

## **LIFE ON A PLATE**

### **SEASON 2, EPISODE 10: Honey & Co.**

#### **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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#### **SPEAKERS**

Itamar Srulovich, Jimi Famurewa, Alison Oakervee, Sarit Packer

#### **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. Hello, Alison, how are you?

#### **Alison 01:26**

Hey, hello, I'm all right, thank you. How about you?

#### **Jimi 01:28**

I am, as ever... I almost feel like this should be on a T-shirt now...

#### **Alison 01:32**

You're just OK?

#### **Jimi 01:33**

I'm pretty good. Was it just OK? I thought it was pretty good. No, I'm pretty good. I have got one for you this week. How are you when it comes to cooking with other people being in the same space? Somebody watching you as you cook, producing a meal together and both kind of chipping in? Are you good at that? Or are you bad at it?

#### **Alison 01:57**

I have to admit I'm a bit of a control freak in the kitchen. I don't mind people in the kitchen but as long as they do what I say. That kind of thing. But then at the same time, it's really helpful to just watch different people because you think, "Ooh, I've not thought about doing it like that, actually.... Like the other day my brother was eating a salad, and he went, "Alison, how do you cut the romano peppers up in rings? Do you take the seeds out separately?" And it was like, "Yeah, sort of, I kind of cut until the seeds and then cut it in half," and he was like, "OK." See, the little tips?

**Jimi** 02:31

Yeah, yeah. And I think that that idea of, like, learning by somebody observing you or you observing them... My mum watched me once frying plantain and I wasted the little kind of nubby bit in the end and she couldn't believe I was wasting this tiny little squeeze of plantain and now every time I do it, without fail, I think of her. I give it a little squeeze. And, you know, the waste gods are appeased.

**Alison** 02:57

That's why I love watching Instagram stories to see little tips and hacks about how they do different things. You know, whether it's cutting up a fennel to make sure you get the maximum out of it without the core and that kind of thing. So yeah, it's good.

**Jimi** 03:10

Yeah, you learn so much, I think, from being in the same space as other people cooking together, having friends around and it being that kind of collective effort. And the reason I've come here wanting to talk to you about this is because our guests today – Sarit Packer and Itamar Srulovich of Honey & Co fame – they have made a kind of empire out of cooking together, their relationship (they're a husband and wife team), with their Fitzrovia restaurants and their deli, have really kind of revolutionised how we all think about Middle Eastern cuisine, how we all think about food and friends and flavour. They're incredible, aren't they, and you're a huge fan...

**Alison** 03:52

Yes, I'm a fan of them already. I've been eating in their restaurants for years, and their food is delicious. Their cookbooks are great, and their recipes are just really accessible.

**Jimi** 04:03

Yeah, they cook with such love and heart, and their cheesecake I've heard is apparently pretty good.

**Alison** 04:12

It's really addictive. But the best thing is you just want to invite them round for dinner afterwards. And, you know, they live locally to me, so I can... Yeah, you just want to have them as your friends and have them round.

**Jimi** 04:21

That's hopefully where this will lead to. So let's get on with it then, shall we? Here is our conversation with Sarit Packer and Itamar Srulovich of Honey & Co. Sarit Packer and Itamar Srulovich, better known as Honey & Co, thank you so much for joining us. We're so thrilled to have you on. I just want to start with the book, *Chasing Smoke*. This is your new – third or fourth book, is it? Fourth, and I just wanted to

say a huge congratulations. It's an incredible cookbook. The recipes are gorgeous, but it's so riveting. This is your journey travelling around the Levant and following these kind of live-fire cooks and traditions around various countries. What was it like to put it together? It seems like a passion project

**Sarit Packer** 05:17

Well, it does. And also, it seems slightly like a dream at the moment because we basically spent 2019 travelling all around the Levant, you know. Like who does that, you know? We just, like almost every month, we travelled, and it's amazing. So we did Turkey and Greece and Jordan and Egypt and Israel. And we just spent so much time travelling and meeting people and shaking people's hands and going into their kitchens. You know, it's like science fiction!

**Itamar Srulovich** 05:46

Remember that time that we drank from a bottle of water that someone else drank from? That was amazing!

**Jimi** 05:55

A different age. You're right, though, and I think that that's part of the appeal. Like just reading it. I mean, the first section is you cramped in a taxi weaving through traffic in Cairo. You can smell it, you can hear it, you can feel it. And I think for all of us that have been craving travel and craving the sort of eating memories and experiences that go hand in hand with that, it's just an absolute joy. Yeah, you're right. It feels like a different life and a different world.

**Alison** 06:21

But it's also a part of the world I've not really done much travelling in, but actually just reading what you've written, I actually feel like I'm there with you and, you know, in the taxi, kind of swerving around the lanes and eating the food. It's just brilliant.

**Sarit Packer** 06:35

That's really nice to hear. I mean, really, when we said about writing this book, it wasn't... I mean, of course, we wanted to travel and we wanted to see this thing. But the more stories about the travel came when we... because we were writing it during lockdown, actually. So just this kind of passion for travel and Itamar's beautiful stories about what we were doing and all of this stuff. Like, as he was writing them, we were kind of remembering these amazing experiences as well. So it kind of coincided well. It wasn't always the plan.

**Jimi** 07:07

The Levant, Levantine cooking... it's something that we hear a lot about, and you guys are obviously such great exponents of it and have really popularised this way of cooking and flavour and linking those various countries together. How would you define it?

**Itamar Srulovich** 07:23

Well, it's a really tricky one to pin down because you would say Levantine cooking, or Middle Eastern cooking, what is it... it's like saying, European food or Asian food, you know, it's a very broad region and very, very, very diverse as well. But there are there are certain sort of threads that run through it, be

it spice, the vegetables, the herbs, the freshness, but more than that, it's kind of, I guess, a spirit of hospitality that is so ingrained, you know – we know it from home and definitely from our travels – it is so open, such warmth and hospitality and friendliness. It all centres around, you know, the table and food. This is true for everywhere we went in the Levant, in the research for the book, and before that, from growing up in the region. So I can say, there is such a thing as a Levantine spirit of cooking, as opposed to Levantine cuisine.

**Sarit Packer** 08:26

Yeah, I always think, it's also because it's not a culture that is so much based on alcohol and stuff like that. So this kind of common ground of meeting and sitting with people is eating and it's like everything is about the eating, the celebrating... whether you come over and you have like a coffee and a cake... this is like one of our funny things to say, like as soon as you meet someone it's like, "Do you want a coffee? Do you want some cake?" Like you can't even like meet someone without food being mentioned. Everything else is revolving around this kind of... first of all, because there's amazing holidays so you're kind of celebrating, you know, right now, it's Ramadan. So every evening's like a street party in the region, which is just so much fun. Like there's, you know, there's so much energy in the air and everyone's going out to eat... Well, this year, it's a bit different, I know.

**Itamar Srulovich** 09:08

Who were we talking to just a few weeks ago? Oh, yeah. We were talking to Adem, this really beautiful guy that we met in Turkey. He's the son of a really famous Turkish food writer, and he was showing us around his hometown of Gaziantep in southern Turkey. We spoke to him a couple of weeks ago, and we said, you know, why is it that the food in Gaziantep is such a huge thing and it's so delicious, and everyone is so skilled, and he said, you know, "Yeah, we don't go to the theatre. We don't go to the ballet. We don't much like movies. We don't have bars, clubs. This is what we do. We eat. We cook and we eat. This is our cultural expression, you know." I don't think he used those words. But this I think is what he meant. And I thought, yeah, I love that.

**Alison** 09:58

But if you're cooking over smoke and fire and char-grilling and that kind of thing, you've got that theatre that's happening once you're cooking the food as well. So it's kind of... and then you get to eat it. So it's like a win-win.

**Sarit Packer** 10:09

It is a win-win and it's a theatre of food but also it's this kind of primal instinct of "Man. Fire." There's this amazing kind of celebration of watching flames and watching stuff cook and smelling it. And obviously the weather is so, you know, is so conducive to sitting outside and barbecuing and eating and stuff like that. It's just a massive part of what everyone does.

**Alison** 10:30

The lovely thing about your new book is the fact that you've got that little paragraph at the end of each recipe for the English weather, how to do it not on a barbecue, how to do it inside if it's raining and still enjoy the food.

**Itamar Srulovich** 10:43

You know, we've had years... we don't have a garden. And we love grilling, we love barbecuing, we had to open a really big restaurant in order to do that in London. Really, we have to spend so much money on extraction.

**Alison** 10:58

Is that why you're redoing your kitchen? It's just an excuse to really beef up the extraction unit at home?

**Sarit Packer**

In lockdown, we have been doing so much cooking at home rather than in the restaurants obviously. And the kitchen just started falling apart in our hands. So now at the end of lockdown we're redoing our kitchen finally...

**Itamar Srulovich** 11:18

We got to a stage that when you turn the oven on, the cutlery drawer steams up. And when you open like a drawer, then the pull stays in your hand. So this is the amount of abuse our kitchen gets.

**Jimi** 11:32

You mentioned there, lockdown. How have you guys coped? I mean, you're our first couple that we've had on, you're successful as a professional partnership. How have you managed to make it work, really, throughout this time?

**Itamar Srulovich** 11:47

Just last night, I didn't sleep well. So I was running in my head. And I thought, actually, when we first came to London, it was kind of like that, because we didn't know anyone. We didn't have money for anything. So we were just stuck in, you know, in a tiny studio apartment in Clapham North, just trying to pass the time. And I think this is like... that was 15 years ago, but I think this as a couple, this was like our forming years. So we kind of fell quite comfortably to that sort of mode of just like being in our own little bubble. It works for us. I don't know...

**Sarit Packer** 12:26

No, I mean, it did at the beginning. It was like a bit of a holiday. We said, "Oh, this is kind of a bit like a holiday, our restaurants are closed, nobody can call us. Let's take a book and we'll sit on the sofa and we'll kind of read it." And that was the beginning. I think we got bored quite quickly. Because we did reopen for like... we started, you know, doing takeaway, cooking a bit for the NHS, basically because we were bored and we had restaurants that you know... we suddenly closed the doors on restaurants full of food. And we just thought, "What's gonna happen here? We don't know how long we're closing for and there's, like, all these, like, dry stores and everything and what are we going to do with it?" So we kind of went back in and started, actually almost like a cookie factory at the beginning, wasn't it? Like people in the first lockdown were cookie-obsessive. We made so many cookies. And you know, we're lucky to have an online shop and stuff and like we could not believe how many cookies and jam people were like consuming in that first lockdown. I think the other lockdowns, progressively, the food became slightly healthier, but the first one was pretty like... So we did a lot of kind of cooking, a lot of trying to reinvent ourselves and what we're doing and you know, slowly bringing teams back and, kind

of, I think, maybe spending more time... even though we do obviously spend a lot of time together, spending more time than we ever had before.

**Alison** 13:46

Is that because you'd have normally, in a normal time, been at different restaurants, because you've got Honey & Co as well as Honey & Smoke and Honey & Spice, the shop?

**Sarit Packer** 13:55

Yeah. And also we decided after we had opened Honey & Smoke, the third place, we said, "We need to kind of divide and conquer here. We can't all be at every place all the time." And you know so we kind of did, like it's not an absolute division of course, but like you know, Itamar was more in charge of Honey & Co; I was more in charge of Honey & Smoke. We kind of didn't spend all day together because it's impossible. It's also impossible for a place to have two heads all the time.

**Itamar Srulovich** 14:24

And as a rule of thumb we get along better outside of work, wouldn't you say? At work we can get, like, a little bit territorial. We can get a little bit like, "Who's the alpha here?"

**Jimi** 14:38

I just wanted to pick up on the cooking for the NHS, which seems like... you know, a lot of chefs did it. And I think it was an amazing thing to do. And you mentioned there that it was a lot of the time born of wanting something to do and wanting to keep active. Like what was your experience and memory of doing that?

**Itamar Srulovich** 14:57

I think we all had that feeling of helplessness, you know? The feeling of, you know, this thing is happening. It's happening to me, I'm not a part of it. And then we said, "OK, we have to be active, we have to be useful." And we put a call-out out there: who wants food? We got contacted by the Royal Free in Hampstead and a few people approached us saying: "Oh, yeah, we can deliver." And then we just started cooking. We just did, you know, lunch boxes with whatever we had. And that was kind of our, you know... Yes, it's altruistic maybe. But for us, it was really a lifeline for *us*. Suddenly, yeah, we had something to do. We were of value again. And I think it's... you know, it saved us in a way, it gave us a lifeline. And actually, I'm so, so proud to be part of that industry now. Because I think, you know, our industry, hospitality really... I know so many people who just like us, they said, "We don't care. We just want to do something. We just want to be part of that community. We just want to give back."

**Alison** 16:22

Because after doing the boxes for the NHS, didn't you then start doing things on a Friday night?

**Sarit Packer** 16:29

Yeah, because we had opened just for a bit, you know, there was the stage where we allowed to open suddenly, and we thought, "Oh, let's, you know, do something a bit more exciting for people and let's start taking them on trips, kind of, because we were writing this book, and we were very immersed in this aspect of, like, the Levant and we just thought, "OK, we're gonna do some supper clubs about the

countries we went to, and people will have a full meal that will kind of be like a holiday because no one was going anywhere.” So we did those while it was open. And they went really, really well. And then we had to close down again. And we were like, “Wait, why? Why stop this? Why not give people an experience at home that is like going on holiday.” And every Friday and Saturday, we still do it now, we choose a country that’s around the Levant, or the Middle East, because we’re also going a bit to Morocco. And we’re extending it slightly. But yeah, choosing a different kind of country every week, designing a menu that we think we would eat if we were there somewhere. And sending that to people, from everything from the little nibbles of the start and the mezze and main and dessert and sometimes little other things, you know, they get little gifts that are supposed to put them in the mood for feeling as if you’re on holiday,

**Itamar Srulovich 17:37**

We got amazing feedback on it. We had people, like, sending us flowers. Who sends flowers to a restaurant? It was really moving.

**Sarit Packer 17:47**

It’s really lovely. We had some really nice cards from people. And you know, people really kind of embraced us in taking it into their home and kind of, you know... some people have ordered every single week, every menu since the start. I mean, that’s amazing to see. And that’s, that’s a really special kind of thing that this pandemic has formed is like this feeling that we’re part of a community that you want to support the places you want to support, and you want to kind of make sure they survive this.

**Jimi 18:13**

Yeah, just hearing you two talk. It seems like your sensibility as far as food and hospitality is, like, very much in sync, but you had quite different culinary upbringings, would we say?

**Sarit Packer 18:25**

Yeah, I’m English. I mean, you know, my parents and grandparents are British, and they kind of made the decision to move to Israel before I was born, as a young family. But still, even though they had moved to another country, where I grew up is like a little enclave of, maybe not middle England, but definitely Jewish England. So very like... very North London kind of Jewish England kind of thing. Our neighbours all spoke English; all their friends were Anglo-Saxons.

**Alison 18:55**

So what would meals be like growing up?

**Sarit Packer 18:57**

Well, the family meals would be... like my mom’s specialty would be, like, a chicken pie. Or she would cook... like she had a really good Madhur Jaffrey, you know, curry lemon chicken thing that my family still eats and she would cook Delia Smith and I would... like that my first books learning from were Delia Smith and *Good Housekeeping* and all of those things. And really, it was like my friends would come because you know – we do this thing, Israel’s like you go home from school with a friend or a friend comes to you: that’s what you do, because all the parents work, you know? Anyway, so my friends

would come over and be like, “What is this food? Why are you boiling green beans? Who boils green beans? Green beans should be in like a sauce with cumin and preserved lemons. What is going on? Who just eats green beans?” And like all this stuff, you know? And definitely like our funny joke was to tell all our friends Marmite is chocolate spread and spread it in that thickness. And they would bite into it...

**Jimi 19:52**

Oh wow, that's a really good one.

**Sarit Packer 19:54**

Really, like, they would laugh at us so much. And I would do the same with other people. I would go to their houses and be like, “What is this food? Why have you cooked this meat until it's falling off the bone and all these spices? I don't understand it.” So it's like this kind of very different... my exposure came later in life to this food.

**Jimi 20:11**

Yeah, maybe you came to it as a relative outsider in a strange way, and you were discovering it anew. So was that part when you met Itamar? And obviously his...

**Sarit Packer 20:21**

It is... a lot and I think what was interesting is... it's not only I was discovering, my whole family in a way with discovering the local food as we grew up, you know, that gets more interesting... you go out to restaurants that are local, you study the food, and then you start to experiment with cooking it. And then when Itamar and I met, we were very much in this head of like, “We want to cook European food. This is the exciting food.” You know, we met in an Italian restaurant, you know; all our thinking was like, “How do you cook French? How do you cook Italian?” It wasn't at all about being proud of what is locally available. That came from like a place of... yeah, we would go out to all these places and we would enjoy like an amazing local kebab restaurant or we would go for falafel places, and shawarma and all this stuff that's available there. But it was never in the thought that we would cook this food.

**Jimi 21:18**

Obviously Israeli food is – in no small part down to the work of people like you and Ottolenghi, who obviously you both worked with – is in the ascendancy and it's, you know... people point to Levantine cooking and Middle Eastern cooking and it's kind of the vibrancy of it... you can't separate it from just the way people eat now. At what point did you kind of have that lightbulb moment that “Oh, wow, maybe we should try to cook the things that we know and love.”?

**Itamar Srulovich 21:46**

I don't think it was a lightbulb moment. Like when we came to London, when we came here, like Sarit said, we were looking to... we were cooking European food, we were looking into sort of, you know, Asian Pacific Rim that was fashionable at the time, what was called modern European, and we were looking for the Middle Eastern food so we would go to Lebanese restaurants in Knightsbridge – you know, Ishbilia and Beiteddine, which are amazing. We'd go to Green Lanes to the Turkish grill house for that taste of home and we would bring tahini. So we were seeking those flavours. But we didn't really

think about cooking it, you know, that people had an appetite, I don't think until we started working with Ottolenghi and starting to see people reacting to it. No? What do you say?

**Sarit Packer** 22:39

I think so. I think it's definitely what we were eating at home. And like some of our favourite dishes were then some of the first dishes we put in Honey & Co but, like, when we had started in Ottolenghi and we suddenly saw people have this, like, passion for this colour and vibrancy and, you know, the big salads and stuff like that, we thought, "Oh, maybe this is something that's interesting to people." And it was funny, because we when we joined, which is a very long time ago...

**Alison** 23:07

Was that about 15 years ago or something like that?

**Sarit Packer** 23:09

Yeah, something like that. Yeah. So it was... well, maybe not 15 because it was a few years after we had come here. Because we were working at the Oxo Tower and J Sheekey, very kind of local places. And then we kind of thought... Well, first of all, Sami Tamimi, you know, he used to cook this most amazing staff food, but it was never the food that went to the customer so much. It was the food we would eat as staff food. It's really funny, you know, like, and it would bring all these memories of home. And it's all of these things like almost kind of thinking, "Oh, but this food is so delicious. Somebody wants to eat this, somebody is gonna like enjoy this," and it wasn't so planned in our head. We didn't have this like, massive kind of business plan. Yeah, I think I was in Ottolenghi for almost five years. And I just wanted to kind of become... like Itamar, I'd wanted to open a place for a long time. I was ready to be my own boss. And you know, and we kind of said, "Let's just open and start cooking and we'll just see what happens." It wasn't that we said, "OK, we're gonna bring the new kind of whole, you know, the gospel of the whole...."

**Itamar Srulovich** 24:16

Yeah, no.

**Sarit Packer** 24:17

We wanted to kind of cook food we enjoy and see what people enjoyed. And people just... it was also not that long after the financial crisis of 2008. And people were looking for kind of cheaper, more casual dining experiences. It wasn't about the fine dining anymore. And we just fell in the right place in the right time for people, with really homey food, really honest, quite big portions, you know, and kind of a small place. It didn't feel like a chain, you know, like all these massive chains – London still sadly is blessed with a lot of chains of restaurants – but it was kind of... it just struck a chord with people and very quickly became clear to us this food that we eat at home, people are gonna want to eat.

**Jimi** 25:04

Yeah. Why Honey & Co, while we remember? Where did that come from, the name?

**Itamar Srulovich** 25:09

Well, it's not such a good story, you know. It just sounded nice to us. We wanted something with a sweet connotation so we were toying around with things like Honey and then it was too short so we added the 'and company' but then after a few years later a friend of ours was sitting there and she said, "Oh yeah, now I am getting it. So 'honey' – that's kind of the sweetness and all the good things in life – and 'company', that's the people around me. Now it all makes sense to me." And we were like, "Yeah, finally you got it! Took you a while."

**Sarit Packer** 25:44

We planned it completely!

**Alison** 25:54

So that's the real story. I wondered if there was some link to Sarit being the pastry chef at Ottolenghi's.

**Sarit Packer** 25:58

No, I think we definitely... actually, to be extremely honest, when we opened Honey & Co, I told Itamar, "I am not making cakes." I had just done four years as executive pastry chef for the Ottolenghi group. That's a lot of cakes. And then I did Nopi which was like fine dining... I was exec chef there. And I said to him, "I'm not doing any of this. I want real food. I don't want cakes. I want honest stuff. This is not about fusion. I'm over it for now. I need something different." And he laughs at me so much, because then the first day I'm, like, making pitta breads, baking a cake, you know, all this stuff. And he was like, "What are you doing?" And I was like, "Well, I can't fight the urge." But it really wasn't, like I really needed to not be about cakes for, you know, for a while.

**Itamar Srulovich** 26:49

That worked out! I will tell you, our pastry section is so complex. There's nothing under the sun that they don't... these guys do ice creams, dessert, so many types of bread and cakes in a day.

**Sarit Packer** 27:06

Jams, spice mixes. Yeah, it's mad.

**Alison** 27:07

I'll tell you what, it's your cheesecake that I just love.

**Sarit Packer** 27:10

That was honestly the funniest thing. Like that cheesecake. And don't know if I've said the story too much, because it's quite embarrassing, but we kind of didn't really have any desserts. We didn't really have any desserts on the menu in Honey & Co. And at the beginning, we had like, a couple of cakes were on the display, but no desserts. And one of my good friends is a chef now and actually now a head chef in Australia. But he used to work with me and he came to eat. And he said, "What's going on? Like, you're the queen of desserts and there's no dessert on the menu. But I was like, "Cause I can't do it. I don't want to do sweets." And he was like, "You can't." So I said to him, "Fine. I'll think of something. And I literally just went into the kitchen and whipped this thing up. Without a recipe, without anything. Everyone tried it and was like, "Oh my God." Now it's been on the menu for nine years. I can't take it off.

**Jimi 27:57**

It's an icon. It's a justified...

**Sarit Packer 27:59**

Honestly, when I hired the first pastry chef, I had to... for the first time, instead of just mixing this, I had to weigh what I was doing. So that she would know what to do when I'm not there. It was that kind of weird.. just coincidence of things that... and now this dish cannot go off the menu at all.

**Jimi 28:18**

Your reluctance, Sarit, to carry on with the pastry cooking and your urge to do other things and explore other parts of the kitchen and cuisine, and other parts of the menu, was any of that kind of, like, I don't know.... the gendered implication of that you didn't want to be pigeonholed in that way? Because it's interesting as well in the book, there's an amazing chapter where you talk about, I think it's your dad... him only being interested in barbecuing and that kind of, you know, macho pyromania and you kind of pushing against that. And as you've said, Honey & Smoke is kind of your place, isn't it, and I think maybe you didn't intend it to be that way around either.

**Sarit Packer 28:59**

I absolutely didn't. And then I think, look, I started off as a chef, my passion was always to be a chef. My first kind of job was in a fine-dining Michelin star, you know, at the Orrery. It was Chris Galvin. It was all about food. And then at some stage, even during there, they kind of said to me, "Oh, do a stint on pastry as well." And then you kind of get into this place as a woman, you get put on the pastry section, and I enjoy it and I like pastry, but it wasn't my only passion. So then I had to kind of fight to get back onto the hot cooking pass. You know, then I went to Israel and I was doing savoury, you know, this Italian place that I was cooking was savoury and then I was running like a café and kind of cooking food and everything. And then again, you kind of fall into pastry because as a woman, you kind of always... it's this thing where you always get sent to the pastry somehow, it's kind of like this weird thing. And when we came back here... when I came back, sorry, because I was here before Itamar and then we got married and came back... when we came back and all my experience is in Israel almost and restaurants here just looked at me and I was a woman and I was at a certain kind of age, I suppose, as well. And the only jobs I was getting offered were pastry jobs. And I was like, "But I want to be in the kitchen." And they were like, "Well, we have this pastry position." This was like, you know, but this is like, almost 17 years ago or something like that. It wasn't... Anyway, you know, I love pastry. I love doing it. I find it very easy, but it's not the only thing I want to do. So yeah, somehow this all kind of happened where I ended up doing, you know, more of Honey & Smoke, which wasn't the plan, but I love it, yeah.

**Itamar Srulovich 30:31**

Yeah. She's being very modest. But she is... you know, sometimes, they say, or this is kind of the common knowledge is that, you know, you're either a chef or a pastry chef, and you can be really good at one or the other. I don't know how true that is. But Sarit really in my experience, is one of the people who is extremely, extremely talented in both areas, like the top, I think, I know, and her pastry, like how she does pastry... I've never seen anyone like that. Like she described making the cheesecake, you

know, everyone says, “Your pastry is a science, you need to measure, you need to do this,” and she’s just, “Take some of this, take some of this...” Best cake you ever had in your life!

**Jimi** 31:20

One of those people that drives other chefs mad.

**Itamar Srulovich** 31:24

“Recipe? What is a recipe? Recipes are disgusting.”

**Jimi** 31:28

That’s incredibly sweet. And I wonder when you first met, was it your attitude to food or a shared sensibility? Was that what kind of drew you to each other? What are your memories of first encountering each other?

**Sarit Packer** 31:39

Oh, my God, it was quite a slow burn. We did not jump into each other’s hands and it was not love at first sight! I don’t know, we were working together. And actually I was your boss, if we think about it, in the actual way. He’s also much younger than... well, he’s two years younger. He was so messy. He was like he really didn’t care. He was kind of like, oh, I’ll just cook...

**Itamar Srulovich** 32:07

To be fair, I hated that kitchen. Like really hated it.

**Sarit Packer** 32:10

He also acted like he hated it.

**Itamar Srulovich**

You did as well, we all hated it.

**Sarit Packer**

Well, I was sous chef and I was trying to kind of instill some sense of like, “We can do this.” And it really wasn’t working. But what happened was we kind of became quite friendly with a couple of the other chefs in that same kitchen. We started hanging out together as a group, and they were all boys because this is kitchens of the day, you know.

**Itamar Srulovich** 32:36

So this is the thing, like if you work in a place that you hate, it really brings up, like brings people together.

**Alison** 32:45

It’s got that unifying effect.

**Sarit Packer** 32:47

And then... I don't know, we started hanging out more. And we went out to eat and we did all these things. And then I actually left with the other sous chef and we opened our own kind of business. And then Itamar and I kind of started dating. I suppose it all kind of happened at the same time. It was also easier for me to leave the job before I started dating someone that was there...

**Itamar Srulovich** 33:08

No, but I think, didn't we start before you left?

**Sarit Packer** 33:12

Yeah we did start... but we didn't tell anyone!

**Itamar Srulovich** 33:18

We were a secret, weren't we, and then we were busted going to a movie.

**Sarit Packer** 33:23

We were busted. In Israel, it's near impossible not to get busted. It's such a small country that you can't go on dates and not get busted, because everyone knows everyone.

**Jimi** 33:35

We've not talked about your podcast. This is another element of the community that you've really kind of fostered there. And you have got, you know, Alison fan-girling about the cheesecake. You have got superfans. So food talks, and they would be every Monday evening, would they, and you'd kind of record them and there'd be an audience, yeah. How did it all play out? And how did it start?

**Itamar Srulovich** 34:00

We just really wanted to get to meet all of the people that we're, you know, fan girl/boy-ing about. And all of the people that we kind of, we admire in our industry and are interested. And when we opened the deli, which was kind of by mistake, we opened it, but we said, "You know, this needs to be kind of our little dream shop." So all of our kind of little fantasies that we had that we couldn't fit in the restaurant, they went there. So it became a bookshop and an ice cream shop and you know, a spice shop, and we said, "You know, this needs to be a vehicle for that. And we knew that there's enough kind of food geeks in our beat, in our, you know, client base, to be really interested in that. We said, "OK, let's go. You know, let's start inviting people. Let's do evenings, let's cook their food." We weren't recording them at all.

**Sarit Packer** 35:09

We weren't recording them at first. We were just doing the evenings and it was more about... Yeah, we realised we could just ask these people to come and they might just come, you know, and that was it. And then we had this crowd, and it was like, cramped, and, like, 30 people in this room.

**Itamar Srulovich** 35:26

But, yeah, so we would do, we would sell, like, 25 tickets, just like not, you know, 10 or five or something like that. And they would sell out in like, seconds. And we'd have like, you know, people complaining and it'd become really agro. We said, Fine, we're gonna record it and everyone's invited,

but then it got a little bit... even more unfair, because we always cook in those evenings so if we have someone coming, we would cook their food and give everyone, like, a little taster. And it's always, like, it's always really nice.

**Alison** 35:59

They really were amazingly hot tickets. Because I managed to come. I managed to book a few. I was quick off the mark and came to a few of them.

**Jimi** 36:07

Like trying to get a Glastonbury ticket.

**Alison** 36:09

Yeah, it was the food equivalent of Glastonbury. That last person to arrive almost put their... brought their chair in and shut the door, because that was the very last space... but the smell and yes, it was just amazing, those evenings.

**Itamar Srulovich** 36:24

Which one? Which ones did you come to? Which one? Do you remember?

**Alison** 36:27

So who did I go and see? I went to Olia Hercules and I also went to one with Chetna Makan. The other thing you do besides the podcast is you have a weekly column in the *Financial Times*. How did you sustain that during lockdown?

**Sarit Packer** 36:43

Actually, this was fun.

**Itamar Srulovich** 36:44

I love that we have this column. I love it so much. I think it's, you know, kind of the really very different work from doing the books, I think because it's so immediate. The feedback is so immediate, and we've been doing it for a while now. And so you have a little... I don't know how to explain it, but a rapport, I guess, with the readership. I don't know, it's weird to say, because it's not... I mean, for you guys, maybe it's obvious because you're journalists, but for me... you get a lot from it, don't you? And then we get to see the readers and the restaurant and they say, "Oh, yeah, we live in Carlisle. And we cook your recipes every week. And we're so glad to be here." We have this correspondence with people around the world; we had, you know, pots of jam sent to us from Singapore. You know, it's this kind of really... a very different kind of intimacy that I've never encountered in anything else that we've done, you know, including, no disrespect to the books, but there is something very immediate and very alive about the column.

**Alison** 37:57

Don't people also bring in their quinces for you to cook?

**Itamar Srulovich** 38:02

Yes!

**Alison** 38:02

I couldn't believe that when I saw that.

**Jimi** 38:05

You're gonna have to explain this one to me, guys. What's going on? People are bringing in quinces to you, to the restaurant?

**Itamar Srulovich** 38:10

So people have... apparently there's a lot of quince trees in this country.

**Alison** 38:15

In people's gardens.

**Sarit Packer** 38:16

And people don't know what to do with them.

**Itamar Srulovich** 38:17

Yeah, and they're very, very abundant. People, you know, even if you have a quince tree, there's only so much jam that people make at home and people don't know what to do with them. And they don't want to let it go to waste. So we're kind of... there's kind of like an underground community of quince growers. And then we would come to work and have like a bag of quince outside or we would have, you know... I went to the Inns of Court once – I'd never been there in my life – to a barrister's office on the fourth floor. And I left with two massive bags of quince and I kind of struggled with it. And I had to take it back to work in a black cab. And you know, they smell amazing. So I was in this... like in the traffic of central London when there was traffic... with, in a black cab, with the most amazing smell. I didn't want the traffic to go. I just wanted to stay in that perfect...

**Sarit Packer** 39:20

And he was texting me, "I've got like 40 kilos of quince. Do you want to get ready..."

**Jimi** 39:26

Poised to turn them into something...

**Alison** 39:29

Tell us, do you have any essential ingredient? What does your essential larder look like? Because, you know, it wouldn't be one ingredient, I'm sure you've got kind of a basic thing that's always there.

**Sarit Packer** 39:46

Olive oil, like 50 types of olive oil. It is kind of, I suppose, the basis of everything we cook.

**Jimi** 39:50

Are there things that just one of you really likes that live in the larder for just one of you, that the other one can't stand or...?

**Sarit Packer** 39:58

Not can't stand, but I'm not a massive fan of chilli, so anything that we have to do with chilli or spice is for Itamar. I wouldn't really, it's just not my thing. I don't like the tingling on my tongue and my lips. I don't like it so much. There's some that I would have... there's certain harissas that I think I would... I quite enjoy and there's like smoked urfa chilli, stuff like that, I'll go for that but I don't... I never have like Tabasco or, you know, sriracha... any of these things I would never ever put on foods myself so if we have any of that, that's for Itamar, for sure.

**Jimi** 40:30

Are you the polar opposite then, Itamar? You're all about the spice?

**Itamar Srulovich** 40:32

I mean, like, if I would cook dinner just for myself, it would be either Meera Sodha's chilli paneer, which is so good – so good, you have to try it – or the Ottolenghi black pepper tofu but like with all the chillis. This is like really, really spicy.

**Sarit Packer** 40:55

I can't even eat that dish. Like, I taste it and I'm like, "Oh my God, I'm gonna explode, literally."

**Itamar Srulovich** 41:00

Yeah, and then you kind of smell of garlic and onion for days because there's so much in it but it's so good. Sarit has... can I tell? She likes the horrible...What's it called?

**Sarit Packer** 41:20

I do love a jelly baby but you know I try not to... you know all the jelly sweets and actually, like, the kind of really rubbish ones are my favourite ones, which is really bad. I've got a sweet tooth but I try to never ever buy them actually. So it's something I like but I don't buy. But I mean there's lots of other stuff we do. I mean we always have lemons, we always have garlic, there's always loads of cumin. Tahini, of course.

**Itamar Srulovich** 41:51

Never without soy sauce.

**Sarit Packer** 41:52

Never without miso. Miso is one of my favourite ingredients for home cooking, because it just adds kind of a depth of flavour and always lots and lots of vegetables and herbs. This is kind of mostly what we eat.

**Alison**

Any particular fresh herbs?

**Sarit Packer**

Always parsley... there's always parsley, there's always mint, whether it's for tea or for going into food. But, you know, we love some dill, we love tarragon, coriander... I think apart from bananas, in the world of fruit and vegetables, there isn't anything I don't like. I don't like bananas. I'm the only person in the world but, yeah, I don't like them.

**Jimi 42:29**

So, Sarit, with the miso... using it in home cooking, what sort of things are you putting it in?

**Sarit Packer 42:34**

I mean I absolutely love miso and it kind of... it's ended up in everything that I do just to give it like an oomph, so if... A lot of times I just marinate like a piece of chicken in it, a bit of kind of rice wine vinegar, a bit of honey, rub it around a chicken, roast it, that's delicious, but also we've made cookies with it because it's delicious...

**Itamar Srulovich 42:54**

Can I say like for baking, unbelievable... I have to say like the tastiest thing that ever was created is Sarit's apple cake with the miso and the miso caramel. I can't even say that without starting to drool, it's so good...

**Sarit Packer 43:14**

It is, like caramel and miso, they work so well together. It's like a salted caramel thing and a depth of flavour....

**Itamar Srulovich 43:20**

Like an oat topping on it so it's crunchy, and then you get the miso caramel sauce... you just are in heaven.

**Alison 43:26**

It just sounds amazing.

**Itamar Srulovich 43:29**

We have to send you the recipe and you make it straight away. Also my creation and development that was so successful...

**Sarit Packer 43:40**

You broke the internet, Itamar!

**Itamar Srulovich 43:41**

Because I never bake, you know, but then I had this in my head that I'm gonna make miso and walnut and chocolate chip cookies.

**Alison 43:49**

Wow, nice.

**Itamar Srulovich** 43:51

Wow is the correct word. Made those. Explosion – everybody's been making them. Try them, understand why. They're so good, like so, so good. Then we started making them at work and the other day in Green Lanes – this is our claim to fame, right? – in Green Lanes a woman shouted at us from the other side of the street: "The miso cookies, the miso cookies!" Because, guys, this is what we need to tell you: the miso cookies!

**Jimi** 44:22

Yeah, I love that, that that's just become your kind of almost name now, the miso cookies.

**Itamar Srulovich** 44:28

Yeah.

**Alison** 44:28

You've made them famous. Even if you say you're not a baker, they're great.

**Itamar Srulovich** 44:31

Match that, Sarit. You and your cheesecake.

**Sarit Packer** 45:35

Yeah, whatever!

**Jimi** 44:38

Cheesecake and miso cookies. Well, Sarit and Itamar, Honey & Co, this has been an absolute joy, a delight. Your love for food is infectious. And yeah, this has been great. Thank you.

**Itamar Srulovich** 44:52

You know, it was so much fun. And I hope that we can, before too long, meet up for cheesecake somewhere around Warren Street.

**Jimi** 45:03

Cheesecake and miso cookies.

**Itamar Srulovich** 45:05

We would love to see you guys IRL.

**Sarit Packer** 45:08

Thanks so much for having us.

**Jimi** 45:14

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 guests Sarit Packer and Itamar Srulovich. To learn more about the series, go to [waitrose.com/podcast](https://waitrose.com/podcast), and please subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.