

LIFE ON A PLATE
SEASON 4, EPISODE 6: Diana Henry

SPEAKERS

Diana Henry, Alison Oakervee, Yasmin Khan

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. Their tahini from Nablus has a very special place on 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.

Alison 01:48

Hi, Yasmin, how are you?

Yasmin Khan 01:49

I'm good thanks, Alison. How are you?

Alison 01:52

I'm alright, thank you. I've been really inspired by today's guest. And I've been digging out all her old cookbooks and cooking from them.

Yasmin Khan 02:00

I'm not surprised because our guest this week is the wonderful Diana Henry, who I think is probably one of the most prolific recipe writers that I know.

Alison 02:13

I mean, she writes so many books, but also she's got a weekly column in *Waitrose Weekend*. And within that she does a monthly menu for me. She's got her regular work in *The Telegraph*. So yeah, I'd

agree with you. She is prolific in recipe writing and also just column inches. She just talks about food in such a really engaging way.

Yasmin Khan 02:35

I know, we actually both really wanted to have Diana on, didn't we, for this season of *Life on a Plate*. I think we're both such big fans of her work on so many levels. And, you know, so what have you been inspired by, in terms of recipes?

Alison 02:51

Well, we've got a few family favourites. The one that we go to so often for midweek meals is her Moroccan chicken. It's chicken thighs and rice and onions and aubergines, with harissa and loads of flavours and dates. The joy of it is it all goes in the oven together raw. There's not even onion softened in the pan first. That's Diana's strength. She's got lovely flavours, and even the most simplest and easiest of dishes.

Yasmin Khan 03:20

She really does. And I think she brings that complexity, doesn't she, of flavour, but with recipes that are so easy to put together. I absolutely love – and we talked about this in the podcast – but I absolutely love her recipe for roasted fennel with roasted tomatoes and chickpeas. Another one you just, you know, whack it in the oven. And it's one of my favourite ways of cooking. And the reason we wanted her on this season isn't just because we're both huge fans of her recipe writing, but also because earlier this year, in what I think is one of the most moving and powerful personal essays that I've read, she wrote a piece in *The Telegraph* about some very debilitating illnesses she's had over the last few years. And I think I just felt this was such a wonderful opportunity to talk to someone about something that I think many people can relate to.

Alison 04:13

That's right, Diana was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2019. And she underwent treatment for that. And just as she was recovering, she came down and developed the autoimmune disease vasculitis. And that made her incredibly ill.

Yasmin Khan 04:29

It did and she ended up in ICU and on a ventilator, fighting for her life in February 2021. You know, and themes which the pandemic has really brought to the forefront of all our minds. So, I really wanted to talk to her about that. And knowing Diana, knowing what an incredible spirit she has, it was wonderful to hear about some of the life lessons she gleaned from this incredibly tough period in her life.

Alison Oakervee 04:55

That's right. But she talks about so much more – her childhood in Ireland, her beloved sons, her enormous cookery book collection, and, of course, her zest and passion for her work.

Yasmin Khan 05:08

She really does. She's got so much energy does Diana. And we laughed so much. And it was such an uplifting conversation, even though, you know, we covered some really, you know, profound themes.

Alison 05:19

I so enjoyed it. So let's get on with it. So here is our conversation with Diana Henry.

Yasmin Khan 05:31

Diana Henry, welcome to *Life on a Plate*. Thanks for joining us.

Diana Henry 05:35

I'm very glad to be here. Because I haven't spoken to anybody for two weeks. All I've been doing is testing Christmas recipes. So this is a kind of a thrill.

Yasmin Khan 05:45

Well, Alison, you've known Diana for quite a long time, haven't you?

Alison 05:48

I was trying to work out when the first time I commissioned you was. Was it like, 15, 18 years ago?

Diana Henry 05:54

I think about 18 years ago. I can't believe that actually. But it doesn't feel like it at all, I always think of it as my newest gig. So, I'm still excited about it. And I'm amazed that I can actually come up with things to say, because what should I talk about this week? What am I gonna write about this week? But you feel very connected to your audience writing for *Waitrose Weekend*. And because you do it every week as well, you feel 'Oh I'm just picking up the threads where I left off', which is a really, it's a really nice job from that point of view.

Alison 06:24

It's a weekly conversation you're having with us...

Diana Henry 06:27

Kind of, and there's always something new, there's always kind of, like a thought that you have, and you have never really written about that aspect of food. And sometimes it's an ingredient, sometimes it's just how a cook is formed, how a cook is made. I've been thinking about that. And, last night I wrote about cheesecake. You haven't even seen that yet. But there's always something, always something in the world of food that you want to write about.

Yasmin Khan 06:49

There is for you, isn't there? We were talking this week as we were preparing for the interview, about just what an incredibly prolific writer you are, and a recipe writer at that. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. What you do is just incredible, Diana. I mean, as someone who writes recipes myself, I don't know how you do it. But we want to start, we want to start at the beginning, don't we, Alison?

Alison 07:07

Let's start at the beginning, where you grew up in Northern Ireland. I am right in thinking your grandparents, rather than your parents, were farmers?

Diana Henry 07:15

Yeah, my grandparents, my father's parents were farmers. My father worked in agriculture as well. And my mum was a teacher. But I lived, it was a very rural, I mean completely rural, upbringing, and really, you know, absolutely entrenched in an agricultural world. So I knew always what was going on from the point of view of crops and milking the cows and the chickens, whatever was going on, I was really aware of it. I really, it's funny at this time of year, I particularly feel sorry for my own kids, because we brought them up in a city all the time. And you know, as it starts to get more Christmassy, and it starts to get frosty in the mornings, you don't really notice that in a city, but you really notice it in the countryside. Because frost has a smell. It's hard to describe, but it does smell. And I remember not just that, but kind of like walking along in the morning to the school bus stop. And the trees, the bare trees, they would be sort of glittering as well, because they had a coating of it. And it's the time, this is how you, you start making, you know, in school paper chains, and you get ready to do the Christmas pudding and things like that. And my children don't have the smells that go with that, not the natural smells. They just have, you know, the city and inside the home. So I'm glad, I am really glad I grew up in that, although I'm very far away from it, and I left a long time ago, but it just doesn't leave you.

Alison 08:42

No... So what was your first, your earliest food memory of that time?

Diana Henry 08:46

Okay, what I really remember is my mum who was, she was baking all the time, she was always baking for school sales or church events or WI things. So she was either making cakes, or she was making what in Northern Ireland is called wheaten bread. It's like wholemeal soda bread basically. And it doesn't require any yeast or kneading or anything like that. So you just make it, you know, with buttermilk in a bowl and then you put it in a loaf tin. And then it comes out. And I remember really clearly having slices of that, sitting up on the kitchen counter beside Mum, with raspberry jam that'd be made by a family friend as well. So I can remember it running off the edges. But that thing of warm bread and raspberry jam, which is really, I mean barely set to be honest with you. It was, it was delicious. But the other thing I remember is not a good memory. I can remember Mum trying always, and I never wanted to eat mince and potatoes and onions and carrots. And she would say to me – which I should, honestly, really, when I look back at it, you would have a call from social services for this these days – she would actually say: “If you don't eat your carrots, the crows will come and get you.” They were always crows on the, you know, on kind of like the telephone wires outside. And I just had this vision, you know, an image of myself being lifted by the shoulders of my pinafore and taken away by the crows! I didn't want that to happen. But I did, kind of, like funnily enough, did you know, when, the first time I was pregnant, that is the dish I craved. I made loads of mince and potatoes with carrots and onions.

Yasmin Khan 10:22

And do you put any like herbs in that? What were the flavourings?

Diana Henry 10:25

Oh, it was very, very plain. The only thing that ever went into it, which we thought at that stage was a little risqué, was some Worcestershire sauce. I mean that's it. But it is, as in Scotland, that's kind of what you're brought up on Northern Ireland. You know, mince and tatties, and you know, carrots and onions all together. And it's a really comforting dish, I haven't made it for ages, actually. I don't know what my children would say if I gave it to them. They would probably say what Ted sometimes says: "What did you intend this to be?" And I just say supper - nothing more than that! But the dishes that don't work – that's what he'll say: "What are your intentions here, Mum?"

Yasmin Khan 11:03

And your palate changed, or perhaps got ignited more, didn't it? When you moved to London. Obviously you read English at Oxford, and then you came to London. And I've heard you describe the culinary adventures you'd have, like running around the different bits of the town, finding these ingredients. Can you describe some of that for us?

Diana Henry 11:22

My, it's just London just blew my mind completely because Oxford was quite parochial in a way. And I was able to get some ingredients, but not everything. But London compared to Northern Ireland, where I grew up, I mean, I used to, I used to go to the Edgware Road just to be there. And I was able to get barberries and dates and you couldn't get pomegranate molasses in those days, not in the supermarket.

Alison 11:47

It's only something that's recent.

Diana Henry 11:51

Well, I know it is. And so is preserved lemons. But those are all the, those are the things that I'd find. I remember kind of looking at sacks of pistachios and stuff like that, and barberries. So all of these things were available. And I just felt that I'd come to London, but basically, I was in this massive world. So I'd go to Ridley Road to get feta cheese, because there was a Turkish place there with lots of different kinds of feta. So, my weekends, I used to get exhausted basically by shopping. So I would go to get these ingredients, and I would plan my weekly meals, there wasn't really anything that I was not able to cook, everything was available.

Yasmin Khan 12:29

Well, I think you've described before how we can travel through our kitchens. And I think your recipes so often demonstrate that actually, because you can just see all the different influences that you've amassed and how you put them together. To the first one, *Crazy Water, Pickled Lemons*, you can describe some of those Middle Eastern, North African influences when you first came to London. But then they go on to, you know, really, really varied things, whether it's Scandinavian food, whether it's kind of *A Change of Appetite* and lighter eating; *A Bird in the Hand*, which was just about chicken, such

a great idea. I'm just thinking about some recent ones now... So *How to Eat a Peach* was about menus. I mean, these are very unique approaches to writing about food. And I wanted to know, where do you find the themes for your books? Where do they come from?

Diana Henry 13:14

Honestly, I just want to write them. *Salt, Sugar, Smoke* – I was quite surprised that got commissioned in a way because basically, I'd always done a bit of preserving. And I basically thought, 'I want to learn how to do this really properly.' And the book, the book was the journey of learning how to do that. But that's what happens, things come up. And I think: 'Oh I'd really like to learn about that. I'd really like to know about that.' I mean, I think we're lucky, if you write cookbooks, as you know Yasmin, you can, you can educate yourself while you're doing them. Yeah, we're very lucky to get paid for that. I always kind of just get completely immersed in a culture, or cultures, or a particular approach, or even an ingredient – which was what chicken was about. But my aim is always to go places as well. I'm interested in what's happening everywhere. And I think that's because I grew up in such a very kind of small place in the countryside, in Northern Ireland. And I didn't leave the country till I was 15, and that was to go on a trip to France to do a school exchange. But when I was little, I mean, it makes you sound ancient, and it also makes Northern Ireland seem kind of like, oh my God, was it completely backward? But when we went to Dublin on holidays, we used to go to the airport to watch the planes taking off. I mean, I'm not that old, actually. But that's what we did. There were four kids and my mum and dad, and it was so expensive to get anywhere on a plane. We just had to watch them, rather than get on to them. And I hadn't been on a plane until that first trip and then I was on my own. And it's funny, I was going to France so I was excited about that, but it, you know, as we took off and then got into the clouds I was... nobody told me how beautiful this would be. It was just so gorgeous. It was evening light, and by the time I got to Paris, it was dark by the time I met the family that I was going to stay with. But travelling was just something I could only think about. And I think since I've been able to do it, I've just like wanted to gobble the world up.

Yasmin Khan 15:17

Well, I think that passion comes across in your writing, because even though you're not, I don't know, technically a food and travel writer, I feel that when I read your books, they absolutely... all the recipes have a sense of place. And the stories whisk you away somewhere. You do it so magically, Diana.

Diana Henry 15:31

Well, the book I'm doing at the minute, it's called *North* and it won't be out till 2024. But I've been working on that on and off for 20 years. And that was because I got, well I got obsessed with northern regions in Scandinavia and Iceland, and places like that, and even Germany, and places like that, because I thought we were so immersed in Mediterranean stuff. And we have been, we had been that for a long time. And I suddenly thought, 'What's wrong with the stuff on our doorstep? What's wrong with stuff from up there?' And also, my dad he used to come home... if he'd been on any kind of trip for work, he would bring back pickled herrings. So he'd bring these... bring a jar out and they looked so silver and so beautiful, I got a taste then that I wanted to go to this place. So as soon as it was possible to actually fly to Stockholm, without costing an arm and a leg... But there I was, I went to Denmark. Denmark was the first I went to, I went to Denmark.

Yasmin Khan 16:27

I think this is such a good point. Because you're right, Mediterranean, certainly Middle Eastern in recent years, that those flavours have dominated, and obviously the Indian subcontinent. But I would, I reckon if you ask most people about you know, the flavours and ingredients from some of the countries that you're going to explore in *North*, they actually wouldn't be able to tell you. So why don't you tell us? What are the flavours from this region?

Diana Henry 16:48

Well, there's kind of, there's root vegetables, and so they're kind of like cornerstones, and that sounds boring, but it isn't. So beetroot, we've only started to really recently stop pickling it and actually decided to eat it as a proper vegetable. So that was one of the things that struck me first. Dill... cardamom in their pastries and in their breads. Oh caraway seeds. I love caraway, which is more Germanic than it is Scandinavian. In Iceland, liquorice, would you believe? And things that surprised me when I was in... I've had a lot of trips to Iceland now and I really love it. And you think quite a lot about texture when you're there. Because texture is just a very key thing on the landscape. So you start thinking about it with food as well. And there, they use quite a lot of barley, and there's oats and there's rye and stuff like that. And they're obsessed with rhubarb. Rhubarb was a big thing there. And all of those Northern countries, they love summer berries, because they don't get that many of them and they get them quite late. And it's kind of, it's that they do ripen, but they're just not used to kind of having the abundance of them that we do, even in the UK actually, or in Scotland. So, yeah, there are things I'm obsessed with in there. I'm trying to think of any more ingredients... oh, herring. Definitely herring.

Yasmin 18:07

And lots of fish. I guess?

Diana 18:09

I was I was gonna say, kind of like crab, lobster, cod, and salmon. Oh my goodness. Well the first time I went to Sweden in the summer, I just couldn't believe how often that your meal was simply – especially if you went to see people – it was salmon with some sour cream with dill stirred into it. And roast or boiled beets on the side.

Alison 18:26

The thing that always impresses me, Diana, is the way you use those flavours and then layer them. And I'm thinking of the *How to Eat a Peach* book. You did that fantastic roast tomato with fennel and chickpea...

Yasmin 18:44

I make that dish so much...

Alison 18:44

It's delicious because you've got coriander in it. You've got balsamic, harissa...

Diana Henry 18:50

There's preserved lemons in there I think as well... slivers of that.

Alison 18:54

Yes... and because of that, you think that it's not going to work, but it's amazing.

Diana Henry 18:57

No... Not everything works, but most things do... when I was doing it last night, actually, because I was doing ideas for the winter... the winter months coming up for *The Telegraph*. And you think of things and you think: 'Will that work? Yes, probably.' You don't know until you really make it and sometimes things do go wrong. But mostly I kind of can taste it in my head. And that's how you come up with it. But that's what cooks are like.

Alison 19:24

It's quite a talent though.

Yasmin Khan 19:25

It definitely is. Now, Diana, I've been dying to ask you about this immense cookbook collection that I hear that you've amassed. Is it true that you've got 4,000 cookbooks?

Diana Henry 19:37

Yes, I do have. Yeah, but you know what...

Yasmin Khan 19:40

4,000?

Diana Henry 19:43

I don't know where half of them are anymore. When it was about half the size, I used to be able to think exactly where they were and they were kept very, you know, very properly. The baking was all together, countries were all together. Then things like, you know, vegetables, fruits, they will have their different sections.

Yasmin Khan 20:00

Wow, that's very organised.

Diana Henry 20:03

Yeah, but not now... Now I think I do have to get rid of some because I lose things. Like I've got three different copies of Alan Davidson's *North Atlantic Seafood* because I keep losing it and I can't remember where I've put it. There's a whole bookcase in here. There's kind of an office upstairs which is lined with them as well. Although there's lots of fiction up there too. There's some in the front room. There's some... I took the ones that were in the downstairs cloakroom, I took them out because that was too much to cope with. And I have them in my bedroom. In fact, I've got stacks and stacks, all the

books about *North* are up in my bedroom, all beside each other. And then I look at them, I think, 'Oh my God, you're never going to get through all of these before you have to actually finish writing this.'

Ad: Yasmin Khan 20:49

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Yasmin Khan

You're such an exquisite writer. So, I'm always interested in asking people who are good writers, you know, who are the writers that you, you know, really are drawn to, you know, who do you recommend people should read?

Diana Henry 21:33

Oh, well, when I started the people were Claudia Roden and Jane Grigson. I mean, Claudia Roden, she was the first person I discovered. She really wrote about food in a cultural context. I mean, Jane Grigson did it as well, but she's different. She uses poetry. She uses travelogue. She kind of uses memoir. She uses, you know, quite scholarly research about the background to particular ingredients. But Claudia was just like, oh my God, she really took me places. I mean, I bought her *Book of Middle Eastern Food* as soon as I moved to London, and I had a little basement flat. And there was a Turkish shop at the end of the road. And I found her book in the bookshop near me... And my granny had sent me some birthday money – and that's what I used it for – so I bought Claudia's book, and then I took it home. And I started reading it immediately on the sofa in the basement flat, I didn't even notice it getting dark. And after some time, I kind of looked up, I was reading by practically no light, except for the lamppost outside. And I think I was having... by this time in the book I was having tea with Claudia's, or coffee, even, with Claudia's aunts in Cairo. And I just thought this was a completely new thing to me. And I didn't think: 'I want to be that kind of writer' because I didn't... I was working in television... I didn't think I was going to be a writer at all. But I think that they're the biggest influences on me, Claudia Roden and Jane Grigson.

Yasmin Khan 22:56

Well, I think your writing spans so many different genres, don't they? Even though you're not a travel writer, as I said, I think your writing has a sense of place, obviously, you write incredible recipes. And then, earlier this year, you wrote, I think one of the most moving pieces I've read, actually, in a very long time, in *The Telegraph*, and it was chronicling a difficult few years for you, you know, to put it mildly. But you were diagnosed with breast cancer, and then the chemotherapy and radiotherapy that followed from that. Yeah. And then just when you know, you were doing well, the kicker of getting an autoimmune disease.

Diana Henry 23:37

Which was worse, honestly. It's called ANCA positive vasculitis. And it's, it is very dangerous.

Yasmin Khan 23:43

And with that you ended up, didn't you, at a time that, you know... it's all been in the headlines, hasn't it? We've all been aware of ventilators and ICU... Well, you ended up there earlier this year. So I guess, I just wanted to ask, how are you? You know, how are you now?

Diana Henry 23:58

I'm fine. Autoimmune diseases, you can't cure them. So you have to try and manage them. And I'm still in the space where the consultants are trying to get on top of it. I mean, we hope that I will never have to go into the ICU again, because that was a real shock, and they didn't see it coming. And I didn't know what to look out for basically, because I'd only been diagnosed a couple of weeks before. And I was on steroids and they thought enough steroids. But then I started coughing up blood. And I felt awful. I thought I had Covid, actually. I came downstairs and said to both my children who were sitting at the table: 'I just feel awful. Do you think this is Covid?' After that I can't remember anything. Because basically, I think I collapsed. I was coughing up more blood, my lungs were haemorrhaging. And Ted called an ambulance and I was taken to the Royal Free because they have a rheumatology team there. And I don't remember anything then until I was kind of coming round because I was under for quite a long time and the drugs are so strong. I mean, that's the worst bit of it, to be honest with you, the drugs are so strong that you have delusions the entire time. In fact, you're still pretty out of it when you're taken on to the kind of, you know, the next ward down, which is not ICU anymore. And when I came home, even, which was five weeks later, I was still confused, I couldn't... I didn't know how to use the toaster, that kind of thing. But I no longer was in that horrible world. Because my... you don't know whether these were dreams. You don't know whether they were imaginings, you don't know whether there were things that you believed when you were awake, I've no idea. But in the world that I was in, I thought I had been kidnapped by terrorists, which I know sounds ridiculous. But it was horrible. And in the dream, I thought they'd also kidnapped Ted at the same time, and they shot him. So I didn't know, in my mind whether he was alive or not the whole time I was in the ICU. In fact, when they tried to get me to phone Ted, when I came onto the kind of like, normal ward, I was very worried about doing it because I thought, 'I don't want them to try and kidnap me anymore.' If he did something that caused that to happen. And I mean... I thought in some ways it was it was like, it must be like what people feel like maybe when they start... when they get dementia, and people won't believe them. And they think this thing is so true. It's very frustrating because you can't get anybody to take you seriously. I feel like you feel much older, you feel much older, and you feel things are out of your control.

Yasmin Khan 26:37

And I remember you said to me that you actually started writing, didn't you?

Diana Henry 26:41

Well, do you know what? One of the first things that helped was I started to have dreams about the *North* book. I know that seems ludicrous. I started to dream and every night in my dream then, I would go back to the same point on the page of the laptop that I was working on, then I'd start on the next bit. And I would be, I mean when I came to write it all out, it was not garbled, but it was kind of like not quite the right structure. But that's how I structured the book in those dreams before I left the hospital. And I

was really happy when I started. I mean, by the end, when I had about two weeks before I came home, I just said to Ted, please just bring me an A4 pad and lots of pens. And then I started to write about the *North* book. And to think about the dishes that were going to go into it. And the chapters that were going to go in and how to organise it. I mean, I'd already done quite a lot of this before I'd gone into the hospital. But it seemed to be very important to me, it's... I think it's to do with categorising stuff and getting control and writing stuff down. So you have this... something has a shape, because nothing else had a shape.

Alison 27:49

No, nothing else was in your control at all. Because it was in the height of lockdown... so, you know, Ted couldn't pop in and see you or visit because hospitals were in lockdown. And you'd also made a decision, when you got diagnosed with cancer initially, that it was going to be on a very much a need-to-know basis because I remember you told me because of your column. And that was it.

Diana Henry 28:14

For some reason. I thought that was incredibly personal. I'm not a very... I didn't make a big deal about privacy at all. But I thought that was, I don't know, it seemed to go to the heart of you to be diagnosed with cancer. I know other people, other people can like talk a lot about it immediately. And they're on social media talking about that. I don't understand that at all. I really didn't want the attention. I wanted to just get on with it. I didn't want sympathy... I didn't want people feeling sorry for me, especially if it wasn't sincere. I didn't want 'Oh, poor you'.

Yasmin Khan 28:48

I've had that with two close friends who've had cancer. And they had this, I mean, I think everyone deals with things their own way, don't they? And they were the same. And they were like, 'We're telling you, you're not allowed to tell anyone, I can't be dealing with people's sympathy or pity, I can't deal with putting on a brave face to make other people feel less sad.' And, and it's hard, but it's completely understandable. And obviously, so many of us now, you know, everyone knows someone who has been touched by cancer.

Diana Henry 29:15

Well one in every two of us are going to have it. And I mean, I've heard about three people in the last two weeks. So it's a big club.

Yasmin Khan 29:22

Absolutely. But I thought that's what made your piece so powerful, actually, because I think it's really worth reminding people that sometimes it can be exhausting just trying to deal with your own reaction to someone else being ill.

Diana Henry 29:34

Yeah, I mean, I find dealing with cancer actually quite, um... because I saw the positive things about it. And then I went to have chemo every week. And that meant I had a day off. So I used to look forward to it because I tried to kind of do work while I was having the chemo input, but I could never do it. I could

never manage it, not with the cold cap, because I had the thing that stops your... well, it's supposed to help stop your hair falling out.

Yasmin Khan 29:56

How did chemo affect your sense of taste?

Diana Henry 29:58

Oh my God, well it did very different things at different stages. At first, things were really muffled. Well, that was interesting. I could, I mean, I would just get quite crazed about trying to find things that tasted strong enough. So I'd be standing in the door of the fridge, and it'd be raspberries, dolcelatte, anything that was really, really strong because that's what it needed to come through. Then it changed after a while. And I had this awful thing for a period where it felt like there was kind of like a bird's nest of twigs in my throat. Everything that went down... it would kind of... it would hurt there and then my mouth got bad as well. My tongue got sore, and my tongue has not completely recovered. But chillies were awful. Chillies were awful. So any kind of... so the opposite thing happened, anything strong was difficult. And I needed blander stuff. And at one stage, I couldn't even really swallow water. It felt too thin. So if I was thirsty, I drank milk because the fattiness, I think, made it softer to go down my throat. But they gave me things to kind of like deal with this, including these absolutely ghastly aniseed flavoured jellies that I had to, that I had to drink before I had a meal. And it was kind of awful. I mean, I kept, I kept testing recipes, and I kept cooking the whole time. And sometimes I had to get the kids to do it. Or I would say to Valerie, who shoots my recipes for *The Telegraph*, I would say like: 'OK, I might not have enough cayenne in that, because I was too scared to use more'. Or it would be the opposite thing and I'd say: 'I think this is too powerful, so just see what your taste buds make of it'. And but, yeah, I kept going, I never stopped being interested in food. But it became something I had to think about more than I really wanted to, if you know what I mean?

Alison 31:54

Since you've had your diagnosis, have you changed your diet?

Diana Henry 31:58

When I came home from the hospital, actually, after the autoimmune disease, I did start eating a lot more healthily. It was an awful lot of fruit and vegetables. And I just did that because I thought: 'OK, I've been really ill twice now.' And it's just something you can do, I didn't do it in a very considered way. I didn't go on and look up what you should eat if you've got an autoimmune disease. I just started, I decided to eat less bread, less cheese, more vegetables, more fruits, and quite a lot of protein. And that's the thing that really changed.

Yasmin Khan 32:28

It's been an extraordinary few years for you. And you've had to deal with some real existential questions, I think, throughout it. I don't know, it's hard to ask this question without sounding glib. But I'm gonna go for it anyway. What do you think you've learned from it? Or how has it all changed you?

Diana Henry 32:46

I think that I definitely... and this goes back to when I was in hospital after the surgery for cancer, and my sister said to me: 'What do you want to do when you go home?' And she thought maybe I wanted to go out for dinner, maybe I wanted to do this, maybe I wanted to do that... And I just said, I want to feel the sun on my face. And that's what you really feel. The thing I kept thinking about when I was in the hospital at that time was the sound of a breeze through trees, you know, when it ripples like that. And I really, I thought to myself, I hadn't paid enough attention to those things. And the first time I walked up to the shops quite near me, when I got home, I realised that I hadn't looked upward enough. And there were trees that I hadn't noticed before. Because I'm a very focused person. And that's really good for work. It's not good for necessarily life, you have to be looking and you have to be... I mean it's a very hackneyed phrase these days, but you have to kind of be in the moment. And I think I was definitely rushing too much and always busy with the next thing. And that's just my personality. But I think I've slowed down a bit. And actually, when you've been really ill, you have to, your body won't let you go that fast. So you have to behave in a slightly different way. I did think before, because I thought the cancer that I was, that I was diagnosed with, I thought it was gonna be worse than it was. And I spent, oh, a whole week crying before I got the diagnosis and just thinking about what I wanted to change. And at that stage, it looked as if I might only just have two years left. And I thought about what I want to do and how I want to live in that time. And I think it does make it different. It makes you different if you have really thought of the possibility of death, which I now have twice with the cancer and then with the autoimmune disease, which actually did nearly kill me. And that's still quite scary. And I think something happens. It sounds macabre, but I have accepted death, you know, because it happened so nearly and because it could happen again. I might never...

Yasmin Khan 34:48

Does that feel liberating?

Diana Henry 34:49

I think it means that you don't... I didn't want to waste time. I think it made me much tougher, if that makes any sense. I mean, I didn't think I was a wallflower before, but I really, I really wouldn't take nonsense from anybody that I'm kind of like working for, it's like: 'Okay, we're going to do this, we're gonna do that, and it will be in on this date or whatever.' But it does, it just makes you... I don't think... you're not as easy to push around after you've had two major illnesses.

Yasmin Khan 35:21

I've just finished this book called *Four Thousand Weeks* by Oliver Burkeman. Have either of you heard of it?

Diana Henry 35:27

Oh, right. I know him but haven't... Yes, I've seen it.

Yasmin Khan 35:29

I feel that my world has been kind of shifted a little bit by it. So *Four Thousand Weeks* is, if you live to 80, that's the amount of weeks that he says that you've got. So we've all got less than that, you know. And what the book does is, in a really funny kind of down to earth way, it's not kind of self-helpy or

anything, it's really kind of quite down to earth and funny, helps you realise that, actually, instead of panicking, when you hear that number, you should just use it. It should be a moment of... yeah, that's why I used the word liberation earlier... where it just goes, you know what? You literally... I literally have, if I lived to 80 – and who knows, I mean, come on, who knows if I will? – 2,000 weeks or whatever... Well, it just helps you. So many things have happened to me in the last few weeks since I've read that book. And I've gone, 'You know what? I'm not going to get angry about that because I don't want to waste a week's energy on it.'

Diana Henry 36:21

Oh well listen, I came off Twitter when I came out of the hospital with autoimmune disease. I just thought... I didn't even think about the time it kind of like sucks up... Though I realised when I came off, probably about three hours a day was saved, which was ludicrous. But I just didn't want to be in a place that was that toxic anymore. It wasn't directed at me, I've never had anybody be awful. But I just thought 'I don't want to listen to it. I don't want to see it happening.' And this is not a good place for general discourse, for our culture – for any culture. And I just thought I had to take myself out of it. Because I didn't want to be – I didn't want to witness it and I didn't want to be part of it. And I thought if I left, then maybe other people would eventually kind of, you know, leave gradually. And Twitter wouldn't exist anymore.

Yasmin Khan 37:06

You're much more active on Instagram now, aren't you?

Diana Henry 37:10

The thing is with that, it was – I can't remember which lockdown it was – I just thought, 'Oh, well it would be really useful for people, especially if they're having to do stuff from the store cupboards, or just stuff with pasta or a tin of chickpeas. If I could go and look at all my recipes online on *The Telegraph* and post a different one every day. I mean initially it was called today's really useful recipe or something like that for difficult times because we were all having difficult times. And then it just went, when it ended, I didn't want to stop putting them up. Because it became a thing that everyday I thought the night – I usually consider what I'm going to put up the night before. I think about the month, what's the season, what the weather's gonna be like, I mean, quite often I check the weather forecast and see if this is going to be the right dish for it. All in the summer, it was so difficult, because sometimes it was really hot and sometimes it wasn't at all! Sometimes it was like the autumn! So I have to think 'Oh right, OK, get my head around this.'

Alison 38:04

I love it. So tell us: we ask everyone who is on *Life on a Plate* – what is your store cupboard ingredient? What is the one thing that the Henry house always has in their kitchen cupboards?

Diana Henry 38:17

You should see my store cupboard though. I mean, honestly, you walk into it – I've got one of those ones that you can walk into it because I came to this house, I got them to put... it's not, I wouldn't call it a walk-in larder because it doesn't have hanging hams and all that kind of thing. It's not Mrs

Beeton-esque. But what it does have is that... it's quite organised in there. That's all divided, subdivided into areas of the world and the ingredients that you need to do.

Yasmin Khan 38:42

Oh I love that. That is very organised.

Diana Henry 38:45

The Southeast Asian section just keeps growing and growing. And the Italian section. Now you see that's interesting because there are not so many ingredients that you need for that, that's quite small. My Indian section is quite big, but it's definitely – if you look at my cupboard, definitely Southeast Asia has taken over the world. Definitely. If I'd had to kind of be like stuck with a couple of things. I always have olive oil, I always have butter – I love butter. And you have to have lemons. A kitchen that hasn't got lemons...? I mean, it's just such a brilliant ingredient. Because it can replace salt completely. Or the other thing is it's a great connector of flavours. So quite often when I say, especially as soup actually, I'll taste a soup and I'll think, you know, that should be OK... And there'll be something missing. It's like it hasn't got a middle. And then I'll squeeze some lemon in.

Yasmin Khan 39:39

I'm really glad you said that, Diana, because I often say – and I've written about it quite a lot – that we've got stuck thinking that salt and pepper are seasoning, whereas for me, lemon juice – it's one of the seasonings.

Diana Henry

I completely agree.

Yasmin Khan

You know, so you taste something and you do the salt, the pepper – for me, a bit of fat as well, actually whether that's butter or olive oil – and the lemons.

Diana Henry 40:01

And it works with sweet things as well because sometimes if I'm making – I do this cream with cardamom and rosewater in it, and if I add a little bit of lemon to that, you think it would kind of like negate those other ingredients. It actually makes the rosewater a bit more floral. And I think it brings out the cardamom as well, without overdoing it. So I think it's quite a miracle ingredient, lemon.

Alison 40:24

I love it. That brings us nicely to our Kitchen Grill. Diana, have you been told about this?

Diana Henry 40:31

I have been, I've heard. I'm not going to be able to do it at all because I'm going to go 'Oh but on the one hand and on the other hand...!'

Alison 40:36

But that's great. We find out a little bit more about you. We've kind of touched this already: tea or coffee.

Diana Henry 40:42

Oh my god, I knew you were gonna ask me that! If I really had to choose, it would be coffee. Because not only do I like drinking it. I can't... actually most sweet things, I don't eat without drinking coffee at the same time. So if I'm in a restaurant, and they're going to bring me pudding, I'll say bring a double espresso along with it. Like chocolate. Oh my god. Chocolate cake with some dark espresso. They're just things like that.

Alison 41:07

They taste so much better with coffee. Mash or chips?

Diana Henry 41:12

Mash, but very buttery.

Alison 41:16

Nice. Nice. Sight or smell?

Diana Henry 41:20

Oh my god. That's interesting.

Alison

That's the hard one, sorry.

Diana Henry

Yeah. Smell, actually.

Yasmin Khan

Yeah, I'd choose smell.

Alison

Lovely. Sourdough or baguette?

Diana Henry 41:33

That's quite hard. I've thought about that a lot, would you believe? Such a ridiculous thing to spend time thinking about! I love them both. But in the end, I would say that sourdough goes with more things. But if you're leaving me with just – which might be the kind of thing I would have to have...

Alison

That you would take to a desert island.

Diana Henry

Well, yeah, a green salad or just a green salad with a lovely vinaigrette made really well. Now that is better with baguette, it is better with baguette than it is with sourdough. But I would choose – for practical reasons and thinking of how many more things that it would do justice to – I would go with sourdough.

Alison 42:12

Nice. Parsley or coriander?

Diana Henry 42:14

Wow, that's hard as well. I mean, I love coriander I have to be careful not to put it in too many things, actually. I love it. But also you know, there are people who don't like it at all, they taste it in a particular way and it seems soapy to them. So I try not to use it too much. And – but parsley, parsley is just – parsley so home because it's so a part of chicken soup and stock being made and that's what I always smelled growing up. And it's a very useful herb, I think. I think parsley is probably more useful. But coriander is more, you know, kind of, addictive.

Alison 42:54

Yeah, and especially if you're Southeast Asian ingredients are growing.

Diana Henry 42:58

Also, it's kind of – it goes into Indian food; it goes in Middle Eastern food, it goes into – just everything

Alison 43:04

It's everywhere and lovely. Crisps or chocolate? crisps.

Diana Henry 43:08

Crisps

Alison 43:10

Have you got a favourite flavour?

Diana Henry 43:11

Oh, cheese and onion! Although when I was a child it was always salt and vinegar, and I used to, when I was little, I used to dip – I loved salt and vinegar crisps dipped in ice cream. So I would try to have it so I could have both things we had when we went to the seaside at the same time. So I would kind of like scoop up bits of vanilla with the salt and vinegar crisps. But definitely, yeah: cheese and onion. In fact I really can't allow myself to buy crisps because I like them too much. I have to stay away from them.

43:45

Ha ha! Love it. Fruit or veg?

Diana Henry 43:47

Oh fruit! I absolutely – when I've ever kind of, you know, gone on really really hard diets where I think – like the cabbage soup diet or something like that – it's not cake that I miss, it's apples and oranges. And in the summer, you know, raspberries, apricots, nectarines. I just love fruit. It's just one – I mean, the kind of like, the categories of food I really love are bread, cheese and fruit. I love all of them and I would hate to do without them.

Alison 44:15

And for this you'd class tomatoes as a fruit, wouldn't you?

Diana Henry 44:20

Yes, yes, I would. Obviously, because I can't do without the tomatoes.

44:25

Starter or pudding?

Diana Henry 44:27

Starter. Starter is my favourite bit of a meal. Love a starter. And I think that chefs very often have their best ideas for starters. I mean, I really like puddings and I kind of like, usually have one but it's quite often the most disappointing part of a meal if you're in a restaurant. I don't think they put enough thought into that. But a starter, kind of like – also, do you know what, people don't do starters any more. I mean, I did a whole book, *Eat a Peach*, and it was a book of menus and there was always a starter. I love that because it's another, it's another set of flavours and textures that you have before you kind of have your main course. I think that people in their 20s don't bring their friends around anymore and offer them a starter. I honestly think it's gone. And I think that's a bit of a pity. It's just main course and pud, basically. But what happens with the main courses is quite often, I think it's, it's too big. So I would like a starter and then a smaller sort of main course and then I'll go to the pud after that.

Yasmin Khan 45:26

What I think is happening with that phenomenon is that I think that I agree with the starters, but I feel that you have a main and then you have a few more sides. And I wonder if that's because of a lot more of the Mediterranean/Middle Eastern influences that we've got.

Diana Henry 45:40

Well, also the thing is, also if you're doing vegetable main courses, you need a few of them. Because it's very, very difficult, I think anyway, to come up with real, kind of like, stunning main courses, that stun in the way that a roast chicken does, or a big joint of beef does. So you end up with kind of maybe your hero vegetable dish, but you want some others around it. I mean, I definitely cook more extra vegetable dishes now than I used to. So that might be the reason, yeah, you're right.

Alison 46:12

OK. Spicy or mild?

Diana Henry 46:14

Oh, spicy. And because I've still got this tongue, which gives me some problems – I was talking to Stanley Tucci about it and I mean, he's got more of a reason to be bothered about this, because he had tongue cancer and he had a terrible, terrible regime for chemotherapy and radiotherapy to cure his cancer. But he still has trouble with saliva, and he still has trouble with heat. And we were talking about it recently – I interviewed him. And we had this really funny exchange, we exchanged notes on saliva, basically. But he still finds his tongue sore as well, and so do I, but, I mean, I just won't... Friends say to me: 'Why don't you stop eating chillies?' And I'll say, 'No, because I love them!' So I take a painkiller before I go to eat. The things I do have to avoid though is I find Sri Lankan too much, too hot. Yeah, and it hurts my tongue. I mean, I went there, actually, it was in the middle of chemo, and I didn't even think twice about it. I went to a lovely Sri Lankan restaurant over Christmas, I think it was two years ago and I was literally crying. And I kept saying to them, 'Could you bring me some yogurt?' I didn't even know that yogurt was a thing to have with what I was eating. But then they would bring me a Petri dish. It was like, 'No, I need a bucket! You don't understand!' Because it's the only thing that will – I mean, water doesn't do it obviously, yogurt has to be the thing. But I'm not, no, I haven't given up chillies at all.

Alison 47:40

And the final question is: high tech or wooden spoon?

Diana Henry 47:43

Oh my God, a wooden spoon. Of course! Like I don't know why people even have high-tech things. They say to me sometimes, kind of... There's things that make, kind of like, mashed potatoes for you, isn't there, and heat them up and everything. Even the stupid questions I'm asking you show how little I pay attention to these things. No, I just think that everything that you need, basically, is in your drawers in your kitchen. I mean, I have a food mixer; I have a food processor; I have a proper Italian coffee maker, which is like having a train set because only my children actually know how to use it. They got it for me for my 50th birthday. The only thing I've ever managed to do with it is blow it up. I mean, seriously, I got it too hot and then the, kind of like, the coffee grinds went all over the place. So I'm hopeless with machines, hopeless. So yes, give me a wooden spoon any day. In fact I think the best cakes are the ones that you just mix with a wooden spoon. I make those a lot.

Yasmin Khan 48:44

Well, it was a real pleasure to have you on *Life on a Plate*; we knew we would laugh a lot and it was very inspiring too. I don't know how or where you get your energy from, Diana but I'm so glad that you still have so much of it because I can't wait for *North* and I'm looking forward to seeing these new recipes too.

Diana Henry 49:02

Thank you so much. It was really fun.

Yasmin Khan 49:08

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 Diana Henry. If you've enjoyed our conversation, you can find more like

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