

LIFE ON A PLATE

SEASON 2, EPISODE 3: TAMAL RAY

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SPEAKERS

Tamal Ray, 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 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.

Jimi 01:25

How are you Alison, are you alright?

Alison 01:27

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

Jimi 01:29

Pretty good. Pretty good. Obviously still feeling optimistic still. Still feeling okay.

Alison 01:35

The days are getting longer.

Jimi 01:37

Yes, that is always a good thing. Sunlight, all those things, all the spring things. I want you to tell me what you have been cooking and what you've been up to. And I wonder if your nosiness is contagious – about food. I'm only just picking up on it. So come on then, what have you been cooking?

Alison 01:55

What are people eating or what are they doing? So I've been doing quite a lot of batch cooking because one of my sister is a nurse in the NHS. And so she's been working, well, a really intense time – so I've been doing lots of meals that can go in the freezer, so that I can do a weekly food drop round so that she's got some easy dinners at the end of a shift. It is meals that are all in one, so there's quite a lot of beef casseroles and stroganoffs and vegetarian dhals.

Jimi 02:21

That must be really great. Is she completely grateful? Does she ever get like: 'Oh, could you vary the menu a little bit?'. Or is she just like: 'Whatever you send me is great'?

Alison 02:31

No, it's whatever I put in the bag. She seems to enjoy. And I'm more critical about it than she is. But no, it's good – you know, I enjoy it, and I get something out of it. It's something nice to do, especially when we were in the height of lockdown. In all the lockdowns it's been something really positive to do and you feel like it's something you're doing to support people that really do need it. And I know her ward would never object if I put a few lemon drizzle cakes or brownies – or anything baked – it kind of just gets inhaled there, too. So that's also feeding them on the wards as well.

Jimi 03:08

Yes, which handily, of course, is a nice and neat little segue into today's fantastic guest. We have got Tamal Ray, who, of course, was a finalist in *The Great British Bake Off* in 2015, one of the breakout stars of that series. He is a *Guardian* recipe columnist. And crucially, and fascinatingly, he is also an NHS doctor, who, throughout this challenging period has been working right on the front line. As somebody who knows the NHS, how do you feel about this one?

Alison 03:44

It just fascinates me about how they sustain themselves to keep going – my sister gets the meals that I've delivered, but is he cooking for himself? What support does he get? What does he eat at the end of a busy shift? How's he managed this last year?

Jimi 03:58

Yeah, I think as well, just balancing the careers, I think of him as this real recipe baking star – I love his food. And he's done bits of broadcasting work, but he's still in the thick of it. What is it like – are people recognising him? Are people asking him for recipes, or how to solve an issue they've got with their brownies? I really want to know how those two worlds dovetail or how they clash.

Alison 04:25

And he was in the final with Nadiya, and so we've heard Nadiya's side of it, so it'd be good to hear his take of what *Bake Off* was like.

Jimi 04:33

Right, let's get to it then. Here is our conversation with Tamal Ray.

Tamal Ray, thank you so much for joining us. You were just saying it's been quite a hectic year, a hectic period. What does that look like? I've got a sense of it, but please lay it out for us.

Tamal Ray 04:58

Yeah, I guess my day job is I'm an anaesthetist, so I've been on the forefront in dealing with stuff with the pandemic. We had a period of a few weeks where it was just crazy. Like every shift was just constant beeps with referrals of people... ordinarily we would have taken them to the intensive care for monitoring, but because we didn't have space, we were managing these people on the ward and only bringing them into intensive care when we absolutely had to. And then after that initial phase – because when people get really unwell with Coronavirus, they just take ages to get better – and so it's a much calmer period at work, but it's sort of a strange experience because you're actually, in some ways, we were less busy because we weren't doing normal surgeries. We didn't have our normal theatre lists we were only looking after these patients in intensive care. So yeah, I'm looking forward – as everyone else is – to getting back to some normality. I'm bored of walks!

Jimi 05:55

Done with the park – I know what you mean, I've completed every outdoor space in the country. You wrote a fantastic piece about baking throughout the height of the pandemic and of working on the front line and cooking and baking. And obviously, a lot of people... most people will know you for your baking work, your recipe column in *The Guardian* and your starring role as a finalist on *Bake Off* in 2015. But talk us through the position it's taken up for you – your relationship with cooking and baking through this thing, because it sounds like it's been a total lifeline like it has for a lot of us.

Tamal Ray 06:37

Yeah, I think how I got into baking was kind of... you know, I've always liked being creative and doing other stuff on the side. And so baking has always been for me this other outlet to the rest of my life. Like when other things are getting stressful. My partner says when I'm cooking, or when I'm baking, it's almost like meditation watching me because I'm just in my own zone and I'll have the radio on and I'm just doing my stuff. And I used to spend my weekends... like every Sunday would be a cooking day, where I'd spend the morning getting loads of ingredients, and then I'd make all this ridiculous amounts of food. And I'd spend six hours, seven hours in the kitchen and I remember my flatmate at the time being like: 'This is a Sunday that doesn't look particularly relaxing'.

Alison 07:26

How did you continue writing your *Guardian* column through all the lockdowns when work was so busy and shopping was so hard?

Tamal Ray 07:35

So I normally work part time, so I get asked quite a lot by other doctors sometimes... because training as a junior doctor can be quite busy and hectic. There's all the work that you have to do when you're at

work, and then there's all the stuff on the side that you have to be doing when you're at home. And I'll get junior doctors asking me: 'How do you manage to balance, perhaps your time? Like how do you do it?'. Thinking that I'll have some incredible time management strategy that they've never heard of. And actually, I'm just part time. Although during the pandemic, during the worst bit of it, I went to being full time because they basically asked us if we could. I mean, I guess the way I managed to do it was that I had nothing else to do in my social time. So had all this free time to bake where I would have normally been doing other things like seeing family and friends. And so that actually... it focused my life into some simpler ways of it's literally just work. And baking. And Netflix.

Alison 08:41

Yeah. And I guess as you're saying that you find that's the way to wind down and because you're not doing the same recipe over and over again – I guess that probably helped you as well mentally?

Tamal Ray 08:50

Yeah, it definitely helped. I think it always helps having other outlets – like something completely different, that's completely separate, and is a completely separate way of thinking as well. Because medicine, you know, there are lots of things that I love about it, but it's definitely not creative in any way. And actually, a lot of being a good doctor is about patterns and doing the same thing over and over again. And I guess maybe to an extent if you're following recipes, the ones that relax you are the ones that you know so well that you could kind of do them with your eyes closed, without even reading the recipe book. Recipe testing by comparison can be quite stressful and annoying.

Jimi 09:32

I want to know which things were particularly challenging, or in terms of trying to nail certain recipes... talk us through the things that you've been baking.

Tamal Ray 09:43

So I guess this is quite apt for this podcast. I remember one. Waitrose used to do this thing called a raspberry namoura, which is this little Middle Eastern cake and I remember trying to recreate that as I thought it was so delicious and I thought it must be quite simple to do. And I tried, I think for days, trying... [Laughs] I just could not do it and it drove me absolutely bananas. Because the more I failed at it, the more I was like: 'What am I doing wrong?'. And I just could not do it.

Alison 10:14

You didn't crack it in the end?

Tamal Ray 10:16

No, I did not crack it. Maybe I can get some insider knowledge on what the secret recipe is?

Alison 10:21

Yeah! What did you do with all the bakes along the way, the kind of prototypes? Did you take them into work?

Tamal Ray 10:28

I hardly ever take any of the prototypes into work, mainly because I think having been on *Bake Off* I get asked to bake a lot for work, kind of predictively. Which is fine. And I'm happy to do it. But I feel like it's a lot of pressure, because I remember what it was like being a viewer watching those shows, you know, watching *MasterChef*, and you're just like: 'Oh my God'. It makes me hungry watching those shows and, it's like, it must be the best thing ever. So when I bake stuff, I'm like: 'Well it has to be the best thing ever or people are going to be really disappointed'. Most of the rejects – me and my partner eat them. I don't even give them to my neighbours as they're not good enough to be seen by the outside world.

Jimi 11:11

I wonder if part of this is that *Bake Off* has scarred you slightly, in terms of the judgement? It's raised the bar so much.

Tamal Ray 11:22

I mean, absolutely. It absolutely does. And also in the way that people normally... if you were to make a cake for someone, they'd be like: 'Oh, thank you for making this cake'. And they'd eat the cake and they'd smile, even if they didn't like the cake. Whereas now, everyone comments: 'Oh, yes, you know, it's a good crumb, it's very moist and blah, blah, blah' – and I'm like: 'Okay, I don't want your view'.
[Laughs]

Alison 11:45

But the other thing is, if they know it's just a trial, and it's not the final dish, they'll go: 'Ooh, actually, it needs a little bit more lemon, or it needs a little bit more... could be cooked in the oven' – you get some real critical feedback, to which you just think: 'I don't think that's really helpful because I know it!'

Tamal Ray 12:00

And also, some of this is like different tastes, I think as well. I noticed that because I tend to use salt quite a lot in a lot of my bakes, even the sweet things – not that you want to... although sometimes you do want to taste the salt in it if you're making some of those dark chocolate cookies. A little bit of sea salt on top can be really, really nice sometimes especially with caramels and things like that, with just a tiny bit of salt.

Alison 12:25

It just helps the sweetness.

Tamal Ray 12:27

Yeah, exactly. And sometimes when other people make things and I try them, I might think to myself: 'Well, I would put a bit of salt in there'. That's just my personal tastes rather than a review on what is good and what isn't.

Alison 12:37

Yeah. What are the things that you bake that bring back memories of growing up?

Tamal Ray 12:42

I guess whenever I'm baking something like cookies... I grew up baking with my sister. So she had this recipe book that was basically photocopies from some 70s book that she had from school when she was a kid. And that was like one of our baking Bibles at home. And I look back on it now and the recipes actually weren't that great. The cookies were really dry and crumbly. I would hate them now if someone made them for me. But it does really bring back those memories every time I make cookies. And now she's got kids and, well, they're both a bit older now. My nephew is 13, and my niece is eight. And my nephew is definitely in that moody teenager, just leave me alone to my TikTok videos, why are you bothering me old man? [Laughs] But the one thing that will definitely get him back and engaged is cooking. And actually over lockdown he's become this little chef, and I think he makes three or four of their dinners every week.

Jimi 13:47

Oh, that's fantastic. That's really great.

Tamal Ray 13:50

And he goes for quite complicated... He's got into East Asian cooking, so he wants to make dim sum and things like that. And I guess that's kind of how I got into cooking.

Jimi 14:03

I feel like you must have this constantly, but people must feel like they know you so well because: 'You know I watched that series', and 'I remember you from then', 'I remember your comic asides', and I remember feeling like: 'Oh yeah, Tamal's basically one of my friends'. Do you have that a lot? You have people that have this intimacy with you and they feel like they have that connection even after all these years.

Tamal Ray 14:29

Yeah, a little bit. It was a few years ago now. It was 2015. So I'm kind of always surprised when people still recognise me from *Bake Off*. And also, especially during the pandemic, because we're always wearing masks. I struggle to recognise people sometimes when you're all dressed for theatre – it's what you have on: you have a mask, but then you've also got surgical hats – you can't see people's hair. So you can't actually see very much of their face and I've had patients and staff recognise me when I kind of think: 'How? How?'. Maybe I've just got memorable eyes – I don't know! I had someone, actually another junior doctor came up to me, and I was having my lunch the other day. We talked about *Bake Off* and had a nice little chat, and yeah, it's nice. I think it's good. It can be a really good icebreaker I think because as a junior doctor you move jobs, because you move hospitals to get different experience quite a lot. And some of my rotations are three months long, which is really, really short. And it can be quite nice as a way of just getting to know people and just starting off conversations. And also patients sometimes... people are often very nervous before they have an operation. And it can be a nice way of distracting them, chatting about Mary Berry and what their favourite cake is. That sort of stuff!

Alison 15:57

What are some of the weirder moments when someone has recognised you?

Tamal Ray 16:02

I guess... because as an anaesthetist we work on labour wards, and the stuff that can go wrong – and when it goes wrong it can go wrong quite quickly for people – and so you know, an alarm gets pulled, everyone runs into the room, and we've got a lot of things to say to the patient. I've had situations where they've – whilst trying to consent someone for an anaesthetic – they've been like: 'Are you that guy from *Bake Off*?' – and I'm like: 'This is not the time, we can talk about this in recovery'. [Laughs]

Jimi 16:31

Just start quizzing you about why something isn't rising properly, or: 'Tamal, could you just help me with these cookies?'. [Laughs] One of the things that really fascinates me about *Bake Off*, in the context of you and Nadiya, who obviously won the year you were on, people like Ruby Tandoh and Liam and it's been a really great... almost like an incubator for recipe writers and food talent, and it's diversified the landscape in a really incredible way. And it seems to have had this incredible impact. Is that something that you've been aware of, that you think of?

Tamal Ray 17:11

Yeah, I guess so. I mean, the thing about *Bake Off*, is that it's so well cast, I think in terms of getting a diverse group of people. From all walks of life. And so I guess it has given a platform to people... bakers can be all sorts of different people, and actually, I see that at work all the time as well. All the background traditions. And yeah, it's a really lovely thing to see. But I remember when filming the final episode of *Bake Off*, and there are the three of us in the final, I remember saying to Nadiya: 'Hey, have you noticed it's like a 66%, Bengali final?'. Wow, look at this representation. [Laughs]

Jimi 18:05

Yeah. It's incredible, like domination. Yeah, that's amazing. Nadiya, who has been on the podcast was a fantastic guest, I always want to say 'friend of the pod', I've always wanted to say that. I think she probably would allow us to say that. She was talking about the fact that when she entered the world of broadcasting – and you've done some of that, and recipe writing, and working professionally in food – that she initially tried to fit into the mold of what was there. And it was a later revelation that she realised she had to make space and be herself and do things on her own terms. Did you go on a similar journey?

Tamal Ray 18:46

I think yeah, definitely. I definitely feel that. And I think, and I would say, I feel very much I'm still on that journey. Because I suppose what I do in terms of medicine still takes up a lot more of my life, and writing the columns. And I think trying to find a voice that feels unique, you know. My actual text that I write for my recipes for *The Guardian*, mostly – my recipes, I try and tell a little story for each one. And I think just sitting down to write, and sometimes I feel like, you know, I'll write something and I feel like I'm just emulating in terms of tone, the writing that I love and that I've read and I think it's a hard thing to do when you're relatively new, or – although I guess I've done this for a few years now – to try and find what is your own voice and not feel like you're emulating other people. That's definitely something that I've noticed in other people's writing like Ruby Tandoh, you mentioned – especially like, I've followed her work, and it's really amazing and wonderful to see like. She started off as a great writer, but to see how she's grown and developed her style as a writer – I find really inspiring. And I would say I'm still

trying to discover that and translate that. I guess that's kind of the way you will always be as a writer or someone trying to be creative. You're constantly trying to get better.

Jimi 20:16

Yeah.

Alison 20:17

How were you introduced to cooking was it through a particular cookbook or member of the family maybe?

Tamal Ray 20:26

So I guess, food was always a really important part of our household. So my family is Bengali, so West Bengali, based in Calcutta, and most of our family still lives in Calcutta. Our culture of food is – it was always really central to the family and having this big spectacle of a meal. And definitely now when all our family – my sister and I go back home with our partners, and we're all gathered under the same roof, my mum will make these massive spreads of meals. My partner, he's English, and he was saying how that's one of the things he really loves about the way my mum will cook a meal. Like there'll be different things that he loves the variety on the table. As I say it was my sister who got me into baking, it was my mum who's been this real influence in food and that you should take care, you should take your time when you're preparing food and going into the craft of making food. Although my mum is not a baker, my mum is a cook. And I think the distinction for me is that my mum, she doesn't use recipes. And my mum is one of those people who will open up a cupboard, see a whole load of ingredients and be like: 'Okay, I'll make this, this and this, and do a bit of this'.

Alison 21:46

She'll just instinctively cook.

Tamal Ray 21:48

Yeah, absolutely. And she'll try new things, like she made Christmas dinner a few years ago, and one of the dishes was this roasted fruit thing, and she had like mango and pineapple with the turkey and I was like: 'This is really good'. Like this is definitely not traditional. And so she was... that desire to experiment and tinker around in the kitchen I definitely get from her. The reason I would say she's a cook, rather than a baker, is she will try and do that same spirit of invention with baking, which is fine, but because we're baking, you're creating structure with your bake, you're taking stuff that's very pure with refined ingredients, and so you're not just creating a new flavour, you're creating a new structure. And so if you tinker around with things with flavour, you can really affect the structure. And so she made me a birthday cake, I think for my tenth birthday, or maybe my ninth birthday, and she read this recipe and she was like: 'Oh, too much butter, too much eggs'. And so cut them both in half. And it was a really... you know, it wasn't a great cake. It was dry. I can still remember how dry it was! Me and my sister... I don't remember us being that rude. But we were obviously rude enough that she didn't make me another cake for about five years.

Alison 23:12

So if your sister learned to bake – who taught her? How did she learn? How was she then able to teach you?

Tamal Ray 23:19

Yeah, good question. I think she learned when – she's a bit older than me – so when she was going through school, she had like home economics class, so she was taught a bit at school. And I guess my mum must have baked some of those things for her, or with her, when she was little. But yeah, I've got really, really fond memories of me and my sister baking like every summer holiday. I remember us flicking through one of these books and she was like: 'You can choose, we'll make whatever's in this'. And I chose eclairs. And she looked at us like: 'Oh yeah, we're not going to make those, way too complicated'. And now I can make those and I love making those.

Alison 23:58

But I guess that photocopied book that she taught you from – they'd have had some really good techniques, and they might not have been really good tasting recipes, but I guess it's a good way to learn the basics.

Tamal Ray 24:09

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And it was kind of like the comprehensive basics. They're all in there, fairy cakes and things like that.

Alison 24:17

And shortcrust pastry.

Tamal Ray 24:18

Yeah. And pineapple upside down cake and all of that. So yeah, I guess it's all the fundamentals. Although it's really interesting, she never bakes anymore.

Jimi 24:27

Yeah, I was going to ask this. Was there a point at which you surpassed her and that was – sibling rivalry – it's the apprentice that was handing over the torch. Or was it that she just lost interest?

Tamal Ray 24:41

I guess she must have just lost interest after... when she first started working I guess because my brother-in-law now does a lot of the cooking in their house. I think for me when things stepped up a gear in terms of what I was baking at home was when I went to university. And because I was at medical school in London, money was really tight, and so I wanted to eat good food because I'd grown up in a household where we ate well, but my mum always did it on a budget. And so I wanted to bake but I wanted to do it on a budget. And I remember I lived with a couple of people who had done a year in Paris as part of their degree. And they came back and they were talking about this new thing I'd never heard of – macarons. And they were amazing. And so I went out to try and buy some macarons and saw how ludicrously expensive they were. And so I was like: 'Well, I definitely can't afford that'. And also, they just can't be that hard to make, to warrant those prices. And that's when I started teaching myself how to make other things. When I was in med school, my sister got married, and they weren't

going to have a wedding cake, which I thought was ridiculous, because it's clearly the most important thing of the day. So, I learned how to make a wedding cake from this amazing book. And also there was a local shop. There's like a cake decorating shop, and so I would go in there to buy equipment, but also just chat to the people who ran the shop and people who bought things from the shop. So it'd be these little old ladies telling me: 'Ooh, you need to buy these dowelings for stacking the cake', and that sort of stuff. It all stepped up a gear at uni.

Jimi 26:30

One thing about you – you seem to have such a great calmness about you, and you bring a real humour to what sounds like quite stressful situations. Is that a natural trait? Have you always been relatively steady and able to sort of see the bigger picture? Or is it something that you've learned how to do?

Tamal Ray 26:55

I guess I'd say I'm quite an introspective person and I always have been. Some of the conversations I would have as a little kid – I remember my sister saying to me: 'You overthink these things, you need to think about this less'. But I don't know. I guess there's what's going on inside, and there's how you present to the world. And one of my bosses... I've just done this exam, like one of my last exams as an anaesthetist. Hopefully my last exam as an anaesthetist. And one of my old bosses was saying to me: 'What is the job? What do people look to an anaesthetist for in those emergency situations?', and she was saying: 'What you need to do is exude calm and be logical and have an order, because in a bad situation, you've often got everyone stressed that you need to be the point of focus and calm'. And inside, you can be thinking: 'Oh my God, this is the worst thing ever. It's terrible. God, I wish I wasn't here'. But the outside needs to exude this calm. And I guess, in those moments, I guess I focus on stepping outside myself a little bit. And I've always been a bit like that. And I tried to be like that on *Bake Off* – because I definitely spent a lot of time very, very stressed on *Bake Off*. But actually, I think letting yourself go into the zone of what the work that you have to do is, that's what helps me to calm down I think. And keep your focus small I guess when everything else around you is going crazy and is chaotic.

Jimi 28:39

Yeah. Does that come back to something that cooking and baking can do as well in terms of shrinking things down? Making them manageable? Is that something that you have felt?

Tamal Ray 28:53

Yeah, definitely. I guess there's a commonality there in terms of having that time on your own to sort of focus and I guess it is like meditation and mindfulness and the baking and the cooking is practice in a way. Because it's also internal in that way of self-focus. I guess it kind of prepares you in a way for when you have to do it in other situations.

Alison 29:23

I'm fascinated, while baking is great for calming and mental wellbeing, how do you balance the health with baking?

Tamal Ray 29:31

Interesting. I feel like the balance between health and baking... I don't think I'm navigating brilliantly at the moment as I've put on loads of weight in the last year and the job that I do, a lot of... so you know, I'm an anaesthetist for anyone having any type of surgery, but a lot of people who need surgery have... it's from a chronic disease. And a lot of chronic diseases are lifestyle based, you know, it's diet, or maybe a lack of diet, or balanced diet, lack of exercise, things like smoking, which are habits actually that are really easy to fall into for anyone. Especially if you're busy. And I notice, I don't want to demonise any foods, because I think that's also unhelpful. Yeah, you know, there are things that... there are treats that we all enjoy having, but I guess it's about having moderation and balance. And I think, for me, I do have a real sweet tooth. So trying to find that balance. And I think especially because there's some compulsory sweet eating that I have to do every month, in order to do the column.

Jimi 30:50

It's literally your job.

Tamal Ray 30:53

Yeah, exactly. Leave me to eat my cakes in peace, it's my job. A lot of anaesthetists are really super healthy as well. It's the same type that anaesthetists love coffee and cycling. And so I work with a lot of people whose favourite fabric type is lycra [laughs] and are so into their exercise and I'm not. I'm not cut from that cloth and I have a doughier physique. So I'm still trying to find that balance, I think.

Alison 31:23

Is there a savoury go to dish that you might cook in the evenings?

Tamal Ray 31:27

I go through phases. So I went through a phase of making more Bengali recipes that I grew up with. My most bog standard meal would be the chicken curry that my mum makes, which is, I guess is a stew with relatively simple flavours but with cumin, turmeric, onions, garlic, ginger. And that would be a warming recipe. I think that recipe more than anything, says home to me. But then in terms of what we make, and what we eat is quite varied. I think it changes very much based on the mood that we're in. My boyfriend had this really nice idea – and now that I'm free of revision – we're going to do because we can't travel and we can't go anywhere. It was like: 'Well, why don't we go to places with food? Why don't we pick a place we've never been to that we don't know the food very well, and we've not experienced eating it, and we'll make some really nice dishes from there'.

Jimi 32:25

It's a really good idea.

Alison 32:27

Because you're not alone – everyone's got cookbooks groaning on their shelves that just haven't really been cooked from, so it's just a great way while we can't travel. So if you're changing what you're cooking the whole time is there a standard thing that's always in your fridge?

Tamal Ray 32:41

Yeah, a lot of yoghurt. And a lot of lemon juice. That's another thing my boyfriend always rolls his eyes because I'm adding lemon juice to everything. I love really sharp flavours. I used to eat lemons as a kid. If you're having an Indian meal it's almost like a condiment, you always have a slice or two of lemon just to like squeeze over the food. And I would always spend the end of the meal just eating everyone's piece of lemon.

Jimi 33:11

Mine sweeping the lemons. I love it!

Alison 33:14

It's a good way to save food, reduce food waste – eating the lemons.

Tamal Ray 33:19

Scurvy, you know,

Jimi 33:22

We have spoken about *Bake Off* and the sensation that you became and you're a real fans' favourite and viewers' favourite – you were also an internet pin up for quite... in an intense way. And there was a real sort of kerfuffle around that. What was that like?

Tamal Ray 33:42

It was definitely... that was a surreal experience. Because I've always been quite shy, and I guess I am still quite shy, to be honest. So it was, yeah, it was weird having that sort of attention from people. I don't think I really knew what to do with it at the time. I mean I definitely didn't know what to do with it. But I guess, also, in a way, I kind of did want that attention. So one of the reasons that I went on *Bake Off* – I really love the show, I was a massive fan – also I'd been single for absolutely ages, and I hate dating. Yeugh, just first dates. I just loathe them because you're presenting... it's so awkward, you're presenting this weird version of yourself that you think will be acceptable to the other person. And they're doing the same thing. And it's – yuck, hate it. And I thought: 'Oh, you know, going on *Bake Off* would probably be quite a good way to find a boyfriend because...'

Jimi 34:39

It's a simpler way to do it.

Tamal Ray 34:42

If you want to find a relationship just compete on a baking competition. But I thought, actually, it'd be a good way of filtering people because they'll see me and they'll be like, either they'll think I'm a complete plonker and have no interest, or they'll be like: Oh, he seems alright'. And I guess it kind of all worked out really well, because it's how I met my boyfriend, Matt. So I was at Manchester Pride. It was a weekend when the show was still on, I think it was maybe just before the final was on. And he was out with his brother-in-law and his sister. And they spotted me. And he was too shy to come and say hello, but his brother-in-law wasn't. He was like: 'I'll go and say hello to him'. And then we all just got chatting. And that's how we met. And we've been together for four years now.

Jimi 35:36

That's fantastic. You mentioned Pride there. And it was this thing that you had to address as well, wasn't it? Because there was a lot of: 'Ooh, what is Tamal's situation?'. And I think that must have been really good for people to see you being so out and upfront in that way. And what was the process of that?

Tamal Ray 35:57

As the show went on, I thought people would just know that I was gay – I thought people would guess. And I didn't want to... because I had a Twitter account that I'd had for years and basically never posted anything on. And I didn't want to make this coming out statement on Twitter. I was like, I've been out for years, so it would feel a bit false to say something. And I kind of thought, well, I don't need to because people will just know. And it got all the way to the final and people hadn't really clocked on and then I felt really awkward at that point, I felt like I was being deliberately evasive by not having said anything.

Jimi 36:38

It was maybe just a lot of wishful thinking.

Tamal Ray 36:44

Yeah, so the way it worked, the *Radio Times* did an interview with us, with four semi-finalists, and they asked if I was going out with anyone, and – oh, they asked if I had a girlfriend, and I said: 'Oh, no, it would be a boyfriend, if anything, and no I don't have a boyfriend'. And so that was how I came out. And I told all my friends this. Yeah, I mean, it was... it's interesting seeing how things have changed, just in the course of my lifetime, and how I grew up at a time where Section 28 was still in force. And so... I think actually my school were great in terms of when we had sex education, relationship, education stuff, that even when Section 28 was still in force, they still acknowledged it. And I think that was a really helpful thing to hear. But just seeing how *Bake Off's* been this incubator for loads of LGBT people, and how accepted people are. It's great to see how society has moved on. Not that things are perfect and absolutely fine now, because they're not – obviously there's still work to do. But yeah, I feel lucky to live in the time and the place that I am at the moment.

Alison 37:58

Yeah, so you're very good at showing compassion and kindness to your patients as they're about to go under the anaesthetic – as a team how do people support – especially at the moment – how do people show kindness, and support, and compassion to you and your team?

Tamal Ray 38:13

One thing that has just become really clear how important it is, is community and feeling like you belong in a place and how important that is, I think for wellbeing. I think we undervalue it completely as a society. I think regardless of how healthy a person you are, if you were to ask the average person on the street: 'Oh, what are the things that you need to do to be healthy?', they would say: 'Eat well, exercise, don't smoke'. I hope those messages have got through to people in all walks of life. And I think more so now, people will be able to talk about wellbeing and mental health and mindfulness. But I think actually, a huge part of that is just community, we're social animals, we need to feel like we belong with the people around us. And I think as difficult as working in a pandemic has been, there have been

some really positive things at work. And so I've worked in two hospitals, two different hospitals since this all started. In the first hospital, they divided us into groups. So mixed skill groups, like consultants down to the most junior doctors, and we were always with those groups of people. And so although the shifts, especially in the beginning phase, were stressful, busy shifts. You got really used to that teamworking aspect. And it was really nice knowing that I would see exactly the same faces on each shift. I mean, maybe it wouldn't be nice if I didn't get on with them, but they were all lovely. And that made it just so much easier to deal with anything. And then the second hospital that I worked at, again, was just really friendly, but they've had a programme of events recently. They've had a wellbeing team organise all these events, so we've had things like Book Club, and then I did like a Zoom baking session for people. So we had loads of different people who work in the department dialling and with their families, and we were all baking together. This sort of stuff is so important. You know, I'm really lucky that I have a partner and although we haven't been able to see family and friends anywhere near as much, at least we've had each other. But there are people who are single who've been really isolated during all this, and it's made me think, well actually, community is just so important to our wellbeing. And so much of life stresses are just made so much more manageable by having people that you can talk to about them.

Jimi 40:46

Yeah. Tamal, you've been a fantastic guest. Thank you so much for taking the time, for joining us, for sharing about disastrous 10-year-old birthday cakes. Hope your mum forgives you for that one. Yeah, thank you so much. This has been great.

41:01

Thank you.

Jimi 41:07

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, Tamal Ray. To learn more about the series, go to [waitrose.com/podcast](https://www.waitrose.com/podcast), and please subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.