

LIFE ON A PLATE SEASON 4, EPISODE 4: CHRIS PACKHAM

SPEAKERS

Alison Oakervee, Yasmin Khan, Chris Packham

Yasmin Khan 00:00

This season of *Life on a Plate* is sponsored by Belazu, the amazing suppliers of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern ingredients. Their range includes premium olive oils and vinegars, pestos, pastes and preserved lemons. And if you haven't yet tried their signature rose harissa, which is a staple in my fridge, then you are in for a treat. Belazu started 30 years ago when two friends, George and Adam, drove a van full of olives back from France. They began supplying chefs, then home cooks, and have never looked back. Belazu ingredients are restaurant quality. And I've genuinely been a fan for a very long time. The tahini from Nablus has a very special place in my kitchen shelf; it's so nutty and flavoursome. Their ingredients are such a simple way to enhance other flavours, and they transform any dish. Belazu source and develop their products very carefully, without compromising on quality, and have gone above and beyond in their commitment to the environment and to looking after their suppliers. To find out more, go to waitrose.com/belazu to discover the range for yourself.

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, lovely to see you.

Alison 01:50

Hi, Yasmin. Nice to see you. How are you?

Yasmin Khan 01:52

I'm good, thank you. Slight change of location this week – I'm in Birmingham.

Alison 01:57

Oh, what brings you there?

Yasmin Khan 01:58

Well, that's where my mum and dad live, and also my sister's over visiting from the States which is really nice. So it's been really good to be with the family and do lots of cooking.

Alison 02:07

Yeah, because I imagine it's quite a long time since you all saw each other. What do you all sit and eat?

Yasmin Khan 02:12

It is, it's been a full year and we've descended on my mum and asked her to make all our favourite Persian dishes. So we've eaten lots of ghormeh sabzi, which is this incredible stew made with – this is no exaggeration – about 1.5 kilos of fresh herbs, cooked down into a thick sauce and kind of, it's a beautiful, kind of earthy stew with lots of lamb and dried limes.

Alison 02:35

Does it go a really lovely khaki green colour with all those herbs?

Yasmin Khan 02:39

It does, it does. Yeah. So, it's just yeah, so we've been, we've just been eating lots of Persian food, which has been a real delight. What about you? What have you been cooking this week?

Alison 02:49

Well, it's a bit like you – stews; it's a bit colder, so slow-cooked. You know, it's really good beef casserole with lots of mushrooms and just, I mean they smell nice and they kind of smell warm while they're cooking, don't they?

Yasmin Khan 03:03

There's something about the slow-cooked dishes. They seem to take on a different quality, I think, because the ingredients all meld into each other. You know, I think Nigel Slater always says, when you cook something slowly it gives the ingredients time to get to know each other.

Alison 03:17

Mmm. So, lots of eating. What else have you been up to this week?

Yasmin Khan 03:20

Well, very apt for this week's guest. I spent yesterday at a local city farm with my nephew, which was just so fun, just feeding the goats and the sheep and seeing the little chickens running around. And it was particularly pertinent because of course, we're speaking to the campaigner and environmentalist Chris Packham this week, who, believe it or not, has been making nature programmes for 35 years, which really blows me away. I mean, I really remember him from when I was a kid watching *The Really Wild Show*. And of course, these days he is more regularly on the telly with *Autumnwatch*, which is currently on iPlayer, I think.

Alison 03:57

I always think it's autumn or spring whenever you see Chris on telly, you just know it's that change in the season. He's just a fixture of your telly-viewing calendar.

Yasmin Khan 04:08

He is. You know it's autumn when you've spotted Chris in an anorak talking about bats.

Alison 04:13

But yeah, he was really eloquent in the way he spoke in our interview about his relationship with nature and how vital it is for us to protect the natural world by tackling this climate change emergency that we're in.

Yasmin Khan 04:26

Yeah, absolutely. And I think that what else is really interesting for me is this kind of more recent strand of work that he's been doing, which is around his advocacy for autistic people. And I really found it so moving when he opened up about his own autism in his documentary *Asperger's and Me*, and it was wonderful to talk to him about it because I think it is a topic that we don't hear enough about.

Alison 04:47

I'd agree with you on that. He's so articulate, and it's such a hugely important subject. I can't wait to listen to him again.

Yasmin Khan 04:55

Indeed. Here is our conversation with the wonderful Chris Packham.

Hi, Chris, how are you doing?

05:09

Chris Packham

Hi, I'm very well, how are you?

Yasmin Khan 05:09

I'm good, thanks. I think, Chris, you're something of a national treasure really, aren't you? I mean, I have such fond memories of watching you when I was a kid on *The Really Wild Show*, and for the course of the research, you know, for this podcast, I was kind of going into all the different nature shows that you've made since then. I counted 33; you'll probably know if it's more than that.

Chris Packham 05:32

I haven't... I haven't counted, I have to tell you. There is an increasing – whether we can call it a legacy or not, or litany, I'm not entirely sure, but I've been fortunate to be, have been making nature programs since 1986, which, as you point out, is a long time ago. So you were watching me as a child, and you're not a child any longer...

Yasmin Khan 05:54

I'm not, I'm 40 years old now.

Chris Packham 05:58

Well, that makes me feel very old. Very much older than you, obviously. I had my 60th birthday recently, but I'm trying to age disgracefully. So I'm still trying to expend as much energy as I did when I was 26.

Yasmin Khan 06:09

Well, you're looking great for it. I actually saw you, I mean, this is a sidebar, but I saw you on the BBC, and I was like, 'He looks amazing.' And I had to, like, Google how old you are. And I was like, 'There's no way he's 60!' So, we're going to be getting into your secrets later. But what began your interest in nature, Chris, where did it come from?

Chris Packham 06:24

Well, it seemed to be primal in the sense that my parents told me that I was crawling around in our very small back garden in suburban Southampton picking up ladybirds and catching tadpoles out of a small upturned bath that they put in as a pond before I could even speak. And certainly, my earliest memories go back to when I was just before five. And by then I was obsessed with dinosaurs at that point in time, and bats. Both were inaccessible to me and I think as a child, I was drawn to many things which I couldn't quite see or connect with but I would fantasize about from my childhood encyclopedias. So, it didn't originate from my parents. My mother was a legal secretary when she went back to work after my sister and I sort of got into more education. And my father was a marine engineer. But the key thing is that they were both very much invested in our education. So they weren't of the mind that, you know, education stopped when the school bell sounded. We went home, and they didn't have that much money but what they did have they spent on books for us, and they would take us out every weekend. And my father was a very keen military historian. So there wasn't a castle or a military museum that we hadn't visited across the land. But they were very generous in the sense that, you know, they would split the castle alongside the zoo, which was one of my, you know, primary destinations as a child. So, I mean, again, you know, by the time I got to school, it was already too late.

Yasmin Khan 07:55

Well lucky for us, really. I've heard you say that you feel you have a more honest relationship with animals than humans sometimes. And I thought that was such a curious statement. Why do you think that is?

Chris Packham 08:07

I've always had intense relationships with the animals that I kept. Initially, I didn't keep animals that were able to reciprocate that relationship or manifest a relationship in return. So I kept a lot of reptiles and snakes and small rodents and things. But then when I was 14, I kept a bird of prey, a kestrel. And you can have a more responsive relationship with a bird like that; they have quite pronounced individual personalities and characters. And then after that, when I was much later in life, I started keeping dogs, and they have become and remain fundamentally important relationships in my life, probably the most important. They are honest, you know. I don't want to sound like a damaged human; I've had some great relationships with humans too. But human relationships are obviously more complex. Dogs have very simple social lives. And so, once you're integrated into those, and you're part of a pack, as I've always been with my poodles, then that relationship is always giving, it's never taking. And therefore, it's, it's one that provides you with enormous comfort and refuge. So when things go really bad, nothing goes bad in that relationship. And it can be immensely rewarding and important on that count.

Yasmin Khan 09:24

That's fascinating. I guess. I've never really thought about it in that way, the idea that it's somehow safer to have a relationship with animals in that way.

Chris Packham 09:33

I think it is. And I think that, that's not, you know, that I mean, obviously we're tantalised by things that aren't safe. And I think that some of our relationships, I mean, certainly some of the relationships that I cultured earlier in my life with humans, were deliberately unsafe, because it seemed to be an exciting thing to do. But with the benefit of hindsight, they mostly backfired and caused myself and other people, you know, an enormous amount of grief. That's never happened with any of the relationships that I've had with my dogs. They've been absolute rocks. And, and I think that with the benefit of hindsight, although I wouldn't have acknowledged this until relatively recently, for obvious reasons, they've always been my, sort of, autism assistance animals. They're something that have given me the opportunity to get out to talk to people. Because if you're out and about with two black poodles, I can tell you that everyone wants to talk to you. I don't know what it is about poodles. I think they're instantly recognisable, and they have a charm, and they're almost like cartoon dogs, aren't they? They're a breed that everyone knows. And they will stop and say, 'Oh, how beautiful! How old are your dogs?' And without that sort of ice-breaker, then I would probably just be looking down, walking by quietly.

Yasmin Khan 10:50

What are your dogs called?

Chris Packham 10:52

I have Sid and Nancy at the moment, after Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen

Yasmin Khan

And are they standard poodles or miniature poodles?

Chris Packham

They're the middle size, the miniatures. I like standards very much. I've met quite a few over the years. But for practical reasons, the middle ones have been more suitable. They're very characterful. They have strong personalities. They're constantly testing, they have irrepressible energy and, at heart, they are outright anarchists. So, although they are very trainable and easy to train on account of their relatively high intelligence, they will constantly test you even when you've trained them. So on that: I like to be challenged by my friendships and so I'm constantly challenged by the poodles.

Alison 11:35

That brings me to a question I was going to ask. You've been on television for 35 years, and you've worked for most of the time with both animals and also with children, both of which are notoriously predictable. Has it always gone smoothly?

Chris Packham 11:50

Well, when I first started, I, you know, I started *The Really Wild Show* way back in 1986. And I was given no training as to how to be a television presenter. I had an enthusiastic desire to communicate my

passion to other people, I'd done that over dinner tables, you know, every single dinner for years, as my parents and my sister would often recount. My sister, in fact, encouraged me to take that step on to *The Really Wild Show*. She said, 'You've been boring us for years, now go and bore the rest of the world with what you know about tawny owls,' was her exact phrase. But the only sort of trepidation that I felt was working with those young people; I just treated them like I treated everyone else. I didn't know what else to do, actually. And people often remarked upon the fact that I spoke to them rather as if they were adults and they seemed to like that and respond to it. It wasn't something that I calculated, I just simply didn't know how else to behave. But I slipped into it and subsequent to that, I've obviously done a lot of work with young people, I still continue to do everything I can to provide them with a platform to exercise their voice and their skills and their energy and ambition. And I'm one of those people that allows them to take risks and sometimes make mistakes, because I did, I'm sure you did, too and we all do. And I think that at this point in time, the urgency that young people will require to instigate change is something that we should be harnessing and not holding at arm's length. So, I still like to work with young people and give them as much time... and I had mentors, and I've always felt a real responsibility to put something back in that context, I wouldn't be having this conversation if it weren't for a handful of people that really helped me through some difficult periods. So I hope to be able to do the same with some young people.

Yasmin Khan 13:41

It's very important, isn't it? I feel that; I also feel the same, that I wouldn't have... well, I wouldn't be where I am today without mentors, and I almost feel like it's something that I always say to people, 'Oh you know, you really need to kind of...' I don't know where... I don't know how you found yours but mine just kind of stumbled into my life and then a few are old colleagues. And yeah, it's nice now actually, to be in a position, which I'm sure you are now, to be able to help other people level up in that way.

Chris Packham 14:05

Yeah, it is. It's really important, particularly, you know, younger people who might be suffering from, you know, some of the 'side effects', let's call them that, in inverted commas, the 'side effects' of autism, which can be mental health difficulties and other things. I still fear that there are young people out there who perhaps suffered in the same way that I did in the 1970s and 80s. I would have hoped, and we all would have hoped that the world have moved on and that degree of suffering might have disappeared by now, but unfortunately, I don't think it has and therefore they need as much support as possible. So, I do what I can in my own small way on that account. But going back to the mentors, they were principally my educators. I was very fortunate that I had a very brilliant biology teacher at the comprehensive that I went to, and he nurtured me through, you know, a transition of only ever showing any aptitude for things that I was interested in and totally disregarding anything else. So he kind of got me on the academic ladder. I then went on to sixth form college, as a punk rocker in 1977. I wasn't most welcomed as a pupil in that particular school. So, my biology teacher there, again, kept me in education, he managed to stop them from throwing me out simply because of the way that I looked. I then went to university and had another – my tutor there was instrumental.

Alison 15:30

Is it the whole idea of giving back and mentoring another generation – is that the reason why you wrote in your books, and did the television program about your experiences of living with autism?

Chris Packham 15:43

I've been very fortunate to have been given a small voice because of my appearances on TV and other things that I do. And I, up until relatively recently, I'd exercise that voice to try and improve the natural world and the environment where I have perhaps, I mean, I'm not going to self-claim it, but I might have a small degree of knowledge and even authority. When I finally got my diagnosis after a period of psychotherapy through some really, really difficult and dark times, I decided to write the book which I – *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar* – which I wrote for myself, I didn't have a publisher, I just wrote a book. And then when I finished it – it was an exercise to see if I could do it – I effectively stuck it under the bed, or put the hard drive in my drawer. And a little while later, I gave it to someone to read and, and they said, 'Oh, you've got to publish it.' So I went through the process of publishing, which was an absolute joy, I have to say, but even more joyous was the response that it elicited from people who were either autistic or lived with or worked with or taught autistic people. And they seemed to be profoundly pleased that I'd been able to articulate a bit more what it was like, because sometimes autistic people, particularly young people, can't really explain – put it into words – what it's like or what the needs are, what the difficulties are, what the pleasures are. And so having done that, and then we made a television program after a little bit of a hiatus, because I was, you know, concerned that I wanted any representation of autism to show the positive rather than just the negative, which we sometimes tend to dwell on. I just sort of thought, 'Well, now people are listening to me and if I can do some good...', and people were writing and saying, 'You've done some good,' and then I just sort of thought, 'Well, I was brought up to be a kind person by my parents.' And I think that kindness is about giving something of yourself to people, sometimes – and so giving a little bit of myself. I never claimed to be an expert. I'm not a healthcare professional. I'm just someone with autism, I can only ever talk about my own experience. But if that helps, then that's great.

Yasmin Khan 17:47

I mean, I think it was a really important contribution. I mean, I find it extraordinary that you, you just wrote this book for yourself, and it touched many people. And I think it has such a lyrical quality to it, Chris, in terms of your writing, I think that's, I think, what blew me away actually, with the story. What is it that you would love people to know about what it's like living with autism?

Chris Packham 18:12

I would like them to think, 'How can we change what we do to make these people's lives better?' And when I say better, I don't necessarily mean to make them, you know, permanently happy, I mean, to offer them an opportunity to fulfil their lives, to play a valuable role in society, to integrate into that society far more comfortably, and to be able to access parts of their life, which should be accessible to them, but are otherwise excluded because of what are very often very, very simple things. Now, you'll know that in the last few years, retailers, shops have changed some of their practices, and certainly before Covid they were they were having early opening hours in some branches, so that autistic people could go in when it was quieter, less crowded, and so on and so forth. And they would turn the music off, and they would change that environment in actually fundamentally pretty subtle ways but it made an

enormous difference to a lot of people. Then there were cinemas that jumped on board and thought, 'OK, well, we'll play the same films, but we'll play them with the sound modified so it's not so loud and jarring,' because acoustic issues are quite frequent with autistic people. And so we saw across society, very simple changes being offered and implemented, which made enormous differences to lots of people and very often, particularly within the education system, you know, if the educators and those who organised that system understand, you know, what autistic people require in order to excel – and we want everyone to excel – and very often autistic people have the capability of excelling to a very high degree, then making those changes seems an obvious thing to do.

Yasmin Khan 20:09

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.

Alison 20:51

What food you eat when you're filming? What are your go-to snacks?

Chris Packham 20:55

I try to eat as healthily as possible. When we're, you know pre-Covid, flat-out working and travelling, it's obviously difficult sometimes to source the precise things that you want if you don't have the time or the access to sources of those and/or if you're travelling overseas, and they're simply not on anyone's menu in any shop or restaurant or café or whatever. I have to entertain a degree of flexibility. But I'm vegan now, so – and I'm pretty, well I say I'm 'pretty' strict with it: I *am* strict with it, and that's it. So I go without if there isn't an alternative. One of the things – this will shock and horrify you – so over the last three nights... my partner and I live separately, she lives on the island and, well I say we live separately, we spend a lot of time living together – we've got two houses, basically. So sometimes we're in mine and sometimes we're in hers.

Alison 21:48

She's on the Isle of Wight, isn't she?

Chris Packham 21:49

Yeah, that's right. Yeah. Anyway...

Yasmin Khan 21:50

It's a very sensible way to do it, to be honest, Chris. It's like Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, but less tumultuous, hopefully.

Chris Packham 21:58

Yes, hopefully a lot less tumultuous, knowing of their relationship, yeah. And I'm better behaved than he was, as well. I want to strike out and say that straight away.

Yasmin Khan 22:09

Yes, sorry for bringing up that comparison!

Chris Packham 22:10

Anyway, look, she's been at home for the last three nights. She has become a very, very good cook. So this leaves me and the poodles in my house and I've eaten exactly the same food three nights in a row. And I've sent her a photograph of it every night. She's horrified, of course. And that is, again, it goes back to that autism thing. We like... I wear the same clothes when I'm indoors. So I have a uniform. So when I come in, and I've finished work, I put my uniform on. The uniform lasts for about, I don't know, until someone destroys it because they think it's unhygienic.

Alison 22:45

So it literally would be the same T-shirt, it wouldn't be like... it's not like the same style of T-shirt.

Chris Packham 22:51

No – it's... at the moment, it's a T-shirt, which is a facsimile of Neil Armstrong's spacesuit, and a pair of what we call, what you might call, jogging bottoms. I suppose they're running trousers – they're comfortable. But it's not the comfort, it doesn't have to be that, it has just to be the regularity. And so given the choice when I'm on my own, I will eat the same thing. And the same thing and the same thing and the same thing and the same thing. And I'll therefore stock up the cupboard with whatever the, you know, the components or the ingredients are and I will do the same thing. Now, fortunately, I don't spend that much time on my own anymore. And so Charlotte comes in and does remarkable cooking, which diversifies my diet. The food is invariably much healthier because I'm, you know, I'm preparing it last minute, late at night. And, and that's a real benefit. But there have been times when I've been on my own that, I mean, I would just eat pizza every night for weeks. I know it sounds bizarre, but...

Alison 23:54

I was going to ask you, what was that dish you ate three nights in a row? Was that pizza? The same pizza? Or was it...?

Chris Packham 24:01

No, it wasn't. Well, Charlotte eats very healthily so my craving is to eat dirty food. So I had vegan burger, fries, and then because I like them, and I've liked them ever since I was a child, baked beans.

Alison 24:16

Nice!

Yasmin Khan 24:16

Chris, honestly, I don't think that's that shocking, at all. You've been vegetarian for three decades. And then you did Veganuary in 2019 and decided to stick with it. Tell me about that. Why did you feel that was important to you?

Chris Packham 24:30

Well, I've been veggie since my early 20s. And, and then I had an epiphany and it came in the way that many people have them, I think. I went to an all-indoor dairy unit. And I spent a day working there. Now, I've got to stress that there were no direct welfare issues; the animals were well cared for. It was immaculately clean and very well run. But it was, for me, a vision of a hideous dystopian future. These animals go through three lactation cycles before they're slaughtered. Most organic, outdoor cattle, I mean, they'll do 10 or 11. I know a farmer who allows his to do, depending on the fitness of the animal or the welfare of the animal, it could do 12 or 13. And then it's, it's literally put out to grass; he considers that that animal has given and he will then nurture it for the rest of its life. So there was a stark contrast at that point between, you know, my friend's farm where I saw these animals and these lovely lush meadows, and then I was in this illuminated shed and when I drove out of there that night, I just thought, 'No, I can't guarantee to source dairy products from the likes of my friend's farm. And if I can't do that with any certainty, I don't want to support that type of industrial farming.' There are better ways for us to produce food and live more harmoniously alongside those animals and our environment. So it just turned on that sixpence: I drove out of there and that was it.

Yasmin Khan 26:03

And could you, do you not feel like you could source – I mean, it sounds like you do have a friend that does have an organic farm – could you not source from there?

Chris Packham 26:10

Well, I could when I was at home, and we can walk down the aisles of Waitrose, and we can get food but I don't do that, I travel all around the country, all around the world and food labeling is not what it should be even here in the UK; overseas, it can be non-existent. So given my lifestyle, I didn't have that opportunity. I watched a documentary that my friend Henry Edmunds, his name is, made at Cholderton, a farm in Hampshire. It's one of the most beautiful places in the UK; as a piece of our landscape it's enormously biodiverse. It's dairy and – it's a mixed farm. He's an extremely intelligent farmer. I'm sure he doesn't really appreciate my veganism; we've never fallen out, and we have different ideas about things and I intend to promote his film and his regenerative farming as much as I possibly can. I think it's a way that we must move forward but – and he's no fan of, you know, drenching the land in chemicals and, you know, thrashing the soil with crop after crop and filling it full of fertilizers. He, like many other farmers are beginning to realise that we have to nurture nature in order to continue to prosper.

Alison 27:20

I have to admit, when I've done some trips around our Waitrose dairy farms, I've been amazed about how much of their land is just dedicated to wildlife. And there's, kind of, unusual butterflies flying around...

Chris Packham 27:34

Yeah, that's right, there are opportunities to change, to do that. There are two key words: one is tolerance, and the other is transition. We're all on a journey but we're not all going to travel at the same speed. We're not all going to switch our, you know, change our minds and practices at the same time. So if people take a longer time to move, say we wanted them all – say that, say our wish was that if eventually at some point, we wanted everyone to be vegan, well, that isn't going to happen overnight. We've got to show people why it's a good idea, but they've got to come to that realisation themselves. And they've got to be in a position where they can afford to or want to do that. Now that's going to take some time. Now the transition word is really important because if everyone went vegan overnight, it would trash the farming economy and all of those farmers' lives and their children's lives and much of the landscape too. You know, my point of view is that if we are moving in the right direction, at whatever pace we are comfortable with, then that's great. My duty is to offer people alternatives, offer people choices, and to explain to them why I think that that choice is a better choice to make. So it's a more contemporary choice. It's something that we, you know, if we're thinking about the environment, we know we've got to eat less meat; as a consequence of that we should be having more plant-based foods. That's one thing. So I provide that information, what I don't do, because I'm not what I call an 'ultra-vegan', is stand there didactically saying, 'You're either a good person or you're a bad person.' You know, we're all bad in some ways. We're all on that journey, whether it's food, energy – all of the things that we consume in our lives, we just have to be tolerant of one another and kind to one another. And that includes extending an enormous amount of tolerance and kindness to farmers as they move through that transition. We are facing a climate and environment emergency. And as much as I've already said that we should be tolerant, kind and we should transition – that's carrot. I do feel that we also need a little bit of stick and to encourage people to move more rapidly to a much more healthy and sustainable future.

Yasmin Khan 29:41

Absolutely. So much of this stuff is systemic, you know, and obviously as individuals, of course we can make a difference. Of course, all individuals can but it is a global and national food system that needs to evolve really to meet the needs of the climate emergency, as you pointed out.

Chris Packham 29:57

Yes, it is down to us as individuals as well. I mean, you know, we all have a choice. A lot of the time in the UK, we're focused upon the value of food in terms of pounds and pence. But what we also have to ask people to do is stand in the aisles and think about what the value of that food is, and what the cost has been to the environment. Because very often there's a discrepancy between the two. And when I say the environment, that includes animal welfare, so on and so forth. So food labelling is something I think we need to improve. I think that Waitrose... recently I've been leading a campaign calling for The Better Chicken Commitment. So this is chicken welfare standards, basically, in the UK. I won't get into the gruesome details now, I don't need to, but Waitrose have signed up to it. So this is great, because you know, myself and those leading that campaign have gone to the supermarkets and we've said, 'Look, this is what concerns us. This is what we'd like to do in terms of improving welfare for these animals,' and Waitrose agreed instantaneously, and they've taken the lead.

Alison 30:58

And that's all Waitrose chicken that's higher welfare, including our Essential range, not just the organic or free-range chicken.

Chris Packham 31:06

That's right, because one of the arguments against instigating that change is the price point in pounds and pence. But my argument always is that if you put the price on the chicken and you also put a photograph of where it'd been living, then there would be a secondary price point on that item. And that would be the price of suffering, and people would be able to see it and they might make a different choice. I'm not saying they could all afford to, but I think many would.

Yasmin Khan 31:33

The passion is quite infectious, Chris, when you when you speak about these subjects, and I know that you've campaigned on so many issues over the course of your lifetime, really, from, you know, badger culls to, kind of, what we're talking about now to the climate emergency. Given the struggles that we face as a species in light of all of these challenges, where do you find hope?

Chris Packham 31:55

Well, I think there's been some hope in the conversation that we've had, because we have touched on, albeit tangentially, the solutions to our problems. We've mentioned that we need to eat less meat and that we need to transition to more plant-based; we've talked about reducing the amount of damaging chemicals which are ravaging our biodiversity by killing all of the insects so that there's not enough for the birds and bats and everything else to eat. We have a portfolio. If you'll forgive the military analogy, an arsenal of abilities and technologies which we could implement to make enormous changes. Our problem is that we've not been implementing that rapidly or broadly enough. And that's been down to our complacency. I think that we've been all too comfortable thinking that this enormous issue of climate and environment emergency is not our problem, it's going to happen somewhere else. And also, I think that this is an exceptional time for humanity. But unfortunately, we have an unexceptional set of global leaders, and it's not down to people in the UK, and it's not down to individuals; I'm talking about collectively. So, the key point is, we can moan about that and that won't get us anywhere at all, or we can do something about it. And we're very fortunate to live in ostensibly a democratic country where we have the right to raise our voice and ask for our elected representatives to better represent us. And that's what we do. And that's why we campaign. We're constantly just trying to remind them that they've got to raise their game, and they've got to listen to expertise and act upon it and make best-informed decisions on the science we've got at this point in time. And people like myself, are really just a conduit between, if you like, the scientists and the decision-makers. And I'm just trying to join those two people together and say, 'Look, the situation's critical: stop dillying and dallying and get on with it because we've got a solution.' And that's where the optimism is, if there were no solutions, well, we'd be going to hell in a handcart.

Yasmin Khan 33:53

Absolutely. And I think it's really important to remember that, actually, exactly what you spelt out: that the solutions are within our reach, and we know what they are. It's just a case of political will. What has a lifetime immersed in the natural world taught you?

Chris Packham 34:14

It's taught me a lot about truth and beauty. I like to think of science as being the art of understanding truth and beauty. And I like integrating the word 'art' into my description because I'm very keen on art and I'm very keen on an interface between science and art. I think there can be very beautiful science and sometimes we're taught, if you like, we're brought up to admire artistic things, whether it's music or dance or you know, painting, or all those things that we express – or how we express ourselves –enormously imaginatively and creatively. And they are beautiful. There's no doubt. I'm a great fan of all of that. But science isn't just about getting answers. Sometimes the method of getting the answers, sometimes the answers themselves are breathtakingly beautiful. And I think that when I go out and I look at the natural world, the way that it functions at an individual species level, all the way through to the whole ecology of that given area, is truthful. It's honest; it works. It's not all, it's not all kind. I mean, you know, things get killed and eaten; other things just die and decay. But at the same time, its functionality is wholly truthful, there's nothing corrupt going on. And when you draw all of that together, it's not about putting individual species, you know, on a pedestal and worshipping them, because they're out of context. When I was a child, I did that. I used to put a ladybird in a jam jar and I'd think, 'That's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.' And then I'd put a lizard in a jam jar, 'Oh, that's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen,' and just carried on until I was, you know, well I worshipped my kestrel as a teenager, entirely independently from everything else. So, it wasn't until I got to my mid 20s, when I began to understand all of the connectivity, the complex connectivity of the natural world, that I realised that there was a greater beauty. And now that I'm aware of that, when I go to, albeit semi-functional ecosystems, because there are very few that we haven't had some negative effect on, I can stand there and I don't need anything else. You know, I'm in nature's art gallery. I'm not just in nature's art gallery, I'm in the best one. I'm standing there, you know, with the Rothkos and the Pollocks and all of the other art that excites me around me in natural form, and it is faultless and inspirational, and it engenders almost instantaneous euphoria. You know, I can just feel so good, knowing that it's working, and it's beautiful.

Yasmin Khan 36:51

Well, that's the most extraordinary description. Thank you, Chris. You've inspired me to go for a walk as soon as we get off this call, which is also quite timely because I know that you're presenting *Autumnwatch*.

Chris Packham 37:03

We look forward to *Autumnwatch*. Autumn is one of the most exciting times of the year because it's largely unpredictable. You never know when it's going to start, if it starts at all, and when it might finish. Spring has to happen in springtime, winter invariably follows autumn so it's going to happen at some point. Autumn is the one that chops and changes because it's influenced by, obviously, the spring and summer seasons every year. So, end of October, I'm going back to Norfolk, Megan my stepdaughter's going to Mull. I'll be there with Michaela and it will be our usual box of treats. Best of British wildlife, we

hope. We'll be in the dark, of course, so focusing more on nocturnal species than we would have done in *Springwatch*. And I can tell you, we've already got some treats in store, we've been out recording things. And we're giving also a platform to young people, which I mentioned earlier is really important. We've got some films from young filmmakers and I love, you know, putting those out. It's just great.

Yasmin Khan 37:55

Well, I can't wait to watch it. And autumn is also, from a food perspective, of course, a very abundant time of year. But before we go, I am very curious because this is *Life on a Plate*. I would love to know what is Chris Packham's store-cupboard staples? What have you got in there, Chris? What are the, like, three ingredients that you always have?

Chris Packham 38:18

OK, I would have bran flakes...

Yasmin Khan 38:22

Very healthy, excellent.

Alison

Because, is that, that's what you'd have for breakfast?

Chris Packham 38:25

Yeah, although sometimes if I don't get time for breakfast, they turn into a sort of a mid-afternoon snack. I've got to say that I've got a current food obsession, which is Eat Real lentil chips. I'm not being paid by Eat Real in any way, shape or form...

Alison

I've not had them, are they good?

Chris Packham 38:45

Ah, you know, there are other brands of like, chip that you once you start you can't stop. Well, that might be an exaggeration, but not with the lentil chips. So every night I open a packet and I put them in a bowl, and Sid and Nancy like them too, though I'm sure they didn't ought to be eating lentil chips. So we share lentil chips at about six o'clock every night. So that's become another food habit. There's no question of that.

Yasmin Khan

And the third one?

Chris Packham 39:17

Right, well, the third one is another bad one. And it's bad because it's got palm oil in it and I've tried to do what I can to reduce my intake of palm oil; it's very, very difficult as you know. So, I'm chastised by Megan and Charlotte for having this one, but every night before they go to bed, the poodles are treated with half a digestive biscuit.

Yasmin Khan 39:38

Oh, how austere! Just half a digestive.

Chris Packham 39:42

Well, they're quite sugary and salty. But the thing is, it makes them so happy every night, you know. It's just one of those things. I don't eat them myself, but I've always given them to my poodles at bedtime. And I just love making them happy. You know? It's just one of the best things in my life. So when I go to the biscuit tin at the close of play and I take out the digestive biscuits and their little chestnut eyes sparkle, and then they bound up the stairs and onto the bed and I give them the last piece as I always announce... They're always in the cupboard. What I'm saying to you is that I couldn't not be without one of those, you know, otherwise, can you imagine the consequences? It would be unthinkable.

Alison 40:24

I was going to say, you know, the best thing about dogs and poodles is the unconditional love, but clearly, it's actually their love for your digestive at the end of the day.

It's Kitchen Grill time. Kitchen Grill is just 10 quick questions. You know, there's no right or wrong answer. Tea or coffee?

Chris Packham 40:42

Neither. I never have drunk coffee and I gave up drinking tea about 10 or 15 years ago. So my hot beverage of choice, and it's a treat, it's hot chocolate, vegan hot chocolate, but obviously I can't have it all the time.

Alison 40:57

Mash or chips?

Chris Packham 40:59

Oh, do you know what? Mash with lots of mustard in it and pepper on top. Vegan butter these days, of course. You know, I'm going mash over chips but that's a very, very tight contest.

Alison 41:15

Baguette or sourdough?

Chris Packham 41:17

Oh, sourdough. No, no question at all. Yeah, baguette, what I don't like, you see, is all the mess. If you pick up a baguette and it's one of those ones with a crusty crust... the crumbs – who's going to clean that up if you haven't got the poodles? So no, I don't like messy food.

Alison 41:32

Crisps or chocolate?

Chris Packham 41:34

Chocolate. Every night. It's one of my... I have vices: I'll reveal one of them. So I go to bed and I have dark vegan chocolate. And I invariably go to bed very late, about sort of one-ish or maybe even half one sometimes. And I'm told it's not the thing to do, to have sugar at that point when you should be trying to go to sleep but I have really tried to keep it to sort of two squares, probably about 10 centimetres by two centimetres. But sometimes I maybe nibble a little bit more.

Alison 42:04

There's nothing wrong with a bit of vegan chocolate. Fruit or vegetables?

Chris Packham 42:08

Vegetables. No doubt. I don't eat fruit at all, actually. It's a bit bizarre but I don't like the texture of it and the feel of it. It's a childhood thing; my mum used to make me eat, like, nectarines and peaches and things and the juice would run all over me and they have that soft, squishy feel to them and even now it's making me grind my teeth: grrrrrrr.

Alison 42:24

Spicy or mild?

Chris Packham 42:28

Spicy. I like hot food. Yeah, not seriously – I'm not one of those people that would go to an Indian restaurant and tackle the menu head on. But I do like, sort of, not so much hot food but spicy food.

Alison 42:41

Spicy – it's the flavours. Starter or pudding?

Chris Packham 42:46

Starter without doubt again. That's down to you know, dietary reasons. I just can't eat that much sugar anymore, I'm afraid, so I'd go for the starter.

Alison 42:55

Are you a grazer or a feaster?

Chris Packham 42:57

Feaster. So I, I'm not a nibbler. So, it's not unusual for me to not have breakfast, not have lunch and only eat once a day in the evening. That would be relatively common.

Alison 43:08

Restaurant food or sofa supper?

Chris Packham 43:11

Well, given that Charlotte has turned into one of the finest cooks that I've encountered, I'm going for sofa supper without a shred of a doubt. I mean, her mother was always a great cook, and I she and I

weren't, but lockdown – it's become her hobby. And seriously, I mean, maybe I could do it. I don't know, it's given me hope that one day I could pick up those books... She's intuitive so she's not just following the recipes, she's actually, she's acting more artistically and intuitively. And I just, I never imagined that I'd have the skill to do that so I didn't invest in it.

Alison 43:42

Sight or smell when it comes to food?

Chris Packham 43:46

Smell, definitely. I've obviously done everything I can to enhance my sense of smell. Our sense of smell is – we always ridicule it and compare it to other animals like dogs who we know have significantly better senses of smell – but we do underestimate our sense of smell. And subconsciously, it's really important to us; we choose our partners on it. And part of that is how they smell and we know them by how they smell. And yet if I were to ask you, 'What does your partner smell like?' You might find it quite difficult to describe it – but you know it, your brain knows it. So I've done everything I can to excite my olfactory senses. Smell is really important to me.

Yasmin Khan 44:21

It's interesting you say that, actually, because I feel that I have... I'm not like bragging about my sense of smell, but I feel like I have an extraordinary sense of smell. But I almost find that sometimes it's a curse because I can get really overwhelmed with smells when I walk into a room or a place, or travelling can be really difficult. And I can smell things that no one else in the room will find difficult and I'll be like, 'Oh, what's that scent?'

Alison 44:46

I know. My friends and family don't like it because I can walk into the kitchen and nine times out of 10, even though the kitchen has been cleaned down, I'll tell them what's been cooked in the kitchen hours earlier from just what...

Yasmin Khan 44:57

It's interesting, isn't it? And I sometimes wonder if people who are really good at cooking, we just have like – what came first? The fact that our senses were stronger on that level so it relates to us more, or it's something that we developed?

Chris Packham 45:11

I think you, I think you can train yourself. I don't think there's any doubt, I think you can train yourself. Also, when you look at our neurophysiology, there's a lot more plasticity in our brains. Because it's not about noses, it's about interpretation in terms of, you know, the smell. And there's a lot more plasticity there than we give ourselves credit for and I think, therefore, you can expand your capacity to use your senses. When people lose their sight, their hearing massively improves. And they actually use that part of the brain, which was formerly used for sight, for hearing, which is pretty remarkable.

Alison 45:43

Thanks, Chris. That was the Kitchen Grill. So, thank you.

Chris Packham 45:47

OK, I don't think I was probably going to score 10 out of 10 on your Kitchen Grill.

Alison 45:52

There's no right and wrong answer! It's just a little way for me to be a bit more nosy and find out a little bit more about you.

Yasmin Khan 45:58

So thanks so much for joining us, Chris. This has been a really inspiring and fascinating conversation. I'm really looking forward to watching *Autumnwatch*. And I want to thank you on behalf of me and Alison and everyone on *Life on a Plate* for joining us.

Chris Packham 46:12

That's a pleasure, thank you very much.

Yasmin Khan 46:18

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 Chris Packham. If you've enjoyed this conversation, you can find more like it by subscribing to *Life on a Plate* wherever you get your podcasts. And to learn more about the series, go visit waitrose.com/podcast