

LIFE ON A PLATE

SEASON 2, EPISODE 2: CERY'S MATTHEWS

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SPEAKERS

Cerys Matthews, Jimi Famurewa, Alison Oakervee

Jimi 00:00

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Hello, and welcome to the second season of *Life on a Plate*, the podcast from Waitrose. In each episode, we talk to some very special people about what food means to them, asking about their comfort foods and favourite dishes, their food memories and go-to ingredients and finding out a lot more about each of our guests in the process.

Alison 01:24

Hi Jimi, how are you?

Jimi 01:24

I'm pretty good. Yeah, not too bad.

Alison 01:28

Not too bad? What have you been up to? Been doing anything fun or interesting?

Jimi 01:32

What have we been doing? Do you know what – there is something that I wanted to mention and share with you that's kind of put me in quite a good mood, actually, and put a bit of a spring in my step. Out of nowhere, recently, my wife Madeleine, she put together one of those online photo books of printed-out pictures: loads of these phone-camera pictures that we never previously looked at, from the past year –

what's been a really challenging year for all sorts of people. And she did those. It was really great, because obviously it's been such a difficult time for everyone, us included, but it was a reminder that there was, you know, these moments of happiness amid what has been quite a difficult period. And like, there was stuff in the park and, you know, disasters, picnics that we'd had and even screenshots of Zoom calls that were just a great reminder of the ways in which throughout all this, we managed to stick together and grab some moments of respite and enjoyment for ourselves.

Alison 02:47

What a great idea! Because your kids are quite young and they'll have grown in a year, and there's quite a lot of relatives that wouldn't have seen them in that year – grandparents that wouldn't have seen them...

Jimi 02:57

Yeah, it started off as a present thing. But then we just did one for ourselves, which was really nice because again, you don't really pay attention to those things. And it's interesting to see a record of a time, in that you don't remember all these quite precious moments. And again, I know that – saying this – that it's not been an easy time and people have not had it easy at all, but it's something that really worked for us.

Alison 03:26

Nice! I think I'm going to try that. It's a good idea.

Jimi 03:28

Yeah, I think you totally should. It's really good. Yeah. Yeah, positivity and optimism in general seem like quite good themes, actually. Because today's guest is all about that positive attitude. It is Cerys Matthews, perhaps best known initially as the front woman of Catatonia, the mega-selling Welsh Britpop outfit. But now she's best known, at least to me and to a lot of her listeners, I think, as a broadcaster. She's got a show on Radio 2; she's got an award-winning 6 Music show that I think is still the most listened-to digital show around; she is such a great connector of various cultures; she's got her own festival. She is all about the good life.

Alison 04:21

She's also got a cookery book as well.

Jimi

Yes, yes.

Alison

Her book *Where the Wild Cooks Go* kind of brings it all together. She's got food, she's got poetry, she's got music, her community, a lot about her and her foraging – she's a lot braver about foraging than I am.

Jimi 04:37

Yeah. I want to know about the foraging thing, because I do find it fascinating that, as you say, bravery.

Alison 04:45

That's bravery – I just stick to blackberries in the summer.

Jimi 04:47

I think you're on safe ground there. And of course, we should absolutely say that eating wild food is something that you should only ever do if you've got an authoritative, robust source that's telling you exactly what you're eating and whether it should be cooked. It's not something that you should ever guess at. But this is the thing that I really love about Cerys, she is – from what I've seen or what I think I know – she's very cool but she's got this real openness and she's all about embedding yourself in cultures and meeting the locals and sharing food, sharing good times together.

Alison 05:28

And she's actually just arrived in the meeting room.

Jimi 05:32

OK, fantastic, here we go then. Here is our guest, Cerys Matthews. Cerys Matthews, thank you so much for joining us.

Cerys Matthews 05:43

It's a pleasure.

Jimi 05:46

Obviously, we on the show concern ourselves with obsessing about food more than anything, and it's just great to have somebody who seems just as obsessed. Have you always been? Has it always been food and music together as one? Or was there one that you were passionate about first and then the other followed? Like, how did that work out?

Cerys 06:06

Do you know what, I think some of the best times I've ever had in my life have always been a mix of things – not just purely music, or purely food. It's always been great company, great stories, great music and great food, and maybe even a great bottle of wine as well, you know. It's a whole life's experience. And so I've always, always thought that music and food, they always go hand in hand. If you go into a restaurant, and the music is wrong, it spoils everything. And if you go somewhere where the music is great, and the food isn't quite right, again, it's like it's not the whole experience. So I suppose it always has been, although, I've got to be honest, you know, music has been such an overriding obsession for so long. But then so is food actually, because I always used to like going out into the garden and seeing what could be eaten.

Jimi 07:03

Yeah, well, you've spoken about the fact that you had Roger Phillips's book on foraging at a very young age and you were kind of going out and you had this very wild, adventurous spirit even from that early point. My question for foragers is always: did you have any close calls of things that you absolutely shouldn't have been trying?

Cerys 07:27

Ha, yeah, I'm still here, so not close enough. But you know, when you think about aubergine/eggplant they're made out of belladonna. You know there's a load of... I think tomatillos and tomatoes, aren't they from the belladonna family? So we're only a hop and a skip away from things that one oughtn't to eat.

But anyway, in terms of going out and finding my own food, I think that I was brought up as a teenager, let's think, in the end of the 70s – not teenager but as a child at the end of the 70s and into the 80s, which means that for a lot of families what you're looking at eating are crispy fried pancakes, Libby's Sunshine Orange, maybe at the tail-end of the 70s, vol au vents with that meat paste. It was what was fashionable: Vesta curry, freeze-dried, boil-in-the-bag. It was Smash, [singing] 'Smash for mash. Get Smash!' It was all really fashionable to have this because, you know, for the first time – think about it – in the 60s and 70s, more women were working; people wanted convenience, fast food – and it was fashionable. So it was all of this pre-packaged, chemical-heavy stuff.

Alison 08:42

Did you do much of the cooking?

Cerys 08:44

No, I didn't. My dad worked all the time so it was it was down to my mum. But she didn't like eating anything apart from chicken and chips. So her ability to cook was rather limited. She doesn't mind me admitting this because something that I so admire in her is that at some point later on in our lives, she suddenly had this emancipation to go back to the basics and then started cooking – from our friend Madrika Purahit next door – she started cooking proper curry. She could have gone with the Vestas... and you know, she introduced dhal to our life and to me dhal is the lifeblood. For the future of the planet, all you need is dhal. So watching my mum really – it really inspired me to go out looking for fresh food in the woods behind the... when I say 'woods' I mean more like a copse because it had like shopping trolleys and old mattresses. I loved it because there was nettles and sorrel...

Alison 09:48

And then what did you do with it as you harvested? What were you cooking with it? Or were you just eating it neat and raw?

Cerys 09:54

Yeah, neat and raw most of the time, because you get that hit of vitamin C – and then you get the story of the pirates that came ashore with scurvy and they go looking for sorrel in the hedgerows, and I like those stories. But nettle soup was a favourite, I think it was one of my first dishes I ever made, because it's so simple and it's so delicious and it's full of iron and it's very, very cheap obviously, and easy to make.

Jimi 10:19

I love that you're already really pointing out these links: with the link to the pirates there and trying to keep away scurvy, and certain different plants, and the connection of cultures, and you talk about your

your mother learning curry-making from a neighbour. And this is something that I really loved that you carried into your shows on Radio 2 and 6 Music: forging these links between cultures that we sometimes think of as disparate. Is that something that you always had, that you were fascinated by?

Cerys 10:56

Yeah, because I love history as well, especially history when it means stories. So I collected songs, and fell in love with the Irish repertoire – full of stories of history. You know, I was eight and nine and when you're that age, people are not talking to you about genocide or persecution or injustice; they're not really subjects that you usually give access to a child, whereas they were all in the songs and they're all in folklore, and they're all in our back catalogue of mythological stories and legends. None of those subjects are taboo. These stories just make life very interesting. And every single human being, wherever they're brought up in the world, will have these stories that pertain to their locality, their nation, and then to swap these stories... and then we'll sometimes find some of these stories exist in four or five different cultures that you would never put together... Like the story of Gelert, which is the story of the lord who has a best friend, his dog. He comes home from hunting, finds his baby killed, blames the dog, kills the dog, then finds a wolf dead under the bed. So the dog had killed the wolf. So the lord has just killed his faithful hound who actually saved the baby – the baby was still alive, it was the blood of the wolf that the lord saw. So anyways, a convoluted story that is really not that convoluted, usually, but this story exists in Indonesia, and India as well, just using different animals. So I think the history of man is very interwoven and we are more similar than we are different. But I love the differences too.

Jimi 12:40

Yeah, it seems as well that it's something that manifests – and this ties in with your (I hope we can talk some more about it) your amazing book, *Where the Wild Cooks Go*. It seems like it's at the core of that, this idea of things being linked and it ties in with cuisine and food and food culture as well. We quite often talk about all the different forms of similar dishes, like, you look at something like the Caribbean patty and the Cornish pasty – it's really, really fascinating. And it seems like that was a really easy link for you, to move from the world of music and history to the world of food.

Cerys 13:21

Well, also, you know, variety is the spice of life, and I think we'd be all the poorer if we just keep honing back into this Anglo-American axis. You know, the English-language-Anglo-American axis to me has kind of run its course. I want to know about different languages and different stories and different heroes and, you know, different legends and different foods. I'm done with the burger and chips. Give me something else. And I mean the whole picture, 360, because there are heroes and musicians and poets and explorers. Like, in my Moroccan section I celebrate Battuta, who should be as big as Marco Polo: he is just this mammoth traveller, who went across all these thousands of kilometres and wrote about it and then went back. I think he went travelling for tens of years. Anyway, that's what I wanted to pay attention to: not only to celebrate different cuisines across the world, but also to celebrate different legends.

Alison 14:31

I love the cookbook, your cookbook. I love the fact there's so many areas to dip in and dip out of and the way you've woven in the poems and a real mixture of recipes. Some of them are a little bit involved

and others are really simple: like in Spain, there's a half a melon with sherry – you couldn't get a more simple dish than that, but I bet it tastes amazing.

Cery 14:50

It's authentic, you know, and that's the other thing: I don't want to cut corners. I'm not going to throw chorizo in my paella, I'm not going to say, "Take that curry mix." Make your own curry mix! Make your own spice mixes. Know what the nuts and bolts are because then you can see similarities. Like if you take pilaf and paella and any rice dish, you can start drawing the connections between these dishes that migrated with people. And then you think about how we see people's cultures or food cultures; like in Italy, it's the tomato, but the tomato didn't come to the Old World until the 16th century; it's the same as the chilli in India – it's not indigenous to India, the chillies came with the Portuguese. And there's so many stories like that: when we think of Ireland and potatoes, you know, the potato is from South America, like the chilli and like the tomato and like avocados.

Jimi 15:48

Yeah, yeah, it definitely is something that you've seen throughout food, not just through home cooks but restaurant cooks at the top end. If you think of new Nordic, which has been so influential, and what they did was exactly what you're talking about. They looked at what was available, and they went further back – almost in the same way as your mum – to what was happening before and kind of, really dug into those traditions.

I wonder, I can see and hear your enthusiasm here as you talk about these cultural connections and food. Obviously, as you broke through with Catatonia, and were a huge, mega-selling, hugely successful act, how was this tendency manifesting back then? Were you like this then? When you were on tour, were you going off to find the best place to eat and the best cooks in whatever country you happened to be in?

Cerys Matthews 16:43

Oh, yeah, absolutely. I've always been passionate about great artists, and I count chefs as artists, home cooks as well – people that are passionate and knowledgeable and generous to share. So yeah, I was very lucky as a touring musician to be able to go around the world and be invited in people's kitchens and collect recipes along the way. And I collected stories and language – I love languages – and food ideas and drink ideas, and, you know, kitchen ideas – shortcuts. And then music and playlists, so I've got Spotify playlists for each one of the countries as well.

Alison 17:25

Tell us more about the playlists. Are they linked in any way to the book?

Cerys 17:29

Well, basically, you know, I absolutely adore the radio or music while I'm cooking. It's part of the whole 360 experience. And being, you know, the captain of your own ship in the kitchen, when you're cooking, choosing the music. But to get into the mood, what I've done... Let's say you're cooking Italian, you can go to Spotify, if you've got Spotify, and say, "Where the Wild Cooks Go; Cerys; playlist Italy". And it's got a whole hour of like Sophia Loren and some just brilliant, uplifting Italian music that I love to listen to

when I'm cooking. It's got a great Welsh playlist, English playlist, Jamaican playlist, Mexican playlist, and so forth: it's 15 different playlists of an hour each. You know, because I think the best description really is that it's a folk cookbook.

Jimi 18:22

Yeah, food is one of those things that has got a kind of folk or oral tradition, hasn't it, and history. And we all have that within our own families: those recipes that people just make innately and we love them and they make them in a very specific way. And, you know, I've been trying to get my mum to teach me all these Nigerian recipes that she doesn't measure anything for and just knows how to do.

And what were some of the more maybe unusual eating memories you have from that time of touring and meeting people? I know that for a long period you lived in the Deep South in the US; what are some of the things that stick out as the stranger things you were introduced to?

Cerys 19:04

Well, probably the American system of food which is so divorced from real food. Like honey buns Twinkies, moon pies – just a whole endless list of food that is just chemicals. It really was the catalyst to me really embracing the idea that actually we've got so far away from food as a human family memory – kitchen, home, you know, a natural thing. And again, when you talk about food, there's so much that is not just love and memories within the family: it's a whole history of man. So then you look at the food from the south and I'm eating breaded okra, fried okra, biscuits and gravy. And then you're eating catfish sandwiches, and going into Kroger or Piggly Wiggly, which is the name of a supermarket, and seeing jars of bright pink trotters, pickled trotters – it's obviously got colouring in, it's in America – and then, oh, one of my favourite words: chitterlings...

Alison

What's that?

Cerys 20:19

Chitterlings is intestines that have been boiled and boiled, so they're clean, and you can have stuffed chitterlings, you can have fried chitterlings. But then you've got a tree called chinkapin tree and chitterlings – oh it's just so lovely. But, anyway, when you're enjoying this kind of food, which is associated with the South, then you're enjoying the food that was invented by the slaves. And then you get the whole history, the awful harrowing history of slavery, there on your plate. Because all that these people were given were the offcuts of the meats, the cheap cuts, and even to the vegetables, it's turnip greens, it's the waste stuff, the stuff that the white people, the elite class, chucked away. But out of this, the resilience and the invention and the brilliance of the people allow us now to enjoy what's known as soul food – delicious, delicious food. And then you go to somewhere like New Orleans, and you realise the history of the French that came down, who were kicked out of France and kicked out of Canada, came down the Mississippi, settled in New Orleans, mixed with the Spanish, mixed with the First Nation people in New Orleans, mixed with slaves. And there was this pre-Jim Crow law, there was this integration in New Orleans, which is reflected in the gumbo and the spicy étouffée and boudin sausages in New Orleans and Louisiana. I mean, when you look at food like this, it's a map of the world

and a map of stories of the positivity and negativity of human history. And I honestly find it just one of the most fascinating lessons in history ever, you know, because it's delicious as well.

Jimi 22:12

As a fan of your show – and you know, I'm not alone in that, I think at one point it was the most (your 6 Music show I'm talking about in particular) – was the most listened-to show on digital radio...

Cerys 22:24

I think it still is – single show.

Jimi 22:28

That's amazing. And it just feels like such a clear progression in terms of what you're interested in. And the show is such a reflection of that and these links between cultures and that kind of questioning voraciousness that you've really got. I wondered – this feels like such a true representation of who you are – but I wondered with that whole Britpop fame and, a lot of it was quite hedonistic and a lot of it was you being the front woman of this band that were lumped in with the Cool Cymru movement and all that. How do you reflect on that? How did you feel about that at the time and the sort of fame that was thrust on you?

Cerys 23:10

Well at the time, it was exciting. It's interesting, isn't it – when more than a handful of bands or artists, visual artists start emerging from a country, it becomes a scene and then the press hook on to it and it becomes a bigger scene, and then it is branded as something, you know. But the Cool Cymru thing was exactly that: we'd spent so many years as Welsh-language, and English-language, groups playing to ourselves – and not one journalist crossing the Severn Bridge. And every time any band from Wales was written about in the music press, it had the word 'sheep' somewhere in the article: it was so predictable and so underwhelming. And then all of a sudden, we had Gorky's Zygoti Mynci and the Super Furry Animals and the Manic Street Preachers on the backs of, you know, decades of great musicians before us and that allowed us to have our own, sort of, listening. I think we were listening to like Kevin Ayers and Welsh folk singers and hymns – it was such a mix of influences that the music that happened to be made by a lot of us in Wales sounded fresh and a bit different to what was happening in the so-called London scene.

Jimi 24:35

Are there things you miss about that kind of level of fame?

Cerys 24:38

No no, no [laughing]. I wasn't very good with it, to be honest. I mean, it was fun. I can't say it wasn't fun. Like we met like, you know, we tour around the world – Loreley and Roskilde and the Fuji Rock Festival and we'd be touring with other musicians and there was an awful lot of fun. But it's... it's also, what I love about life is that there's a rhythm to it, you know, and I was quite happy in my mid-30s to start thinking about a different kind of life rather than perpetual touring. I tried touring with my children; they were one year old – was he one? or a few months old? – and the other one was just over one-and-a-half years old, both in nappies on a tour bus.

Alison 25:31

Wow, that's quite a challenge!

Cerys 25:33

That pretty much put an end to my touring ambitions as a mother of two little ones. And my crew members, who were like, "For God's sake, can you shut those up?" You know, and then you're backstage with babies and they're crawling and they're tasting and putting things in their mouth when they're teething and it's full of cables, you know, electric cables, huge fat electric... It doesn't really make sense. But you know, if you're multi-million and you can afford a nanny on the tour bus with your children, so they're kind of separate from the working crew then that's – well that's for millionaires and gazillionaires, but we were doing it in one tour bus and it was difficult. In terms of eating, then now you're talking about riders?

Jimi 26:17

Yes. Yeah!

Cerys 26:18

Yeah. My rider was always quite fussy though as well, because – and I've always been like this – but I don't like chemicals.

Alison 26:27

So what did you have, what did you ask for? Was it bowls of fresh fruit, or...?

Cerys 26:28

Well, local foods where I could, so when we were in Germany, it was the breads, the black breads and the lovely local cheeses, but also nuts and always, always, always fresh chillies because I'm addicted to fresh chilli – so crunch, as well.

Alison 26:45

I read somewhere or heard somewhere that you carry chillies around in your handbag when you're going out. Is that true?

Cerys 26:51

Yes. I carry them in – not all the times – but I usually put them in a plastic bag. Fresh, because you need the crunch. I used to carry Tabasco, but it kept opening in the bag, and once you've had a Tabasco spill... but besides, I've moved on from Tabasco because I prefer the crunch of fresh chilli. I think it's because we toured for so long and aeroplane food and stuff is kind of bland. And once you get a taste for spice, which I have – I love sour food and textured food and spicy food – once you get that taste, and you're given like, oh my pet hate: if you don't eat meat, you're always given risotto or vegetarian lasagne. It's like baby food.

Alison 27:36

Oh, it's just quite safe and tasteless, isn't it?

Cerys 27:39

It's baby food. It's gloop. It's like there's no there's no excitement, you know, visually or taste-wise or texture-wise. So I started carrying chillies, to give that bit of interest to aeroplane food and to bland vegetarian offerings. It's good for you too. I mean, apparently it helps the metabolism. And it's meant to have vitamins and stuff in it, so...

Alison 28:06

I thought you were going say you've got lots of different varieties of dried and spicy chillies and things that you could just sprinkle over rather than a whole one that you could chop up and add texture, but I hadn't thought about the texture that a raw chilli also brings to dishes – it's good.

Cerys 28:23

In fact, my favourites are Waitrose ones – the green ones. I think some of them are from Thailand; they're kind of about two, three inches long, quite thin. So they're a really nice mix of fresh-tasting and enough heat to give you a little buzz in your mouth but not too hot that you can't have a few bites.

Alison 28:42

Not like birds eye chillies or anything like that, that are probably a little bit too hot.

Cerys 28:45

You want to enjoy a chilli, you don't want it to just be like, "Oh my God! Aaah!"

Alison 28:49

And you can't taste anything for the rest of the meal. You don't want that.

Cerys 28:54

You've got to find the sort of mix that suits your tastes.

Jimi 28:58

You've touched on the fact that you don't eat meat, but that's in opposition to your family history because you're from a line of faggot-makers. Is that right?

Cerys 29:07

Yeah, proud, faggot-makers on two sides of the family tree. We used to make and deliver faggots and sell them in Neath market in South Wales. And I've got the fabulous recipe, the 100-year old recipe of my Auntie Delyth in the book. But my whole thing about this idea of vegetarianism, veganism, pescetarian, gluten-free and all the rest of it, is I think it's more helpful to think of it in terms of aim and ethos. The reason I started gradually cutting out meat was because of the environment, just in the same way as I'm trying to cut down the amount of plastics I'm using. Just like I'm trying out different laundry cleaners and dishwasher cleaners and I just think there's a lot of us that are trying by small increments and by baby steps to try and live in a more sustainable fashion. And that's the reason. I don't want to judge anyone, I'm not here to stand on my soapbox. But for us, for our family, the more we get used to the idea that you can go days without meat, and absolutely enjoy your food and live a really

healthy life and, you know, feed all the adults and the children and they're really full and happy and enjoying their meals... I think the pressure actually became a commercial thing – that we were so used to getting cheap meat, all of the time, that we just got used to it in our diet every day, every meal, every day. Whereas before, it was more of a treat. It was something that you looked forward to for your Sunday roast on a Sunday. And there was nothing wrong with that.

Alison

You've mentioned dhal, but what about other plant-based dishes that you're cooking that mean you don't miss meat or animal products?

Cerys

Well, that's what the book's about basically. It's these sort of cheap, sustainable, daily, delicious, easy-to-cook and fast – because, you know, we're a busy household – alternatives, and also flexitarian. So if you want meat, and you really want meat, and that's great, you can throw them in as well. But most of them, like there's a beautiful Spanish recipe that I learnt when I moved to Spain when I was 18. And it's... We mentioned dhal, so let's think about vegetarianism, or veganism, or meat-free alternative meals not through carbohydrates, but through legumes and beans and peas and lentils, I think that's a good place to start.

Alison 31:34

Because that means you're getting your proteins.

Cerys 31:36

Yeah. And it sustains you, you know, it makes you feel full and good, good energy. But across all of the cultures, you're going to find guaranteed a sustainable, delicious, cheap, fast, easy-to-cook meal. So in terms of Spain, you're going to have green lentils with a whole head of garlic that you make with olive oil, chopped onion, green lentils, and you can stew it up. If you want to put meat in you can put a chorizo sausage in or a ham hock in there. And you can see the same one in the south, in the southern states of America – you're going to cook your greens with your ham hock in there. And that's a lovely dish – not as sustainable as these other examples... In Jamaica: ital stew, so you get the fresh vegetables and then you can add chickpeas or you can add some sort of you know, legume in it. In my own culture, Wales: cawl, the traditional cawl whereby according to accounts you have your cauldron sitting on your fire and all day long you can add various vegetables as people come in from working in the fields. And then if you want a bit more sustenance you can make dumplings and then you see that across the cultures as well. So you've got your vegetable soup with added beans, peas or legumes and then if you want a bit more, you know, calories if you working hard, you throw some dumplings in there and I love making dumplings that puff up so they're not like hard nuggets, but they're like fluffy clouds.

Jimi 33:05

Yeah, I'm feeling hungry.

Cerys 33:07

Or refried beans in Mexican cooking, that's another example, or if you go to the Punjab then you have a red kidney bean side dish... All hail the bean!

Jimi 33:23

All hail the bean! You seem to have a real adventurousness not just with music but with food. It's a point we keep returning to. Are there any things that you that you've not been able to eat or that you haven't enjoyed? And not necessarily the processed stuff but things that you've been introduced to on your travels and you've been like, "No, I can't do that."

Cerys 33:43

Yeah, I love this conversation. Let's each of us pick what we don't like. I blame my mum, bless my mum: ratatouille. Oh! Ratatouille! Don't ever give me ratatouille: it's watery, slimy, slithery, yeurch. Boiled courgettes, boiled aubergine, boiled tomato stew. Ratatouille? No, thank you.

Alison 34:19

As a vegetarian, if it's not a pasta or cheese dish or a risotto, do you not get ratatouille served quite regularly?

Cerys 34:30

Well, again it's my mum because she didn't cook anything but chicken and chips, and then ratatouille was one of the first recipes she learnt to cook, so we had ratatouille so often. So this is where this comes up.

But honestly, I could bore you two senseless. I went to one of the most wonderful, beautiful weddings recently in France, in Paris, in the Palace of Versailles. And it was the night before and it was all of the main friends of the groom meeting together to celebrate the nuptials and it was a French restaurant and we kept calling a friend to say, "Look you know we don't eat meat. If it's a real trouble, maybe we'll eat a bit of fish but normally just we're happy with vegetables, but is there going to be something for us?" "Yes, yes. Don't worry, don't worry, it'll be fine, it'll be fine." Anyway, you know where this is headed. So we sit down. Their meals, their starters came – delicious cured ham or whatever. It was delicious stuff. And then the lamb comes in then and the vegetarians among us are just still sitting there getting hammered on delicious wine, which is fine, you know – just throw the dog a bone. But anyway, we're like, "Oh, [cough, cough]," in that British kind of, "Excuse me, excusez-moi, sorry, sorry, but..." So eventually with a big fanfare they go, "This is ready for the vegetarians!" And they came and it was a little shot glass full of ratatouille.

Alison 36:05

Ha ha ha! That's not going to fill you up!

Cerys 36:06

And then the rest of it was some boiled potato. So anyway, you know what, it still makes me chuckle. It was such a good night. In fact, that night we had to walk back because there were no taxis to pick us up: we walked back begging bars along the way for free peanuts. So hungry!

Jimi 36:27

It is a common thread as well that vegetarians do not come in for the best treatment. If you've got any vegetarians in your life, you know what it's like – that kind of scan of the menu, particularly if you're travelling.

Alison 36:46

Although I'd have thought with the increase in the number of people that are vegetarian or vegan, that that whole thing is changing and actually more and more people are actually getting more confident in cooking vegetarian dishes.

Cerys 36:58

There's one restaurant in France, a vegetarian restaurant and maybe even vegan actually, that's just been given a Michelin star so... But I think you have to move away. I think on the whole the classic training for chefs is the French-based training, which is based on meats and stocks. So I think probably there will be a time when chefs need to be taught the classical meat-based cooking idea, the French idea, but in parallel to that, start training with a plant-based diet because it is opening up and it's absolutely delicious. You don't have to go far to start tasting some of the world's most delicious plant-based meals. There's a lot of Japanese, Chinese, Indonesian, Vietnamese, so many alternatives now that you can have the vegan option of those meals – tofus and tempehs and like, the vegan haggis that I've got in *Where the Wild Cooks Go...*

Alison

That looks delicious!

Cerys

Honestly, it's as delicious, if not more delicious, than the meat haggis. It's totally inspired by the meat haggis. It's got so much black pepper and you wouldn't think that the recipe's for real – it's got like half a teaspoon or a teaspoon of ground black pepper. It's unbelievable.

Alison 38:20

That's the recipe that caught my eye when I was looking through it, thinking actually, it looks really appetising and it looks like the real haggis – it doesn't look like a substitute, with the oats in there and the texture.

Cerys 38:32

Because that's the thing: you want to be able to eat the same sides as everybody else, whatever their choices. So that's what people quite often don't understand. Why are you interested in a vegetarian butcher? Why do you want vegetarian sausages? Why do you want vegetarian burgers? The reason is is because these have got cultural traditions and this is the way we eat: this goes with this; fish goes with chips; burgers go in a bun and with tomatoes and lettuce; bangers and mash. You want to be able to sit and share the same – you don't want to sit there eating, like, lasagne or ratatouille when everyone else is having a roast dinner. You want to sit there with your roast dinner but not have the meat but have a couple of extra portions of Yorkshire pudding.

Alison 39:16

If you're having a barbecue or a campfire, you want to be able to cook your sausages over them and have them in a bun like everyone else. So, yeah.

So it's a busy house you've got, does that mean you're doing the cooking, your daughter's now doing some of the cooking too... Do your other children help in the kitchen or does the lion's share still come to you to do?

Cerys 39:37

My whole thing with cooking is that it's an enlightenment. It's revolutionary. It's a means to save money. It's a means to have options. It opens the whole chest of drawers of options if you know what goes with what and how the increments work together and the variables that you have at hand. So if you allow your children access to the fire, the salt, the fat, the sour, and see what goes with what from a really early age, I think you're giving more power to their elbow. So I encourage them. In fact, my husband, like, sometimes is despairing. He's like, "Aren't they too young to start cooking?" "No. No, no, no." I mean, I think from a very early age, children, you know, say, "It's hot!" You know, even when they're tiny you have to teach them dangers and how to be able to avoid danger, you know? So yeah, all the children... The only problem is the mess they leave. I'm now trying to teach them to clean up after themselves.

Jimi 40:44

How have you managed to maintain that sense of magic and discovery and wonder when you're all cooped up in the same house? And presumably, you've been recording, been continuing working, and all on top of each other! Like, how have you coped, essentially?

Cerys 41:00

Well, we have like – this is our treat – we have fish and chips, well not the fish bit, but we have chips and curry sauce every Thursday, which we look forward to. We still... when I was a kid we used to have it, you know, because it's just a break from cleaning up basically. Because I think that's what, you know – breakfast, lunches, and dinner for all the people in the house every day is a lot of sorting and cleaning. So chips: chips are on a Thursday, which is a break. But also I am lucky because my daughter cooks for us. As I mentioned, she's 17 now and she's really inventive and it's brilliant to watch her.

Jimi 41:38

Amazing. We've covered so much ground. But just when you were talking then about introducing kids to the risk and the joy of cooking and trying things and trial and error, it was making me think of your festival, The Good Life Experience, which has been running for quite a few years now. And I've seen you talk about that. What's the future for it? Can you talk us through where the idea came from and what it was you were hoping to achieve? It sounds like such a great, great idea.

Cerys 42:13

It means that we'll sort of end in where we began: questioning what makes for a good time. You know, what do you enjoy doing? What makes your memories, what are the most memorable moments? And for me, it's exchange of information, great company, fire – real fire, great foods, and whatever your

tipple is, and music: all of those things. So I wanted a festival which combined everything: so you have passionate small producers, artisan makers, blacksmiths, bow and arrow makers, wood-carvers musicians, poets, comedians, whatever. Sausage-makers, you know, chefs, we get some of the best chefs around the world come, but they don't cook on stainless steel, top-of-the-range ovens, they cook on fire. It's just a celebration of life basically, in a more, you know, uncommercial setting.

Jimi 43:12

This has been incredible. I feel like we've spanned the globe while not moving at all and it's been so enriching and enjoyable and just great. I could talk to you all day, but we will let you go away. Thank you so much for your time.

Cerys 43:29

It's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you so much for all the research and things. It's been lovely talking to you as well.

Alison

And enjoy your chips and curry sauce tonight.

Cerys

Oh yes! It's Thursday!

Jimi 43:43

You've been listening to *Life on a Plate* from Waitrose. I'm Jimi Famurewa. Thank you to my co-host, Alison Oakervee, and our guest, Cerys Matthews. To learn more about the series, go to waitrose.com/podcast and please subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.