Hi, Alison, how are you doing?

Alison 01:50

Hi Yasmin. I'm really well, thank you. How about you?

Yasmin Khan 01:53

I'm good. I'm good. Very much settled into cosy season now, I think... kind of invested in a new hat and gloves and scarf this week, so I'm feeling kind of ready for the elements.

Alison 02:07

It is that kind of weather, isn't it, when it's weather like this? It's a bit colder, crisp in the morning. It's real kind of mash weather and slow-cooking, which is great.

Yasmin Khan 02:17

It is, and I've been carving a lot of pumpkins this week because near where I live there's this great place called the Dalston Curve Garden where they have pumpkin carving every year. So I went and did that a few days ago which was fun and I've now, with just a few days to go I'm trying to assemble a

Halloween costume for a party that I'm going to. I love this time of year for many reasons but mainly because I can whip out the old pumpkin pie recipe that I love.

Alison

I was going to say, do you cook with it?

Yasmin Khan 02:54

Pumpkin pie I think is one of my favorite things to make and eat and bake, and the way it fills up the kitchen with the smell of, like, cinnamon and nutmeg and ginger... So that's what I'll be doing with all the pumpkins I've been carving.

Alison 03:07

I tell you what, they're lovely just with soup, as well. And, you know roast it, having it as a side veg – there's so much, it's so flexible, sweet or savoury – it's just delicious.

Yasmin Khan 03:18

Pumpkin season! Well, I'm very excited about our guest this week, because she is someone who I think embraces the pleasure of good food. It's the brilliant food writer Ruby Tandoh. I'm sure some people will recognise her name; any fans of *The Great British Bake Off* out there might remember that she was a finalist on the show back in 2013 when she was just 21, which I found shocking. But she's done so many interesting things since then: she has written two cookbooks, released a book called *Eat Up!* which is all about the pleasure of eating and which really pushes back against judgment and guilt. Have you ever read that book, Alison?

Alison 04:00

Yeah, I have. It's a really important book. It's about the pleasure and fun of food.

Yasmin Khan 04:05

That's a perfect way to describe it, Alison, and she's just published her third cookbook, *Cook As You Are*, which also rejects a few traditional conventions in food writing, in that it really pioneers this approach to inclusivity. Ruby's kind of considered the experience of her readers at every level and the recipes are aimed at those with limited energy or time, those with different abilities or income, those with sensory impairment...

Alison 04:30

She's such a refreshing and inspiring writer. Not only has she written cookbooks, she's written for *The Guardian*, *Waitrose Food*, for *Vittles*, *Elle*, *The New Yorker* – she's a busy lady.

Yasmin Khan 04:43

She's been described as someone who is allergic to food snobbery. And for me that really sums up what she's about. I really welcome her outspoken voice on a whole range of topics.

Alison 04:55

Yeah, when she doesn't agree with something she is not scared of being outspoken on it, which is really refreshing.

Yasmin Khan 05:02

We need more voices like Ruby's if you ask me.

Alison 05:05

We certainly do. Anyway, here is our conversation with food writer, Ruby Tandoh.

Yasmin Khan 05:17

Hi Ruby, how are you doing?

Ruby Tandoh 05:18

Hi, I'm good, thank you.

Yasmin Khan 05:21

I was really excited to kind of have you on *Life on a Plate* for so many reasons. You're someone who's really redefined what food writing looks like, and also what it could achieve. And whilst we're here to talk about your new book, I just really wanted to start by applauding you, because in my mind you're an absolutely fearless voice. And you're working hard to shift people's perceptions, not only about food, but how it relates to the world around us. So, thank you.

Ruby Tandoh 05:48

That's very kind. Thank you. I mean, you know, one person's fearless is another person's gobby, so I think that's um, that's a judgment call, how you position me in that sense. But, I mean, I kind of arrived in this field, kind of by accident, I guess, in a way. And it's been a slow process of trying to find my feet and figure out what kind of thing I want to do, what kind of writing I want to do and what my message is, in a sense. So it's been, it's been slow trying to like position myself, and sometimes I position myself like in reaction to other people, like, I definitely don't want to be like them. And sometimes I've had, like, a more positive sway like, this is what I stand for, or whatever. But yeah, it's trial and error and I think most of us doing this food writing thing are kind of still, bit by bit, figuring that out for ourselves.

Alison 06:46

You are just a breath of fresh air. You're so different from so many other food writers, have you always been fearless at, you know, in school? And is that just how you were made up?

Ruby Tandoh 06:57

I think there are definitely times when I have been – how do I put it – quick to say what I think about things, I think that's been quite a constant theme in my life. Sometimes, not in a particularly useful way. But it's a weird split. For me, actually, I think a lot of the time I'm very quiet; a lot of the time I'm very willing to kind of bend and to fit in around other people and stuff; I can be very malleable in so many ways. And then every so often something will pique my interest and I kind of spring to life and I kind of

assert myself sometimes almost disproportionately. But usually, it's a weird balance – it is very split, I would say.

Yasmin Khan 07:46

I feel like you're being I don't know, I hope this isn't overstepping, but I feel like you're being a bit ungenerous towards yourself there because it's almost as if you're being a bit apologetic for sometimes kind of saying some of the stuff you say. And of course, I don't know the ins and outs of your life but I would say that, you know, I'm also someone who – to a fault actually, it's the biggest challenge I have, that I'm just way too reactive, generally, and I just, I react to things and stuff. And I think when people are like that, I tend to give myself a hard time about it. But from the outside what it seems like you do then is, I don't know, you do drop, like, Ruby truth bombs everywhere. You know, we had this again, when me and Alison were talking. I was kind of reading through some things ahead of this interview and one of the funny – I mean, you're very funny – but one of the funniest things I saw you say was that, you know, you'd never read Elizabeth David, and you don't think, you know, anybody really has! And I was like, 'Alison, I haven't'. And then I was like, 'Have you?'.

Alison 08:42

It was a big confession time that none of us had actually read Elizabeth David cover to cover, who for such a long time has been considered this archetypal, iconic food writer.

Ruby Tandoh 08:54

I thought I was the only one who actually hadn't. So I'm pleased to hear this; I'm pleased everyone else is coming forward now that I've been the sacrificial lamb. So, thank you.

Yasmin Khan 09:05

Exactly. But I do think you push the boundaries of food writing and cookbooks. And I think your new book, *Cook As You Are: Recipes for Real Life, Hungry Cooks and Messy Kitchens*, is just such a brilliant example of that. But I mean, I want to start by asking you, you know, did it surprise you that you wrote another recipe book?

Ruby Tandoh 09:25

It did, yes. Because I swore... So I did a couple of books a few years ago, I did one baking book and then one kind of general recipe book... and I absolutely swore down to anyone who'd listen that I'd never do it again. And, obviously I've done it again. But it felt so different this time, like genuinely and in a way that surprised even me. I think when I did the other two – it's tricky; I'd just come off *Bake Off* and so I wasn't really sure what I was doing and I wasn't really sure what my approach to food was going to be and what I stood for and all of that stuff. And so the books, like, I mean, I put everything into them, and I'm still proud of them, but I still am not sure what their function was – like, who were they really, really for? What did they stand for? And I didn't want to do that again. I didn't want to put something out just for the sake of it. I mean, there's a million recipes online; you can get anything you want to. So, for me a cookbook has to be an act of curation, almost, rather than creating recipes, it's about bringing stuff together. It's about tailoring stuff for specific people, or about specific cuisines and really having that vision and having a purpose for it rather than just like, 'Here are my recipes, because I'm great.' It

has to say something. So I knew that I didn't want to do a cookbook that didn't really have that mission. And when the idea came to me to do *Cook As You Are*, and to do this thing, that was all about meeting people where they're at in their kitchen, no matter their ability, their budget, all of this stuff, I was like, 'OK, that's what it is.' Like, this is the thing that will galvanize me to do all this recipe testing and to write all these words, and put this book out. Because, actually, I can see what it's for and it feels purposeful.

Alison 11:14

To me, this new book feels really different, Ruby. The recipes feel really inclusive, with their simple but diverse ingredients. And you've given substitutions for ingredients if people don't have the ones that are listed; the tone that you've used throughout the book is really warm and accessible. And one thing that is striking is it is fully illustrated, there are no photographs – what made you decide to do that?

Ruby Tandoh 11:39

So, basically, I didn't want this to be photo-led for a number of reasons. I think one of the things is that, when you have a photoshoot like that for a cookbook, it is really expensive, and that means that the book's more expensive, and it means the book is bulkier. So it's bigger, it's more expensive, it's glossier, it's more aspirational. So, I didn't want it to be those thing; I kind of wanted to veer away from photography, for that reason. But also, I mean, I wrote this book in the middle of the first lockdown; I knew that I wanted it to meet people where they're at in their kitchens – it's called *Cook As You Are*. So the idea of having these photographs done in one set kitchen, like a studio kitchen, which presents just, like, one vision of how it is to cook, and probably just one person cooking – and that'd be me – it just didn't feel right. And I knew I wanted to show loads of different kitchens and dining rooms and people cooking, and just people from every background, people of every size and shape, people of every ethnicity cooking, like, as they are. And the only way realistically to do that was illustrations. And I'm actually so pleased that me and my editor and everyone made that call, because the illustrations that Sinae Park has done are so cute, and so beautiful and full of life and they just, they make it about more than just what the food looks like at the end – it is about the process of cooking. And that's really what this was about.

Yasmin Khan 13:09

And then also on that point, I think, you know, certainly with some of the cuisine that I've written about there is this expectation around food in the way it's photographed for cookbooks, or for magazines, being styled in a way that's, like, got particular colours in it or has particular textures. You know, like famously, you know, people always talk about kind of, like, brown food as being like a bad thing... I do think with people in the food media now it's just like, 'Well, yeah, that's a recipe, but like, how does it look?', you know, as opposed to a lot of the recipes from, you know, Pakistan where my heritage is, or Iran, it's not about how it looks, it's about how it tastes.

Ruby Tandoh 13:47

Absolutely. But you know what, I feel like even these brown foods, so things that, you know, don't photograph particularly well, like, I don't even think it's that they look bad. I really do think it's about the camera and about what we expect from a photograph; because, like, if I see a dinner table that's laden with loads of different bowls of stuff and stews and, you know, things that don't have the form and don't

have the pop and the colour that you expect from food photography, like, when I'm in front of it, it's absolutely beautiful – and if I tried to train my camera on it, it becomes a mess. And I think yeah, it's just about appreciating the food within the context that it was intended for. I think that seems vital.

Alison 14:30

Your titles are great, you're really focusing on, you know, you've got the 'Effortless cod in a red lentil and tomato lemongrass broth', you know, that just having 'effortless' in it, it just encourages people to do it. But also you've got 'No waste whole cauliflower cheese'. In that recipe you're kind of encouraging people to kind of avoid food waste – and all the way through it. But also you've got the permission to substitute bits in the recipe and, you know, loads of ideas of, 'If you can't get this, try this'. Is that how you naturally cook at home?

Ruby Tandoh 14:59

Yeah. Here's the thing, I have bedroom cookbooks and I have kitchen cookbooks. And they are two really distinct categories for me. And I think it's probably true for a lot of people to be honest. So my bedroom cookbooks are actually, like, the Ottolenghis and that kind of cookbook that I look through, and I salivate over, and I really enjoy just imagining and fantasizing about this food. And I seldom actually make it, I seldom actually bring that energy to the kitchen and kind of stand there with 500 ingredients and make it come true. And then I have my kitchen cookbooks, which tend to be more like the Niger Slaters and there's a few others and actually a lot of recipe blogs and stuff that I turn to these days as well. They're the ones that I actually find I use for my day to day cooking. And I knew that this cookbook, I wanted it to be a kitchen cookbook. I wanted it to be the one that you actually cook from. So it had to be flexible, it had to be realistic. And I know that so often you'll have a tin of tomatoes in, and a recipe will, say, maybe call for fresh tomatoes, and you're thinking, 'Can I substitute that?' And I am always having those conversations with myself, I'm always in dialogue with a cookbook, trying to figure out how much can I push this. And I know that a lot of other people are, so I pre-empted that and included a million variations and things that I hope will make it more convenient and more flexible for people. And, just, so they can tailor recipes to meet them.

Yasmin Khan 16:32

One of the things that I felt when I was reading the book is that it feels like, as we've discussed earlier, it feels like a real antidote to what food is conventionally presented like in cookbooks. And I know you've spoken out a lot about, you know, the things that you found challenging in the current food media landscape. But what would you like to see UK food media do differently?

Ruby Tandoh 16:53

I mean, it's really, it's really tricky to give an answer to that. Because I mean, there are a million things and it feels like me and so many other people, you, as well, have been shouting about this for ages. So it's just there comes a point where you're like, 'Well, I think it's clear at this point.' So just some people who seem to, like, make a living from being offensive and discriminatory, they need to go. And in general, I think more opportunities need to be given to loads of people from diverse backgrounds, people who kind of cook from, with a different perspective, you just bring something different than just like the same old, same old. For me, that's pretty much where we're at. It's not like I think, 'Oh, you

know, people in my cohort are good, and everyone else is bad.' It's really not that at all, it's just I think *the* important thing for writing about anything, and especially writing about food, which is so exciting and so evocative and so close to people's hearts, is to have curiosity, and to have some humility. I think it's about entering into things knowing that you're not going to know it all. And being realistic and being humble about that. And I think that can so easily be lost. And so, honestly, on a practical level, I just think a little bit of that would go a long, long way in food media. So rather than discovering a cuisine or dismissing it out of hand, or whatever it is, just having curiosity. And I think so much respect and mutuality and care will follow from that.

Yasmin Khan 18:25

One of the things you mentioned is, you know, you wrote this book during the pandemic. Did you find the pandemic – and we're still in it, of course – has it changed how you personally cook and eat?

Ruby Tandoh 18:37

I wish I could use it as an excuse but actually my slightly haphazard approach to cooking, like, predates the pandemic and it stayed the same throughout. I mean, I go through periods and I think – I don't know if this is particularly common or not – but, like, I go through periods where I'll cook loads, I will try out loads of new recipes, and then there'll be maybe even a couple of months where I just cannot face it, and I'll make the things that I, like, a really small roster of things that I know well, I know don't take too much time, don't take too much energy, and I just fall back into the rut. So for me there are absent flows of this kind of creativity and, like, kitchen energy, but it, yeah, is independent of the pandemic. I can't use that as an excuse for that.

Yasmin Khan 19:26

I guess the reason I asked that question is I feel I had a quite a difficult relationship to food during the pandemic in that I basically completely lost my appetite and I just did not want to cook and I guess some people, you know, during times of stress, they just... food becomes this thing which they cannot relate to. And I remember, everybody else, I felt, in the world was, like, baking sourdough and, like, baking banana bread, and I was, like, supposedly a food writer and I literally was just eating cheese sandwiches. And I remember Samin Nosrat posted this photo about, like, six months in – I think it was a toasted cheese sandwich. And she was, like, 'I'm really sorry, I've not posted anything. I literally can't bring myself to cook.' And I just felt so, like, relieved that there was someone else out there in the food world that also just, you know, I just... I just, I've got so many takeaways in the last year, more than at any other point in my life. Do you have any tips for people when they get to that point where just, you cannot bring yourself to cook and then you just feel terrible about it?

Ruby Tandoh 20:30

I mean, well, firstly, I'm sorry that you have been feeling that way because it's just, it's not nice, is it? And I can relate to it. And it's just, it's exhausting and then there's also – I know what you're talking about – that like compounded sense of kind of failure, because you are a food person, so to speak. So you're like, 'I should be better than this.' And then you're kind of cracking into a ready meal again. But I mean, for me, the thing that helps more than anything is just not doing what we seem to have been doing and adding that layer of shame. I mean, it's hard enough if you don't have the energy to cook or

you just don't have the headspace, you can't face it – that's hard enough. And then when you add shame and embarrassment, and you're flogging yourself for it, it just makes it 10 times worse. So, when I get my – and this happens, you know, multiple times a week sometimes – when I get my, kind of, supermarket ready meal, you know, one of the ones you literally put in the microwave, like, I do not beat myself up for it because it is frankly quite delicious. A lot of the time, I really enjoy them. I know some people don't, but I like them. And it's keeping me going! And I would rather that I ate that than that I stood at the stove with a real grump-huff on and just, like, powered through making a dinner for what? To impress who? Like, it's just not worth it. So, I mean, there's literally a bit in the book that's... I can't remember what it's called, but it's something like, 'A reminder about baked beans', which is exactly about this, like, sometimes you can just open a tin of beans. I don't want you cooking from stuff in the book if it's going to make you absolutely miserable. So, yeah, I'm all for these, kind of, for cutting corners and for just doing whatever you need to do to get by.

Yasmin Khan 22:32

If you enjoy wine, spirits and cocktails, as well as delicious food, here's a date for your diary. The Waitrose Drinks Festival takes place on the 12th to the 14th of November at London's County Hall. With more than 100 stands hosted by leading experts, it's a fantastic chance to taste award-winning wines, spirits, beers, ciders and alcohol-free drinks. You can also attend masterclasses to learn about food and drink pairings and even sample the Waitrose Christmas food range. Go to waitrosedrinksfestival.com to book your tickets, sponsored by Schweppes and Unearthed.

So I'd love to maybe, like, take a little step back and talk a bit about what food was like for you growing up and how you developed this interest in food. So, you grew up in Southend-on-Sea in Essex; what did food look like for you when you were growing up?

Ruby Tandoh 23:32

My parents did a lot of cooking, they still do. My mum really enjoys cooking, I think it's kind of like, a highlight of her day is getting to be a bit creative in the kitchen. But to be honest, when I was younger, and living at home, it wasn't so much about being creative, because my parents had, like, four young children at the time and, you know, jobs and not that much money to go around and stuff like that. So it was about just getting as much food on the table as possible on a budget. So, we did that. But they did that with quite a lot of pride. And they had cookbooks that they kind of used to guide them in that – a lot of vegetarian cookery to keep it affordable and lots of stews and soups and things like that. So honestly, just very similar to cooking to what loads of people grew up with. But yeah, it was always a highlight, it was always something that was kind of a talking point of the day. I think I took that little bit of interest and absolutely ran with it when I became obsessed with reading cookbooks and cooking myself and all of that.

Alison 24:40

Because you actually started cooking at quite a young age, didn't you?

Ruby Tandoh 24:44

Here's the thing. I started reading cookbooks at a very young age, like, I was, I would literally read them before I could properly read and write. When I learned to actually cook it was probably when I was a teenager and that's because I was obsessed with Nigella's *How to be a Domestic Goddess*. So I made cheesecakes, like, multiple times a month. And that was kind of the beginning of the actual cooking. But yeah, the reading of the cookbooks, the perusing them, predates that.

Alison 25:13

You were cooking multiple cheesecakes a month but yet at the same time, I know in the past, you've written about having, having had an eating disorder. What role did cooking have for you, then?

Ruby Tandoh 25:24

Yeah, it's definitely, um, it's not hard to see, I think, how multiple cheesecakes a month and an eating disorder might actually be compatible. Yeah, it's when I was kind of in my mid-teens, I started just having a really difficult relationship with food and with my body. I think a lot of teenagers go through this. I've always focused myself a lot on whatever I do. And I think food and, kind of, that side of things became something that got my whole focus. So it was pretty intense. And I spent a huge amount of energy thinking about food and what I would eat or wouldn't eat or fantasizing about food, and then denying it to myself; it was, it was all over the place. And that continued for maybe five, six years in a pretty intense way. And then I managed to figure things out a bit better. But yeah, it was really, really tough and I think that's kind of underpinned a lot of the way that I approach food now and have been writing about food since then because I know that it can be so so difficult to eat in an uncomplicated way, to follow your appetite, and all of that. So, that is really at the core of the way I think about food now – is stripping away the shame and actually foregrounding, like, pleasure in food.

Yasmin Khan 26:48

And I think you did that really well in *Eat Up!* Your last book. It's such an incredible book. Obviously, you chronicle a lot of the stories that you kind of just told us about in a bit more detail in that but also kind of try and help us all deconstruct what it means to be able to take pleasure in food. One of the things I think that I really respected you for and appreciated you for in the book, but also kind of more widely, is how it kind of took an aim at wellness culture, which I heard you very recently describe as repackaged diet culture in a seductive form. What is it that you found or find so challenging about wellness as a concept?

Ruby Tandoh 27:29

Oh, I mean, it's really hard to talk about because it sounds like you're picking a fight with something that's common sense, doesn't it? Because I mean, it's called 'wellness'; why should anyone have a problem with people feeling well? Like, it makes me seem like the Bogeyman. But here's the thing, it's not just about that, is it? Because otherwise it would be... it would be simple, and it wouldn't be a hugely profitable industry. So, when I take aim at wellness, I think what I'm really looking at is the kind of insidious stuff that is, like, 'We're going to help you to get the glow. We're going to help you to shine more than ever before. We're going to help you to feel great in your body.' But when the subtext to all of that is: 'We're going to help you lose weight,' or, 'We're going to help you be, like, super lithe and muscly' or whatever it is. So I think these things, these ideas come in such like peppy, upbeat, fun form

and it's really easy to get sucked in by them. But so often there's that subtext and, and I think it can be really difficult for people to resist. And I think it can be really damaging if you get sucked into that. And then, you, kind of, you come to believe that you should never bloat, that you should never have a spot on your face, that you should never have frizzy hair, that you should never have a wobble. And that all of this has to do with, like, self-expression and happiness and all of these things. So it is just, a lot of it is diet culture, weight-loss culture but with this really fun, sisterhood kind of vibe to it.

Yasmin Khan 29:12

Yeah, absolutely. And I think it's something that probably all of us at various points, especially at its peak, you know, kind of found ourselves not totally buying into, but you know, we're all part of society so it's hard not to be influenced by it, you know. And then I think I started – especially after reading a lot of your stuff – like, I've always felt a bit uncomfortable about this, but can't put my finger on why. And I think one of the things that I've always felt really frustrated by is how wellness food culture actually seems to kind of really ignore issues of, kind of, class and poverty, which are social issues that massively affect, like, our health and wellness. And so there's just always felt, like, that there's this, like, cognitive dissonance between how it's presented and then actually the reality of people's lives.

Ruby Tandoh 29:58

I think that's exactly right. I think that is a huge, huge blind spot for this wellness stuff. And I actually think that it's a blind spot in food more generally. I think we put so much emphasis – and I include myself in this – we put so much emphasis on individual diets, individual lifestyles, individual people with individual kitchens. And we are not very good at keeping in our sights, the bigger structures that kind of underpin all of that. So, how much is... for example, you know, stuff like Universal Credit being cut? How much is that affecting how much people can eat? And what about people who have to share flats because rents are really high or something like that? How much is that affecting how much they can actually get into the kitchen and do any cooking to start with? So there are huge things that shape our food lives. And I think it's really easy to get sucked into individualising it all, but we are part of these bigger structures, and they have a massive influence.

Yasmin Khan 31:00

Do you think wellness is on its way out? Like, you know, do you feel the pandemic has shifted some of this kind of influence of perfect lifestyle stuff?

Ruby Tandoh 31:10

I do think that some of that stuff has shifted, yes. The standards have risen a bit for what we expect from ourselves and other people in terms of, like, body shaming and things like that. But you know, there's always things, there's always things. I mean, just right now even, there's still, like, there's so much stigma around weight, around fatness. There's so much judgment around what people eat, even though we've already been through the mill with all of this stuff. So yeah, I don't think the fight's over yet, but things have improved.

Yasmin Khan 31:46

There's so many, I think, inspiring, like, tidbits in this conversation that we've had. I am always curious, because I love to learn from other people: who inspires you? You know, for example, I know from your writing, that you love a lot of movies, don't you? And you've always, like, connected film and food really well. Where do you go to for inspiration, I guess? You know, we all need to fill our creative well, don't we?

Ruby Tandoh 32:12

Yeah, I mean that is it for me, like with, with food stuff, where I find it most interesting and most fulfilling, when it intersects with other parts of life. I think maybe that's why I always kind of struggled to come up with like a food personality, who's my hero, although I have been quite public about calling Nigel Slater my dad, but that's, that's an aside. But yeah, I love food when it intersects with other things, when it's there in intersection with culture and history and our social lives and all of these things, that's when it becomes really interesting for me. I've never been that interested in zooming in on just cooking or just like, you know, gastronomy and science of food and stuff like that. So, I like to enrich my food life. Honestly, I watch, I watch films, I watch TV, anything that kind of looks at food even just tangentially and uses it to say something about who people are and what they stand for. I think you see so much of that: in any kind of media food is used as a shorthand and these kinds of tiny little moments that are almost just, like, you know, a food stylist had to go on set for half an hour one day to put a cheese roll in the frame – like, that is the kind of stuff that I look for and I enjoy. I enjoy those contexts. It's about food in context to me every time and that's where I get my, kind of, inspiration.

Yasmin Khan

Do you watch *Bake Off*?

Ruby Tandoh

I can't, you know. I really can't. I, it really stresses me out. Yes. Yeah.

Yasmin Khan 33:52

Do you think...? Would you do it again? Like, yeah, how do you relate to that whole experience now?

Ruby Tandoh 33:58

It's a tricky one, because it was a really, really good experience. And it's, it's given me so much, and obviously I don't want to be... I know that I would never be where I am without *Bake Off*. So it actually was a great experience: I'm grateful for it. But also, I would never do it again. Like, it's weird to kind of balance those two truths in my mind. But yeah, it was, it was a moment. You know, I was at university, I was kind of at a loose end, I wasn't really enjoying my course so I just took a leap of faith and I did this TV show. But TV is definitely... it's such a vulnerable thing to do and you're so visible and you're... you're judged, not just for, kind of, the bakes you do or whatever, but the entirety of who you are, or at least who people think you are. And I definitely wouldn't let myself in for that kind of scrutiny again I don't think.

Yasmin Khan 34:51

it's very... you need such a thick skin I think, to do telly. I always feel that.

Ruby Tandoh 34:56

I have an extremely thin skin.

Yasmin Khan 35:00

Yeah, me too and I feel like especially now with, like, social media stuff, I really remember that one of my formative TV experiences, obviously, I come from a very different world. So I kind of came from, like human rights activism and I remember I was on like, the *10 O'Clock Live Show* or something on Channel 4, this, like, comedy show. And it was when Benghazi had just been attacked in Libya and we were kind of debating whether we'd have, like, military intervention. And I was like, like, the voice, the lone voice on that particular panel talking about, kind of, the challenges of military intervention, and, you know, going in with that plan, and like the chaos and all of this stuff. And on social media afterwards, you know, that pile-on of criticism – I was so young at the time, and I found it really affecting, and then, you know, you just have to kind of distance yourself from what goes on.

Ruby Tandoh 35:44

Yeah, I think it's a difficulty that's maybe to do with the format of TV: that so much of it is about being likeable, or personable, even if that doesn't necessarily mean *good*.

Alison 35:56

Were you one of the years of *Bake Off* – you know, you hear about some years that really bond and have, kind of, gone through it together and regularly meet up. Are you still in contact with your, your *Bake Off* year, or...?

Ruby Tandoh 36:11

Not so much, not so much. But you know what? That is, that's my fault and I would fully recognise it as my fault. I think when we first finished the series, we did meet up, we did meet up a couple of times, a few of us, like sometimes all together, sometimes separately. And I think a few of them are still in touch. But for me, I think the problem was that I was, what 20/21? And it was such a stressful experience, not the actual filming of the show, which was lovely, because I really enjoyed meeting those people that I was on it with and I thought they were all lovely. The problem was that when it went out, when the show aired, and getting that attention, and I found it really overwhelming. I found it massively destabilizing and it kind of made me scared and sad and angry and paranoid and all of these things. And actually, the last thing I wanted to do against that backdrop was to hang out with the people that I'd done the show with. So you know, that's, that's my fault. That's kind of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, you know, I should have actually... I probably could have and should have used them as a support. But because it was so stressful I just wanted nothing to do with the whole thing, with the whole kind of *Bake Off* institution. So I kind of, yeah, I stepped back and I disappeared.

Alison 37:29

But that's understandable when you were under the pressure that you were, that, you know, different people react differently. And, you know, the way you reacted was, you know, right for you at the time.

Yasmin Khan

It makes complete sense to me, yeah.

Alison

So Ruby, I ask everyone a question. What is your kitchen ingredient that, you know, you can't function in your kitchen without, that's always there?

Ruby Tandoh 37:53

Oh. What do I have to have? Let me think. I mean, if I'm being honest, I think it's probably butter. Is that too simple to say?

Alison 38:01

No! No.

Yasmin Khan 38:02

It isn't because mine would be olive oil so I don't think it is.

Alison 38:07

Nice. Is it, is it salted?

Ruby Tandoh 38:10

Here's the thing, OK. I know people get quite upset about salted butter because they say, 'Oh, the quality's worse, it's salted and they use that to mask the fact that the quality is worse.' I mean, just, if I have to have one thing that I kind of fall back on in kitchen, I'm going to use salted butter because it's delicious on toast. It's easy for me, I can even make cakes with it, which really benefit from the salt anyway. So yeah, it's got to be salted butter. It is the start of so many good stories.

Alison

Brilliant.

Yasmin Khan 38:39

Shall we do a bit of kitchen grilling, Alison?

Alison 38:43

I think it is time for Kitchen Grill. This is just quick questions, feel free to expand, but um: tea or coffee.

Ruby Tandoh 38:52

Okay, it's got to be tea. Because coffee makes me absolutely buzz. I am highly strung enough without coffee. So, yeah.

Alison 39:00

Fried or poached?

Ruby Tandoh 39:04

Poached because I don't like... I love most foods, but eggs make me absolutely retch if they're not, not just-so, and poached feel safer to me.

Alison 39:16

Ah, OK. Bacon or smoked salmon?

Ruby Tandoh 39:19

Bacon.

Alison 39:21

Bacon. Do you have a favourite way of having it?

Ruby Tandoh 39:24

No, no, I just, I just love bacon. I just thought that that would suffice.

Alison

That's it! Fruit or veg?

Ruby Tandoh 39:31

Oh God, um, actually vegetables. Actually, I have a joke with my friends that if I'm feeling really, really good one day I'll eat fruit with my mouth, which is to say I won't put it in a crumble or a cake or something. So yeah, vegetables, I think I prefer.

Alison 39:46

Mash or chips?

Ruby Tandoh 39:50

Oh God, chips.

Alison 39:51

Chips. I know the answer to this one: butter or olive oil?

Ruby Tandoh 39:54

It has to be butter but I'm a massive fan and appreciator of olive oil.

Alison 40:01

Crisps or chocolate?

Ruby Tandoh 40:03

Chocolate. I've got a raging sweet tooth.

Alison 40:07

Now, scones: jam first or cream?

Ruby Tandoh 40:10

I actually couldn't care less. I could not care less. It's all the same to me. So, I have tried it both ways just to be sure, but I'm not a connoisseur, I just absolutely love food. So, yeah.

Alison 40:23

As it comes! Starter or pudding?

Ruby Tandoh 40:27

Oh, pudding every time.

Alison 40:29

Graze or feast.

Ruby Tandoh 40:30

Oh, um, do you know what, I think feast. I think the sight of something spectacular on the table is just, is part of the joy of eating. So yeah, the atmosphere.

Alison 40:42

That's it, Ruby. Thank you for your Kitchen Grill.

Ruby Tandoh 40:46

Thank you so much.

Yasmin Khan 40:47

And thank you so much for joining us on the *Life on a Plate* podcast. It was great to talk to you about your book, *Cook As You Are: Recipes for Real Life, Hungry Cooks and Messy Kitchens*. So thanks so much, Ruby. It's been a real pleasure.

Ruby Tandoh 41:00

Thank you so much for talking to me. Thank you.

Yasmin Khan 41:07

You've been listening to *Life on a Plate* from Waitrose with me, Yasmin Khan. Thank you to my co-host, Alison Oakervee, and our guest Ruby Tandoh. If you've enjoyed this conversation, you can find more like it by subscribing to *Life on a Plate* or wherever you get your podcasts. And to learn more about the series, go visit waitrose.com/podcasts.