

LIFE ON A PLATE

SEASON 2, EPISODE 5: JOHANNA KONTA

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

eat, food, Hungarian, tennis player, tennis, Waitrose, home, year, recipes, Australia, bit, cooking, bake, day, cook, life, cake, athlete, Wimbledon, Johanna

SPEAKERS

Johanna Konta, Jimi Famurewa, Alison Oakervee

Jimi 00:00

This season of Life on a Plate is sponsored by Bart Ingredients whose extensive range of quality herbs, spices, seasonings and pace are all available at Waitrose. Bart offers so many simple, delicious ways to elevate your cooking, from aromatic whole spices, to handy blends and pace, such as ras el hanout, or black garlic paste. They'll help you build incredible depth of flavour and create beautiful dishes. What's more, with over 50 years of experience working with producers all over the globe, Bart guarantees their ingredients are grown and harvested responsibly, with care for people and the planet. So, whether you're just starting out on your cooking journey, or you're – forgive the pun, a seasoned chef, you can relax and trust Bart to open up a world of exciting flavours. Go to waitrose.com/bart to discover the range.

Hello, and welcome to the second season of Life on a Plate, the podcast from Waitrose. In each episode, we talked to some very special guests 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 them in the process.

Alison, hello – how are you?

Alison 01:25

Hey, I'm alright, thank you. How about you? How are you?

Jimi 01:29

I am pretty good. But what I want to know from you - what's been going on in your world food-wise this week, or just generally, what's going on?

Alison 01:39

Yesterday, I had a really good chat with a friend of mine who I work with. He has come up with a brilliant idea. He's got two daughters that he cooks with the whole time. And he has got this leather notebook that he's had engraved with two of the phrases that they always say when they're cooking. And he's just starting this collection of their favourite recipes now, which I thought is a really lovely idea – just to do

now and it'll become a family heirloom for the girls. And it did make me think... do you write recipes down, from your mum...?

Jimi 02:14

Yeah, that is a really, really good idea and committing it to something that's a beautiful monument and setting these things down – it's definitely something that I've been really aware of, particularly with my mum, and my kids, and those Nigerian recipes that are the food that I grew up on. And my kids now love jollof rice – it's one of the few ways to get nutrients into the four year old. And so yeah, I did something similar, I got my mum a notebook and to try and set some of these things down because they just live in the ether or they live through us.

Alison 02:54

Yeah, they're just cooked by instinct without committing quantities...

Jimi 03:00

Yes, well, there are things that you cook, or do a certain way, in the kitchen that are hand-me-downs from people you've known, like people talk about heirloom recipes and things like that. Are there any things that you can think of?

Alison 03:13

Well, I was really lucky that I have got a collection of handwritten recipes – they're mostly cakes from both sets of grandmothers. And I think there might even be a great grandmother recipe in there, too. There's a lot of date and walnut cake, but they all seem to do the same cake, but there's like Nan's boiled fruit cake. And actually, my lemon drizzle is based on their version of one that my Nan's friend used to cook and that was in the notebook, too. So yeah, there's recipes that you just do the whole time, although mum's beef stroganoff, I think will always be the best because she doesn't actually write down the quantities of, you know, the dry Sherry that she puts in, because it's always a generous glug. But yeah, it's good.

Jimi 03:57

Yes, well for me, it's definitely the same sorts of things. And it's got that cultural mix as well. And so I've got things that I've got from my wife's side and brought in, like I'll never have a boiled egg and soldiers without a little pile of salt and pepper on the side. And that's something I've adopted that comes from my wife's family. And every time I do it, I think of that, and it's really nice to have those kind of links across the generations and through different cultures. And actually, that is not the most obvious of links, but it does tie in quite nicely with our guest today who is your Johanna Konta. Who is the British women's number one tennis player, and she has got the kind of cultural mix that we're talking about. She was born in Sydney in Australia. She moved to the UK at a young age – at the age of 14, and represents Britain. Her parents are Hungarian so she's got that really fascinating mix of different cultures. And that's something that I'm looking forward to finding out a bit more about.

Alison 05:10

But also, if you're not into tennis, you might also recognise her from when she was on the celebrity *Great British Bake Off Stand Up To Cancer* last year. So, I'm really looking forward to talking to her about her baking and just how she stays an athlete.

Jimi 05:26

Yeah, completely. I'm sort of trying to... hopefully, I won't just badger her about serving tips for a lot of it because...

Alison 05:36

You just want to get better on the court, do you [laughs]?

Jimi 05:40

I'm an enthusiastic, but quite hapless tennis player. So I really want to know about that but I think there's something psychologically fascinating about tennis players. They seem so emotionally robust and able to withstand this unbelievable pressure, particularly in Johanna's case, when she's on Centre Court at Wimbledon, and the nation's hopes are on her shoulders. So, I really want to know more about what it's like to have that looming and to handle it as brilliantly as she does.

Alison 06:11

It's going to be fascinating.

Jimi 06:13

Definitely. So here is our conversation with Johanna Konta.

Johanna, thank you so much for doing this. Lovely to be introduced to you.

Johanna Konta 06:25

Thank you for having me. I'm really excited to be on here.

Jimi 06:29

Well, I wanted to start off – and I think you're in the right place – because I looked on your Instagram and your bio is family first, food second?

Johanna Konta 06:38

Yes, close second.

Jimi 06:40

Food close second, which is brilliant. You'll fit in well with us on this podcast. Is that how you feel – that food is that important and vital in your life?

Johanna Konta 06:51

It is. At home with my partner, we talk a lot about our differences with food. And he describes himself as the kind of person who eats to survive and to live, whereas I live to eat. So, I love food and it's been really interesting for me, I guess, through my profession as a professional athlete, I've also had to find

different relationships with food. Sometimes it's for fuel, but sometimes it really is for enjoyment. I get a lot of enjoyment from good food, from making good food, from ordering good food. So yeah, I just get a lot of enjoyment from food.

Jimi 07:31

Yeah, that is interesting, isn't it? Because I suppose people would assume – because of your illustrious tennis career, and being an elite athlete right at the top of your game – that you'd be the one that saw it as fuel and just something that you needed and a means to an end. But it's all these things for you. It's enjoyment. And it's creativity.

Johanna Konta 07:50

For sure. And it's at different times, I think different times in my day, or in my weeks, depending on what I'm doing, it takes on different roles. But, for sure, sometimes it is fuel, sometimes I have to eat for what I'm doing in the day. But then because I do have such a love for food I do try to find those moments where I can just enjoy what I'm eating – even in a way that I know is still good for me, and I know, I'm still doing the right things with what I need from it, but there's no reason why I can't enjoy what I'm eating as well. So, yeah.

Alison 08:22

Have you got any examples of any food that is fuel, but it's still something that you'll enjoy eating?

Johanna Konta 08:28

I think it depends on what I'm doing. But, for example, I wouldn't necessarily say that pizza is a massively 'good for you' food. Like, it's a question, but it's good for the soul. But I do know sometimes when I've had a really big day, and I've burnt a lot of calories, I'm like, you know what, I'm really going to enjoy this pizza. I'm *really* going to enjoy this pizza. And so that sometimes does happen. But then I always then like putting it with a salad. I like adding some greens to it. So, I don't know, I find I need colour in my food. I like having colourful foods. So, that's an important part for me. So whenever I do have a pizza, I like having a salad with it. Or, whenever I do have something, I like having some green. It makes me, I feel like I'm balancing things out.

Jimi 09:21

You mention there about having a bit of balance and having some healthy stuff next to it, which I think is definitely a good approach. Has that always been the case?

Johanna Konta 09:30

I think I have an interesting mix when it comes to food. Obviously I think food habits are very much cultivated in your immediate surroundings when you're young. It comes through your parents and then the environment that you grow up in. And so in that sense, I was very lucky because both my parents – but especially my mum – she is always very in touch with a holistic way of eating. She worked as a holistic dentist so she was always very much in touch with nutrition and things like that. And so I was the kid that went to school with a carrot stick, celery sticks, a tin of tuna and some rye bread. That was me. And, you know, at the time, I would look at the kids next to me who had their Nutella sandwiches and their packet of crisps, and I was like: 'Oh, I'd really like another tin of tuna!'. [Laughs] And, now

looking back on it, I'm very grateful for that, because I do feel it did give me a very solid base and it created habits for me, which I still revert back to. Obviously, another big thing with food is weather, its environment. And I did spend my childhood – my young years in Australia – and so I think the weather also very much influences how we eat. So because it was hot, it was generally very good weather. You do tend to look for lighter foods, not so heavy foods – you eat for the environment that you're in. And so I think the combination of that has given me a good roadmap as I've gotten older. As I guess, I've broadened my horizons so that when I do eat not so well, I do genuinely revert back to good habits because of my parents.

Jimi 11:19

Yeah, you had a really good early education. You mentioned growing up the early part of your life spent in Australia. And your parents are Hungarian?

Johanna Konta 11:32

Yes.

Jimi 11:33

Did that come into play in any way?

Johanna Konta 11:35

For sure. I mean, I love Hungarian food. But as you can imagine Hungarian food – and I would say the general cuisine in Australia – is very, very different.

Jimi 11:42

Yes, polar opposites.

Johanna Konta 11:46

Hungarian food is very European food in the sense that even English food can be in some way. It's heavy. It's meat, it's potatoes – it's just, you know what, let's pack in the calories and let's hibernate. It's that kind of food really, but it's very nostalgic for me. It's what I would eat when I would go back to Hungary as a young girl. It's what my grandmother would cook. It's every time when I get the chance – obviously I haven't been for almost two years because of what's happened in the world – but before that, I would go back once a year and I'd be like: 'Okay, I want my...' Sadly my grandparents are no longer alive. But I would go to the restaurant and I'm like: 'Yeah, I want Hungarian cooked meals'. And I usually go in November, which is my pre-season. So I'm like, perfect. I'm resting. I'm literally: Let's pack in the calories. [Laughs] But yeah, I think I definitely had that combination of Hungarian food, obviously – but then growing up in Australia as a young girl, and then just the general influences from my parents as well. But one thing that my mum very much regretted was when my dad's mum came over, that was the first time I discovered what gummy bears were, and what sweets were, but I think that's the normal introduction of when grandparents come...

Jimi 13:05

They can always be relied upon!

Johanna Konta 13:08

That's when you know the good stuff.

Alison 13:10

And I guess as a dentist that didn't go down well at all?

Johanna Konta 13:13

Well, I think in all forms. It was like: 'Oh no, I've worked so hard, but the carrot sticks...' [Laughs]

Jimi 13:21

The Hungarian food, what kind of things are we talking about? You mentioned a few things there.

Johanna Konta 13:26

So it is very meat – meat and potato based, meat and carb based I think, very much so. But what I noticed in Hungarian food as well, we have a lot of stews and pork knuckles, like meats in the oven and things like that. We have a lot of soups, a lot of different kinds of soups like guash soup and things like that.

Jimi 13:55

Dumplings, like pierogi?

Johanna Konta 13:57

Dumplings, yeah, you do get dumplings there as well, for sure. You get stuffed cabbages or stuffed peppers or things like that as well. But one thing that I found there, which I think has been interesting with my partner who's English, is whenever we have a heavy meal, we always have something light on the side. So you always have like a cucumber salad, or a cabbage salad, or something that's a bit tart, a bit light. And so I've noticed that whenever I eat heavier meals, or whenever I have meat and potatoes, I always have to have a salad. And I remember when my partner and I started living together he was always like: 'Why do we have to have a salad with this?' Or: 'Why do we have to...' And I'm like: 'Why would you not want salad with it? Where do you get the freshness? I mean you need the freshness to keep going.' [Laughs]

Alison 14:45

I guess it's those foundations that your mum laid down. It's kind of getting that balance right?

Johanna Konta 14:49

Yes, but even when we just make some steak and do some roast potatoes at home, I'm like: 'I need to have a salad with it. I can't just have this steak and some potatoes. I need a salad. I literally need that freshness to keep going otherwise I'm like, this is too much, I can't handle this.'

Alison 15:09

It's not just steak and chips. Do you do much cooking at home, would you cook Hungarian? Or do you just wait until November when you go and visit?

Johanna Konta 15:14

I haven't yet ventured into my Hungarian roots of cooking yet. I had my aunt visit me a few years ago and she gave me a few recipes which I have written down, just for chicken noodle soup and for making csirkepaprikás, which is basically like a chicken stew. A chicken stew, like a paprika chicken stew. With little nokedli, which is almost like gnocchi but not made out of potato. They're not made out of potatoes. So it's more of a flour based pasta essentially. But they're more like little dumplings essentially. That's what they look like. But I haven't... and also apple pie, like the Hungarian version of apple pie. But I haven't yet ventured to make it yet. I think I moved out of home for the first time back in 2017 and that's when I unleashed myself on my own kitchen. And to be honest, actually, what really opened my eyes to cooking, and really enjoying the process of cooking, of buying ingredients, of setting up, of going through the whole method, was actually – funnily enough – looking through the *Waitrose* magazine. So where I live, and I've actually got two folders at home – and I can send you photos of this – I've been collecting the *Waitrose* magazines for years now, since 2017. And so I keep all the recipes that I love. And every month I get them I'm like: 'nah, nah, yeah, yeah', you know, like that. I'm making that, I'm making that. And one thing I'm very excited about is when I'll have the time and when I'll have lots of children to cook for. I'm going to make that one day, I'm going to make that one day. So there's stuff I've made and the stuff that I'm going to make one day.

Jimi 17:06

You mentioned 2017, and that seems like it was quite a pivotal year for you, not just in terms of getting your own place, and that independence and this cooking journey that you're going on. But in terms of Wimbledon and tennis. What are your memories of that year, and the place that cooking and food had in that?

Johanna Konta 17:23

Yeah, I think 2017 was my second year on the main tour. But I think that's when I had a very consistent year as well – in the beginning/middle of that year – and obviously that was the year I made semi's at Wimbledon. And that was the first time I was able to play Wimbledon and actually be at home as well. And that was the beginning of my journey and unleashing myself onto the kitchen. And I originally actually started with baking so you'll see me – there's probably still photos around of me – arriving at Wimbledon every morning with this box of muffins. And I thought, you know, in hindsight, I feel very bad for the team I had at the time because they were just constantly being forced to try muffins that I was making because I was constantly wanting to do different flavours – and I'm like: 'I'm really enjoying this'. I'm having a nibble here and there, but you know, I don't really want to eat that many muffins. I'm like here: eat muffins, eat muffins. So I don't even know if they liked muffins. But I think it was really nice for me to be able to have that experience of doing well at the biggest tournament for British players; for me in the season. But also to be at home and come home. That was a really nice experience and to just have a home cooked meal. To be able to bake because I wanted to bake. It was a very grounding experience to have in a very, I would say – in a very bubble environment, playing elite sport, or playing these big events in that they get very taken out of context. It's very big. But at the end of the day, I still go home and I still just bake a batch of muffins and it's quite a polar opposite experience.

Alison 19:14

So tell us, at Wimbledon, when we see you coming out onto the court with that massive bag, what is in the bag? What do you need and also what's gone on in the weeks and the months before that so that you are really at that peak?

Johanna Konta 19:26

I do think as I've gotten older my bags have gotten a bit smaller. When you're at these big events you generally get a locker so I try to not lug all my stuff everywhere. To be honest, I try to put them in there. But generally I do keep all my foam roller bands, things like that, that I need for my warm ups. That is usually what I have with me, and then, otherwise in my tennis bag – I don't know if you've seen the latest one that I've been carrying – but it's actually really... I'm really proud of it – it's really cool. It's brand new. Bradley made this tennis bag for me. And in there I usually have my racquets, I have some string, I have my drinks that I usually have for the match. And this is going to be quite funny, but I have a teddy bear in there.

Alison 20:12

A lucky mascot or something?

Johanna Konta 20:16

It's not a superstitious mascot. It's just a teddy bear that has lived in my bag ever since I was 11 years old when I went away at the time, also living in Australia, and at that time I went away with a group of us at the time to Europe to play some tournaments. And it was a long trip, I think, for me at that age. I think it was about a four week trip – four or five week trip. And my parents took me to... I think it was called The Teddy Bear Factory, or something like that, where you could build a bear – something like that. So I built a bear, and in its arm was a little voice recorder with their voices in there. I mean, this bear is, now like, it's coming up...

Jimi 21:02

A little bit worse for wear?

Johanna Konta 21:03

You know what, it doesn't look bad. It looks in great condition. But it is coming up to two decades. And the voice recorder doesn't work anymore, but it's just always lived in my bag. So yes, when you see that bag, on court, you know that there's a teddy bear in there.

Jimi 21:20

You mentioned the bubble and the heightened atmosphere, and the scrutiny, and it seems particularly magnified in tennis, and also in Britain when it's Wimbledon. And you, as this great hope for British tennis fans, and there's such focus. How did you deal with that? I mean, you baked, but was it a surprise to you how intense it was and how full on it was?

Johanna Konta 21:48

You know, interestingly, I think for me, the way I lived that year was surprising to me how relaxing it was. And I do think a big part of that was because I was able to be at home. And so as soon as I left the venue, I would just get in my car, and I would just listen to music and I would just be driving home,

and I'd get home, I'd close the door – I wasn't really turning on the news... We don't get papers delivered. It was... I was probably watching *The Mentalist* or something on TV – it was very, very normal. And so because of that, I think I did experience it in a very relaxed way, which was surprising to me. But interestingly, as you know, even in the year since I made quarters in 2019, so I was there again, for a longer period of time. It was the same kind of experience, I think just because I am able to be at home. It's a very different experience than playing at the US Open, or Australian Open, or the French Open. Even though I have quite nice setups there as well. In the US you stay at a hotel, but in the other ones I have been able to stay at apartments, and things like that, to try and create that kind of feeling. Wimbledon is very special because it is my home. And especially now I have two dogs as well. So it really is like I just go back to my own little family.

Alison 23:16

When you're travelling, do you have much opportunity to eat locally?

Johanna Konta 23:20

For sure. I would love – and especially as I got older – I definitely took more interest in and felt more relaxed and more sure of myself to try different things, to discover new restaurants, to write down a lesson. I want to try these places and book tables. And so I invested more time into that because I knew it gave me energy. It would pay it back to me because there's something that I enjoyed, so 100%. I think probably my most adventurous of tournaments was the US Open in 2019. I tried so many different restaurants that trip. And I was actually really looking forward to that in 2020, which obviously didn't happen. But I'm holding out. So maybe 2021? If not maybe 2022? [Laughs]

Alison 24:10

Do you find that over the years you go back to the same old favourites in different cities around the world?

Johanna Konta 24:15

For sure. I think I definitely develop a base list that I always try to add to it. But 100%. I am a creature of habit. So I have no problem with eating the same thing lots and lots of times because I'm like: it's good, I like it, I enjoy it. But I think obviously as I got older, I definitely try to add some variation, try new things and add new restaurants. But 100% I always pay homage to the things that have done good by me.

Jimi 24:45

So when you're on tour, when you're training, how regimented is it? What sort of things are you eating? What sort of things can you eat, how much room is there to have a glass of wine at some point or eat some cake?

Johanna Konta 24:59

You know, I think what's really important to keep in mind for me is what have I done that day? Or what am I preparing to do that day? So, I think when I have a general understanding of how tough a day I am anticipating, am I training that day? If I am training, how many hours am I training? What am I planning to do in the gym? But I think as a general rule of thumb, I do try to eat complete meals. So I try to have my protein, I try to have my carbs, I try to have my vegetables, my antioxidants – like different things

like that. And I think that's the general rule of thumb of how I eat in general, but specifically, especially around tournaments. But again, when a tournament is finished, or if I've had a really big day, a pizza might pop up – I can't confirm nor deny.

Alison 25:59

Do you have a natural instinct for nutrition? Or do you work closely with sports nutritionist? Is there a nutritionist as part of your team?

Johanna Konta 26:08

So I do work with someone who I bounce ideas off who I look for guidance from? I think as you get older as well, I think there's different challenges. I've even noticed with me, as I'm 29, turning 30 this year, my body doesn't react the same to food as it did when I was in my early 20s. There's definitely different habits and different ways that my body reacts to food. And so I am trying to stay very...

Jimi 26:42

In what way?

Johanna Konta 26:45

I actually feel that I don't burn food as quickly, I don't burn calories as quickly. I think the stresses of life are a bit different as well. So I am conscious to also just say, do I need to eat this? Or why am I eating this? Or things like that. I think food is a very big part of life and maintaining a good relationship with it – it's important for your own future kind of thing. So, there's nothing wrong with emotional eating sometimes, because it happens, and that's what it is. But I think recognising why you're eating, when you're eating, and maintaining a good relationship with that – I think lends itself to just keeping that relationship with food through your whole life. And so however silly it may sound, I do believe the intention you eat your food with is a big part of how your body then absorbs it and how your mind then uses that because I think if you feel bad about eating certain things, that can have a bigger effect on you than saying: 'Ah, I really enjoyed that and I'm going to move on and I might eat something different tomorrow or later today...' but I think having the kind of mindset that is positive around what you're doing, I think definitely helps in digesting things better; in being able to then make good choices as well. And, things like that. But feeling bad about what you're eating, it's a slippery slope, not that... there's also a place for that as well, because that also, can correct us in a path that we're on if we're not happy being on it. But I think just being forgiving and kind to yourself is very important when it comes to food.

Jimi 28:30

Are there any foods or eating memories that are particularly tied to a moment of triumph for you, or happy memory on the court, or even something that soothes you after you were disappointed in a match?

Johanna Konta 28:44

I think my biggest food memories are always tied to family. I have very good memories – obviously like I mentioned in 2019 going to try different restaurants, or I have very good memories about that – but I think the strongest memories for me are definitely tied with family, are tied to when I used to visit my grandmother and I would be there with my sister and my cousins and I'd be in her kitchen licking the

spoon that she was making the batter for the cake. Or I'd be there... we'd be there helping her with – not really helping – we would just be there, just eating really and just being in the way generally.
[Laughs]

Jimi 29:28

That sounds familiar from my attempt to cook, inverted commas, with my kids.

Johanna Konta 29:33

I was told that I was helpful but I don't think I was! But yeah, and the same thing with my mum, she also would make my favourite things when it came to, some of my favourite Hungarian things, which were a bit lighter in Australia. So there was a... in Hungary during the summer months usually there's a kind of fruit soup, or a sour cherry soup, which I absolutely love. And so my mum would make that for me – usually for Christmas, because it was the summer, you know, it's summer in Australia for Christmas. And she's even made it for Christmas at home in the UK. But yeah, that again – it's just family. It's just the smell of it. It's togetherness. Yeah, so for me, my strongest food memories are definitely tied with family.

Jimi 30:26

You mentioned your parents, in terms of watching you – do they get as wrapped up in the action? Do they get as stressed? Do they kind of hit every ball? How close are they to your career? Because obviously, it was a huge sacrifice for the family and relocating and... it was kind of you're all in it together really.

Johanna Konta 30:44

Yes, for sure. I think as the years have gone, and as time has gone, obviously their involvement in my tennis has had to adapt and change with it. I turn 30 this year, my setup with my team is very different than when I was a young girl, when we first moved from Australia I was 14 years old, and they were very much funding my tennis still. They were very much trying to guide me on my journey. And, slowly, as is normal, and as is a natural progression with any child leaving the nest, so to speak, I had to take ownership and control over my own business, my own journey. And I think they've been on that process and on that progression with me. So I wouldn't say they are as involved, or in the same way, but I think they are as invested emotionally. And as supportive of me. Most importantly, as supportive of me, as ever.

Jimi 31:45

You mentioned stresses a little while back. And this has been such a challenging period, particularly as a tennis player when you're used to travelling the world. And I can't imagine what that must have been like when everything stopped – not just for you, but for your team. And you've talked about this bubble throughout, and the idea of bubbles existing long before then – to the sort of popular usage in this past year. How have you coped through all that? What are your kind of memories of having that battle really?

Johanna Konta 32:11

It's very funny you mentioned bubble, it is very true, the meaning of bubble has taken on a very different meaning from pre-Covid to now, with Covid, and post. I think it's a very different meaning. But for sure, I think this was definitely not 100% not specific to tennis players. I think athletes and a lot of different professions, I think there was a period where you lost your purpose a bit, you lost your place. And I think a lot of people would have really struggled with finding a routine, finding a purpose to... and almost still keeping in mind there is an end to this, there is an angle, there is something that is going to come after this. This is not permanent. And for sure, as an athlete, as a tennis player, we train to compete, we train to perform, and so when you take away that ability to compete, ability to perform, it doesn't leave us with much. It's a bit of limbo state, like what am I training for? And then add in the environment that you can't really train. I was training in my living room for nine weeks, and you don't have access to equipment that you need to keep your body at a state that it requires to be able to perform. It's tricky and it definitely tests your resolve, and it tests your ability to stay present and to keep a perspective and a big picture. There were a lot of things going on in the world at that time, which warranted a lot more attention and a lot more sympathy than a poor tennis player – can't do her leg press. [Laughs] So keeping things in perspective a little bit. As from my own personal experience, and in a very selfish way for me, that was a very difficult period for me to be able to just keep a light mind to be able to wake up each day and prepare to just do my two to three hour training session in my living room. And put out the things that I had, pack them away, and it was monotonous, it was draining and it was very difficult. But I do have to say that when restrictions started to ease a little bit, and once we got to a point where elite sport got those exemptions to be able to open up their training centres and allow athletes back, we were one of the tennis places that was able to do that. So I remember, I think it was about nine weeks after lockdown, so it would have been late May, some point like that, stepping on court and hitting for the first time. Oh, that was – and I don't know if you remember – but the weather was *amazing*. April, May... it was like: 'Oh my gosh, I've never felt so alive'. So that was a really nice experience for me to have that feeling of, you know what, I really love playing tennis. And just to have that back.

Jimi 35:24

In terms of the mental robustness as well that it seems you need to have – to not just be an elite athlete, but particularly in tennis, there's something about the focus. And as you say, it's a skill based thing. And those abilities can seem to desert you suddenly, if you're panicked. Is that something that you can learn? Do you feel like you've always naturally been that kind of character, like from when you were younger? Have you been quite confident and driven?

Johanna Konta 35:53

I think I've always had the characteristics of being driven, of being hard working. I think I get that a lot from my dad, especially – he is very much a workhorse in the family. And I think I did get a lot of that from him. And obviously growing up with my parents you take on, hopefully, the best parts of them and, they like to think, leave the worst parts. [Laughs] So yeah, that was part of my base. I think for me, confidence – I wouldn't say necessarily that was massively my strong suit, I think I always had a general kind of peace with who I was, I never wanted to be anyone other than who I am. I think that obviously wavers, and it goes like this as you go through puberty, as you go through different things in life where you do question things. But I think I did have a very strong base, and this is who I am, and this is who I ever am going to be. But I would 100% say that I would have not been called mentally

strong, or I would have not been called mentally robust when I was younger. I definitely think that was something I had to find a way to bring to the forefront, not that I wasn't strong by, or what it means to be strong. That's a very broad conversation of what it means to be mentally strong. But for my profession what I was trying to do, it took me a long time to find that space to be able to cope with what I needed to cope on court with.

Alison 37:39

You were in the 2020 celebrity *Great British Bake Off*, how did you cope with the stress of being under Pru and Paul's gaze?

Johanna Konta 37:49

I'm not sure I coped to be honest.

Alison 37:52

Was it worse being in the tent than on the court?

Johanna Konta 37:54

100% it was because if you think about it, when it came to a tennis court, I've been spending time on a tennis court for over two decades now. And I've never been in a *Bake Off* tent in my life. And I was very nervous. And I'm pretty sure you can probably see clips of me with massive sweat patches just because 'I have so much performance anxiety here - I don't even know what to do with myself'. And it was honestly, two of the best days of my life. It was incredible. It was such a good experience. It was for such a great cause. And interestingly, I had to also keep perspective there because I had to remind myself why I'm there. I'm there to support a great cause, a really important cause not to prove how good I am at baking, like: 'Okay, just take a step back here. It's not a big deal if my sausage dog cake happens to be the Leaning Tower of Pisa, it's fine'. Although when Paul Hollywood said that it tasted good. I was like: 'Oh, thank God'.

Alison 39:06

It's better to have a cake that tastes good than looks good.

Johanna Konta 39:09

Exactly, that's what I told myself as well. So I was like: 'You know what? It's fine. It tastes good. Decorating has never been my strength. Arts and crafts – never been my strength. It's fine. It's got substance. I'm happy.'

Jimi 39:22

So you Johanna, obviously you represent Britain, and this is your home. There's been a lot of debate throughout your career as Britain versus Australia. The only question that matters is Vegemite or Marmite. Do you have a preference?

Johanna Konta 39:40

My preference is neither. Never, never ever will you ever find either of them in my cupboard. And every time I go back to Australia and I spend time with my nephews, and my sister and my brother in law likes

it, and my nephews usually have some Vegemite with some avocado and toast, and I just look at them, and I'm like: 'If I weren't related to you, I'd be judging you – a lot!'. [Laughs]

Jimi 40:12

So what do you spread on your toast then?

Johanna Konta 40:14

I love butter on toast. Just butter. Yeah, I love butter on toast – it is such a comforting taste for me. I don't know, I always have probably more butter than it needs, but some good fresh bread, toasted with butter on top. And a cup of tea actually. Fine.

Jimi 40:36

Fantastic. Johanna Konta. Thank you so much for your openness, and your warmth, and for the unbelievable insight you've given us into what it's like to be an elite athlete. We've loved having you here. And I think you've definitely put us in the mood for some warming Hungarian food.

Johanna Konta 40:56

Ah, thank you.

Jimi 41:03

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, Johanna Konta. To learn more about the series, go to waitrose.com/podcast, and please subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.