

LIFE ON A PLATE

SEASON 2, EPISODE 4: MINETTE BATTERS

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SPEAKERS

Minette Batters, 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, hello, how are you?

Alison 01:25

Hi Jimi, I'm well, thank you. How about you?

Jimi 01:27

I'm pretty good. I've actually come today with some important business that I want to ask you. I was wondering... Are there any foods or dishes that you had, maybe at one point in your life, convinced yourself you didn't like because of the way they were served or because of the way you had them and you've since performed a total U-turn on? So I'll start. For me...

Alison

Oh yeah?

Jimi

It is, weirdly enough, it is tomatoes – and grilled tomatoes, specifically as part of a fry up or a full English. And I'll tell you why... I think I always, they always used to be like only partially cooked and under-seasoned and there'd be this, kind of, you know... Sometimes you'd even...

Alison

Raw bit in the centre?

Jimi

Yeah! Sometimes you'd even just, it would just be an upended can of tinned tomatoes in certain cafés, and so I just convinced myself that I just was not interested, they were not for me. But now, I've since hit upon this method with grilled tomatoes. I generally get cherry tomatoes on the vine, I add oil, lots of salt, lots of pepper, bit of oregano and then I kind of put them underneath the grill, on quite a high heat, and make them sort of you know, get a bit bubbled and blackened on the outside...

Alison

And charred...

Jimi

Yeah a bit of char as well and they kind of burst and they leach this lovely kind of tomato juice. And I finish that sometimes with a little bit of white wine vinegar or sherry vinegar or something like that. And they are my favourite part of any, like, cooked breakfast situation now. And it just struck me the other day that – wow, like, if I could go back in time and tell “childhood me” that like, you know, the tomato...

Alison

They'd be your favourite...

Jimi

... would be the bit that he'd look forward to the most! But I just, yeah, it just set me off and I wondered – what would it be for you?

Alison 03:25

Yeah, it's a bit embarrassing to confess as a food editor – it's cheese. I really hated cheese as a child. So much so that my mum used to do a separate portion of the lasagna or anything that was cheese-free just because I kind of just said how much I hated it. That now has just totally gone out of the window because I really like a toasted cheese, stringy cheese sandwich. I'm still not great on, kind of, really strong blue cheese but, you know, mature cheddar is lovely. Any excuse to just try a cheeseboard is good.

Jimi 03:55

Well cheese, handily, is a pretty good link to our guest for today. Because obviously that cheese will have come from a farmer and our guest today is Minette Batters, who is the president of the National Farmers' Union and she's actually the first woman to hold this job in the organisation's 113-year history. She's an advocate for sustainable, kinder farming and great animal welfare, she runs her own farm and she's really given a voice to a section of people that we kind of think we have an opinion about or that

we know what makes them tick, but she has given them a real sort of human face and showed what it really takes to be a farmer and have that real vital role in feeding the nation, really, at what is a particularly challenging and interesting time for them. How are you feeling about this one, because you've got quite a lot of experience with farms, haven't you?

Alison 04:56

Do you know what, I love talking to farmers. We've done quite a lot of farm visits, looking at animal welfare of, you know, the farmers that supply us. And so it's just, when you talk to them, you just always learn more, and hear about what it takes to put the food on our plate. And she's also quite a big cook as well. So it'd be fascinating to hear about how she manages to get meals on her table at the end of a busy day and fit it all around the farming schedule, as well as the work that she's doing with the Farmers Union.

Jimi 05:26

Yeah, yeah, I definitely want to hear about that balance. And that juggle and what her cooking life is like. She trained as a professional chef, ran a catering business, which is still a part of what she does with the farm. And she's going from mucking out and doing work on her farm and sort of running around there, to meeting politicians and stuff. And it's like a really, really interesting dichotomy. So let's get straight to it then, shall we? Here is our conversation with Minette Batters.

Minette Batters, I wanted to get a little bit on your early life and your early memories, because you grew up on a farm, and it was something that your family did. So what was that like?

Minette Batters 06:17

In many ways that was so different, I think, back then – everything was very different. It was... it was harder work, really. You know, we didn't have the mechanisation that we've got now. So farming was about heavy lifting. Everything now is so high tech that you've taken a lot of the hard work out of it. But my passion was always the livestock. So I used to rear all our calves that we bought in, before I went to school and when I got home, and I developed a very deep passion for cows, which I kept with me and they are still my great passion in life. A beef herd, or indeed a dairy herd, is part of the family because those cows and successive generations... You know, the genetics live on with you. And it really does take a lifetime to build a herd. And I also think you never sell a herd of cows – if you sell them, you are out. So they are part of the family, part of the identity of the farm. So it's a very special relationship.

Alison

So growing up, when you were helping on the farm, were there any regular jobs you did before school that you really loved and any that you might have hated?

Minette Batters

My parents were absolutely regimented about the time that you got up. And I can remember having a friend to stay, who was just horrified that my clothes were thrown on my bed at half past six in the morning and I was told to get outside. And she was used to lying in bed until 10, 11 o'clock on a Saturday. And that's what life was like, every morning – you had to get outside and do your jobs, whether that was mucking out and sorting things or for me, as well, rearing the calves. I would go and

obviously they had to have warm milk, you'd make up the milk, you'd take that round to them, you'd make sure that their water had been cleaned out, you'd be giving them hay, you'd be strawing them up. But it was all, you know, done in order. And I think in a world where my children have lie-ins... Animals love routines, you know, they have to have a regimented routine: be fed at certain times, because of course they don't work on the basis of 'Oh well, let's wait for two hours'. So I think growing up, for me, it was about, you know, that never having a lie-in. And of course now, you know, I'd never lie in bed. It's just something that has become so ingrained in me. I wake up first thing in the morning and I have to get up!

Alison

No lie in but also probably no holidays too, because animals can't have a holiday.

Minette Batters

That is so true. I never, ever went on an aeroplane with my parents. We didn't go on holiday. We'd occasionally go to the Royal Show, which sadly is no longer, but it was at Stoneleigh Park. So we'd occasionally go there for a few days. But that was the holiday.

Alison 09:07

So growing up, who was in the kitchen doing the cooking for the family meals?

Minette Batters 09:10

My mum was a great cook and she used to do all the family meals. It was a very regimented life back then; my father insisted on meals absolutely on time. So breakfast had to be at eight o'clock, lunch had to be at half past 12 and an evening meal had to be at 7:30 and those were sort of nailed down – completely different to my life now. But she was a brilliant cook – and still is.

Alison

Was it regimented just because that just had to fit around what was happening on the farm the whole time, and if something slipped then the rest of the day slipped?

Minette Batters

Very much driven by the farm and the working day. So it was a regimented approach to link in with that and you know, my father would never answer the phone at lunchtime. Whereas, of course, the life that we lead now, I tend to answer my mobile whenever it rings and I'm hardly aware that it's lunchtime or what time it is – you just answer your phone. So it was very different, I think, back then.

Alison 10:08

And were you ever in the kitchen helping too, or were you always out on the farm helping?

Minette Batters 10:10

I loved cooking from a very early age. I really was passionate about it and so I enjoyed doing a lot of cooking back then, making cakes, making pastry... I was probably more of a baker I think at heart, though I had a great affinity with food from a very young age. But also I think probably quite a tomboy, really, wanting to be outside – that was probably my greater passion, I think.

Alison

Do you remember the first thing you baked?

Minette Batters

It was – probably a lot of children end up making this first – I think it was some sort of chocolate mess with either Cornflakes or Rice Krispies in it. I do remember that sort of going everywhere. But it's something that my kids ended up making pretty early on because you've just got to melt the chocolate, put the syrup and the butter in and you can't, in theory, go too far wrong. But of course, things tend to go everywhere. So that's probably my first memory at a very, very young age.

Jimi 11:08

You mentioned your father there and he was quite adamant that you couldn't be a farmer or that you wouldn't be able to do it, or that women couldn't do what you are doing at a very high level now! Did you accept him saying those things?

Minette Batters 11:26

I think you always look back in life and think I could have handled that much better. And he and I were very, very alike and without a doubt, our personalities clashed. There were a couple of reasons, really, for him thinking that farming was not a good road to go down. We didn't own our farm; he farmed in partnership with my landlord, so in his eyes there was no route, we were never going to be able to afford to buy a farm, and there was no route to what we call now 'long-term farm business tenancies'. So that was one of his reasons. And the other one was that he felt that, again, what I said about the hard work, the lack of the technologies that we have today, you know, he just didn't feel that women were cut out for it. So we are, you know, we had, I think, quite a challenging relationship back then. And of course the more you're told that you can't do something, for me, I guess, the more determined I became to do it. So I wonder if he'd been saying, 'Oh, you should come into farming, it's wonderful, I'd really like to do all I can support you,' whether I would have been quite so determined and passionate about it. Probably not. There's sort of a life lesson in reverse psychology there isn't there?

Jimi 12:43

Definitely. You did have another career as well – you trained as a chef, which I'd really love to know more about. Was it as hard as people say it is?

Minette Batters 12:54

So I trained as a chef in London, I did a Cordon Bleu diploma. I cooked at a pub for a very long time and in the end I set up my own, sort of, bespoke catering business and I did a lot of weddings, a lot of dinners, a lot of drinks parties – anything that was going really, for all sorts of people from all different walks of life. And then building the wedding business here was a sort of natural continuation of my background in that business. So food has always been a key part of my life, it's been a passion in my life. Now in the role that I'm in, which I've been in now for seven years, I've had to step back from professional catering and so we get other people in to do that now. And it's strange really because I'm back in the rut that I think a lot of people find themselves in, where I cook the things that I feel happy with and comfortable with and that my children I know will eat...

Alison

What does an average dinner look like when you're busy?

Minette Batters

So I'm trying to be really good and vary things throughout the week. It'll often be things like a lasagna or a chilli, I'll roast a chicken now and again. I'm really finding it fantastic to try and cook with more pulses, more vegetables, wean myself off of potatoes and get into couscous and other things that are just stretching you away from the basics. So it's always something pretty simple that I can throw together in probably half an hour maximum. My son is Type 1 diabetic so I'm always focusing on that too, making sure that he's not deprived of anything, that he eats what he wants to eat.

Alison 14:54

When he was diagnosed, I guess he was quite young – did you find that that really changed the way you as a family ate?

Minette Batters 14:57

Type 1 is a very, very difficult thing. And I think every family probably goes into it differently. I mean, my son was five when he was diagnosed and sort of old enough to semi process it, but not completely. And what he found enormously challenging was the fact that he was different to other children, that he had to have injections. And at primary school, he had a couple of episodes where he got hysterical about the whole thing – like all of us, children want to be treated the same as everybody else. And, you know, things like Type 1 change that, so I was determined to make it fit round his life. And we've remained determined to make it fit round his life ever since. And that is difficult. You know, George isn't mad keen on carb counting – you know, he loves to sort of 'carb guess', and being a teenager at the moment, has become almost nocturnal in his eating habits, so he likes to sort of eat at night and sleep in the day. So it is a challenge, but I have tried to always put his mental health first. The temptation as a parent is to want to really micromanage their life, because the better you get the blood sugars, the better and longer term their life quality is. So it's – I think it's a bit of a rollercoaster ride, but at the end of the day, he can lead a normal life. You know, I look at other families who have much greater restrictions. And I try and always reinforce that with George that, you know, this is one thing, but you can live with it – there's nothing that you can't do with Type 1, nothing.

Jimi 16:32

Obviously veganism and vegetarianism is such a topic of discussion and a lot of people are trying to reduce their meat eating. Obviously, the other side of that is people are just looking to make more sustainable choices and higher-welfare animals and things like that. What's your journey been with that debate?

Minette Batters 16:52

Whatever age we are, none of us are eating enough fruits and vegetables. So I really make a conscious effort in every meal to incorporate those. And we have access to such amazing vegetables now, such amazing fruits and amazing salads that we never did, so there is really no excuse. I guess my frustration comes slightly in the term 'plant based'. I much prefer to talk about, let's just have, let's

call it what it is. And let's have much more fruit and vegetables in our diet. And if people want to have a meat-free diet, you can have a meat-free diet, but let's use whole foods in that diet. A lot of plant-based foods, if you look at the high processing of it, you actually, your point on sustainability, you look at where the sourcing has come from and realise it isn't truly sustainable. So for me, it's about a healthy balanced diet, which, for my family, meat and dairy is a part of that healthy, balanced diet. But it's also made up, as I say, every meal, with as many fruits and vegetables as I can sort of cram into it – or mask into it, in my children's case. I've never managed to get them to eat a Brussels sprout yet, but that's work in progress. I just don't think, now, that we really appreciate the food that is on our plates. I was brought up by my parents who obviously went through a war. So I was always being focused: 'You have to finish every single thing that is on your plate.' And I can remember at school eating some horrendous things like semolina that was just really making me feel sick, but you had to eat it all. I think now we are not as firm on that. And so we waste, you know, 16 billion pounds worth of food every year. And that is unsustainable. So we've got to get back to valuing our food more.

Jimi 18:40

The idea of waste is a really interesting one. And I think we're all trying to do better in terms of that. I think you're absolutely right that there is, there can just be a bit of a disconnect and things arrive so easily. Or people don't have that connection to what it takes for each thing on their plate to be produced and the work that goes into it. How do you try to limit it and save on food waste within your own home cooking?

Minette Batters 19:06

It is a big problem. And it's a problem throughout the chain. But most specifically, I think for all of us as consumers, you know, it's been so easy to buy things. And especially in some ways with Covid, with trying to limit visits to stores, it's very easy to over-buy on fresh, which there's really no excuse for because we've got stores, convenience stores springing up all over the place. So sourcing food has never been easier. But I do think we've got complacent about valuing it. And I think if you've worked through, you know, the average household budget, the amount we actually do throw away is probably quite staggering. So with fruit, vegetables, things like that, any leftover vegetables after a meal, I'd always turn them into soup and just try and get quite sort of regimented about that. But I'm nowhere near as good as I should be. And I think we all have to get much, much more careful about not wasting food because it's one of the biggest challenges with climate change – if we could stop wasting our food, it would really help with our emissions. And I think it goes much deeper than that, too. If we value our food, we will value more how it is produced, and the care that is taken. So I think there are much deeper messages that really need to come from early learning in schools. I've long believed that actually learning how to cook at school... Course, Waitrose has done such a fabulous job there, in really inspiring a nation, you know, how to cook at a very young age. And that could not be more important.

Alison

Yeah. Because actually, part of the problem is people don't know what to do with food waste, and you've got the cooking skills to turn them into soup. But I think the other thing is people just don't understand how much effort it takes to rear your beef.

Minette Batter

Exactly that. And it's the whole, I think, the whole sustainable approach to not only the food we buy, but the lives that we lead. You know, we've got this this great commitment to get to net zero by 2050. We've said that the NFU, we can get that by 2040. So I think climate change, for everybody now, is real. And the exciting thing for food is that we can do something about it. We're a source of emissions, but we're a sink so we can get to carbon-neutral food.

Jimi 21:26

So Minette, just for those listening, how would you describe sustainable farming? What is it?

Minette Batters 21:33

In a nutshell, I'll try and give you the short version. Sustainable farming, what I will call climate-friendly farming, is about producing effectively more food, but on less land with less input. Though food production impacts on our environments, you know, that is what happens. Producing our food, whatever we choose to eat, whether that is fruit, whether that's vegetables, whether that is livestock or dairy, it impacts on our planet. When we look at the road to getting to carbon-neutral food, ever-more sustainable farming, it literally does mean that we produce the same amount, or we might even be producing more, because the business is ever-more efficient. And you've focused on that ghastly word, productivity. So you're making sure that your animal health status is 100%. You are precision farming, so you are only putting fertiliser on areas that absolutely need it. Because you have mapped it, you've GPS mapped it to know exactly where those things need to go. So your inputs are going down and hopefully massively going down. That is good for the farmer, because that is taking cost out. That is good for the environment, because it is causing much less damage. And also, because you are more efficient and your business is a better business, you can farm on less land and achieve the same output. And in doing that, you set more land aside for nature as well. So it's a win-win for everyone. It's a win for biodiversity, it's a win for the environment, for animal welfare, it's just better for everyone. And of course, for the end consumer they know then that their food has been sustainably produced. And I think over the next 10 years we're going to see greater progress than we've probably seen in the last 50 years. The whole focus on sustainable agriculture, where you're decreasing your food production footprint, and maintaining what you're producing so that the consumer is still getting really high quality – higher quality – affordable food.

Jimi 23:44

Is that something that you had to convince farmers of? Did you have to make that case? Or were the farmers that you were speaking to, were they ready to... You know, the net zero challenge was held up as something quite radical. And there were raised eyebrows about how possible it was, really. What's your role been in sort of convincing people and getting people on board? Have people been willing to come with you on this journey?

Minette Batters 24:09

I've been absolutely amazed how – I don't mean amazed in that I didn't think farmers would be pro it. But they have really grasped the opportunity to be part of the solution. I think whatever business you run, you want to be appreciated by everybody. You want to have access to a market and you want people to buy more of what you produce. Every farmer wants to leave their farm in a better state.

There's no doubt in my mind about that. So when we were talking back in 2019 about being the first country – if you like, the first farming union – to say right, we can hit net zero by 2040, we can beat the government target by 10 years, across every sector, there was enormous enthusiasm with farmers saying, yep, we're up for this. We want to do this. But if we can get to a place where we are carbon-neutral in this country, for agriculture and the food that we eat, that will be a phenomenal success story and provide global leadership. Because the whole challenge of climate change is we can't just do it here, we have to lead the world. And this, I believe, having left the EU, is our chance to lead, have a policy that delivers on what is needed, those incentives to reduce our emissions. And agriculture, as I say, is the one sector that can do this as a source and a sink, we can do it.

Jimi 25:34

The things that you're talking about give a real insight into what it actually is to be a farmer and the practicalities. And you talk about the early mornings and the warming the calf milk. And I feel like these are things that even people like me who feel like they know about restaurants, write about food, are quite disconnected from. I remember hearing your interview on *Desert Island Discs* and that was probably one of the first times that I'd, sort of, heard a farmer in that context. And that must be, that must have been a great thing to do. And that must be great for you to kind of keep showing people what it's really like.

Minette Batters 26:11

I was astounded to get asked to go on *Desert Island Discs*. I mean, to me, that is about famous people and I just see myself as a farmer, and a mum, and someone who leads the National Farmers Union. So I was really staggered to get the invite to go on there. And the biggest irony for me was that the producer had been doing her weekly shop at Waitrose, picked up your magazine and read an article about me, and thought it would be brilliant to make the connection between farming and my leadership role and food – and so that was how I got on *Desert Island Discs*. It was just it just an extraordinary thing to be, it really was.

Alison 26:54

We've all got our stereotypes on what farmers are. How would you describe the modern farmer that you're representing at the NFU?

Minette Batters 26:55

One of my frustrations, growing up, was I always felt that farming was always deemed as male. Marketing, to a certain extent, tended to have, if there was a farmer on it, it tended to be a man, who was in a checked shirt or in overalls, of a certain age. And I just don't think it ever did – or does – justice to the modern farmer. So the modern farmer is very tech-savvy, is certainly male and female – so many women coming into farming – and it's very, very different from that, sort of, stereotype of a man in overalls. I mean, there's a lot of young people out there who are passionate and they look at the world through different eyes. They don't see the problems that my generation – we tend to focus on the problems – and they don't see that. They just see the opportunities and they look at the world very differently. So farming, I think, has changed, in its image, beyond all belief. You know, it's about men and women, it must and is embracing diversity and opportunity right across, you know, all cultures. And that, I think, is a massive success story for the United Kingdom.

Jimi 28:15

Obviously, it's incredible to think of people hearing this and being inspired by what you're saying in a new way that they hadn't necessarily had for themselves. I'm going to flip it around – what is it that inspires you? Who gives you that lift or drive?

Minette Batters 28:34

Oh there's so many people really, I guess, throughout my life that have inspired me. I mean, when I was working in the pub, when I'd been to catering college, it was very much the era of Delia Smith, you know, who put food on the map, really. She was the one that I remembered being on the television and creating that sort of accessibility to food, you know. She made it, I think, everything within the art of the possible. And then of course, we've transitioned on, you know, into Mary Berry and Prue Leith and Jamie Oliver. And all of those people – all chefs – I think it's wonderful for me to see now how they are household names. And it's not just about restaurants and hotels – they are in your home, you know, those books and of course online. All those recipes are so accessible. And what I'm really pleased about that they are all doing now – and my frustration when I was younger was that they weren't making the link back to the primary production. So they weren't talking about farming, provenance, authenticity of food. And now of course, they all are, because we are all, as consumers, we all want to know how our food is produced, where it's produced. We want to know the climate change impact. I think the consumer now is very savvy and has access, through social media, to all of these things. So I think there's a whole army of chefs that have inspired me throughout my life because they've managed to connect. You know, it's all about connection, and the more you can connect, the better. There've been some incredibly inspirational farmers. Just to pick one business out of the blue, Yeo Valley. I've visited that business, Mary Mead, who is a tour de force – she knows more about Friesian cows than anybody I've ever come across. And their passion for the Yeo Valley business, the largest British-owned yogurt business in the country, is, it's just incredible. So I went there, and they've got a lovely café – I had the most memorable meal. And just walking round the business and hearing about their enthusiasm from farm to fork is really moving, really moving, and makes me enormously proud of what I do and the people that I represent. I get the chance to visit many of the growers out there, people who are producing our strawberries, our blackberries, our blueberries. And those are incredible businesses. Every time I go there and I see how they have transformed – we've gone to what they call table-top picking now, which means that for people picking, you don't have to bend down, you're not ferreting around, you know, in the straw, in the mud, as we were as children, trying to find strawberries – they are all at a height where you can just walk alongside and put the strawberry in the box. And of course, for them we can pick so many more strawberries. It's amazing to witness. So those people that inspire us, that have inspired me, that make us just think about the connection between the land and the food that is on our plates.

Jimi 31:53

Was that something that you got from home? You talked about your mother and her influence on your love of food. And that seems to have set you on this path.

Minette Batters 32:02

Oh, very much so. She was always making everything, she, she'd loathe making cakes. She'd never make cakes or biscuits. But she was a very good savoury cook, I would say. And my children, without me knowing it, it was really an extraordinary moment, when they were probably about seven, I suppose, and she'd gone to the shop, she'd come back with some apples. And they'd taken one look at these apples and they said, 'But Granny, those are French apples.' And she'd sort of shrugged her shoulders and they said, 'Well Mummy won't buy French apples, you'll have to go and buy British ones.' So they frogmarched her back down and made her buy British ones. So my children, because I'm always saying to them, you know, if you buy British, and to look out for the Red Tractor logo, because that will be proof that it is produced here, then you know that it's being produced to a high standard.

Alison 32:52

It's brilliant in a way, that you've inspired your children to do that with Granny. But have they shown any interest in going in the farm?

Minette Batters 32:57

My daughter prides herself on saying that 'Mum, you know, no 16-year-old knows what they want to do.' Which I know isn't true, because I know plenty of her friends who know exactly what they want to do, but she is owning up to no ambition for the future, at the moment, keeping all her options open. But she loves living here and I know she feels enormously privileged to live in the countryside and to live on a farm and have the animals around her. My son is really helpful on the farm. But I don't push them into it. I feel it is there, nothing would make me happier, but it's their life. And it will be up to them. You know, nowadays, I want them to really get those qualifications, to get away from the farm and see a bit of life because I think what we do see now, is the more you can look at other sectors, at other jobs, you can bring those back. I mean very much as I did, you know, I trained as a chef and farming, you know, is changing, is evolving. We need to be able to diversify, really, to manage our risk.

Alison 34:05

Yeah. One of the questions I always ask everyone when we speak to them is: have you got any ingredients that you always have in your storecupboard?

Minette Batters 34:11

I've always got garlic, always, always – I would use it on a daily basis, I think. I've always got ginger. Those are probably my two, sort of as far as fresh goes, I just always have them. I'll often marinate both beef and lamb to turn them into tagines, all sorts of things, but that, you know, the marination, the flavours absorbing, putting lots of herbs in, can transform things. But also, I think what I feel strongly about too is, you know, we're predominantly grass-based here in the UK. So we're not feeding the world's grains, we have a grass-based system and I don't think we realise quite how lucky we are that we do have that. So our animals are predominantly outside, they're grazing grass, that is all fantastic for omega-3s and other things that you want to get out of a healthy balanced diet. So we also have to be careful not to mask, you know, the great flavours that we have within, you know, the sustainable meat that we're producing.

Jimi 35:15

Is food and cooking a way that you unwind, Minette?

Minette Batters 35:19

I really do unwind by cooking now. I mean, I find the pressure of my job at this time of such change, representing so many farming businesses, it does weigh heavy on my shoulders. So I know the role of the NFU. The food standards campaign that we ran last year where we had over a million people supported it in a two week period. You know, people in this country really care about not undermining our farmers. So I take my role very seriously. And I very much wear my heart on my sleeve. So the opportunity to wind down and sort of step back is difficult to achieve sometimes, and I get enormous, I guess, therapy out of cooking now, just very, very basic things. Spending time making something and enjoying making it.

Jimi 36:04

Minette, it'd be really good to know, just as somebody who doesn't know too much about the practicalities of this, how something like animal welfare comes into play on your farm. Because it's primarily beef, and it's primarily livestock and cattle. How does it work?

Minette Batters 36:24

Animal welfare is something that the people in this country care passionately about. They really want to know that animals have had a good life, have been well looked after. And it's in the best interests of every farmer as well. For me and my business, the bulk of the year, my cows and calves will be out. When the weather starts to change, sort of normally round about mid-October, end of October, we'll bring them in so that they are shielded from the worst of the weather. They have straw beds to lie down on and we feed them hay and silage that we have made in the summer months. And then you get to that wonderful time of year, sort of normally for us about April-time, when the grass is starting to grow, winter is over and behind us and you turn them out and they can go back to grazing grass again. It's really important for me that every cow – you know, every cow costs a lot of money to keep and they are breeding cows, so they need to have a nice, healthy calf every year. So when I talk about healthy animals, healthy animals is good for everyone. It's good for the farmer – healthy animals don't see the vet, healthy animals don't need antibiotics and medicines.

Alison

Do your beef cows, when they, when you let them out, are they like the dairy cows that skip out?

Minette Batters

They skip, they jump, they are like us, I guess, if we have been kept inside for a long time, and you get out in the fresh air and you just think, well, this is great to be out. So they do leap in the air, they buck, they jump, they're just ecstatic to be out. What they really like to be doing is grazing grass. And if there's grass out there that they can eat, that's what they love doing.

Jimi 38:10

Terrific. It seems like a beautiful circle as well in terms of your connection with the calves and that childhood, fondness and love and responsibility that you had. And that's now reflected in the relationship you have and the work that you're doing and the deep importance of happy animals and well-treated animals and how that just makes everything more positive.

Minette Batters 38:33

Very much so and for the people that work with me here, you know, making sure that... Everybody wants a happy environment in which to work. And so if the animals are happy, the people are happy. Nobody wants to be dealing with stress – stressed people or stressed animals – because, you know, that's where dangers can come in. The calmer everything is, the calmer the animals are, the better they are, the happier they are. And that's what I want – happy people and happy cows.

Jimi 39:03

Brilliant. Thank you so much, Minette, for your time. That has been wonderful and really, really fascinating and amazingly hopeful. And yeah, just great to talk to you.

Minette

Oh, my pleasure. And thanks so much for having me on.

Jimi

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