

LIFE ON A PLATE
SEASON 3, EPISODE 2: JOHN WHAITE

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SPEAKERS

John Whaite, Jimi Famurewa, Alison Oakervee

PLEASE NOTE:

This episode includes conversation about eating disorders and suicidal thoughts.

Jimi 00:05

Hello, and welcome to the third season of *Life on a Plate*, the podcast from Waitrose, in which we talk to some very special people about food, what it means to them, and the role it has played in their life. We ask about food memories and favourite recipes, must-have ingredients and the dishes that represent comfort, celebration or adventure, and find out a lot more about our guests in the process. Hello, hi, Alison, how are you?

Alison 00:36

Hi Jimi. I'm all right. Thank you. How about you? What have you been up to?

Jimi 00:40

Well, what I've been up to, as you well know, is receiving more mysterious packages. Right? It feels like, it's kind of a lovely little mystery unwrapping whatever you sent me, in any given week. This is a new thing where you are getting me to try various products. And this time, it was a little bit more straightforward. Or at least it seems straightforward because you've sent me raspberries. Yes, some beautiful-looking raspberries, but they're not, I'm guessing, just any old raspberries.

Alison 01:13

No, these are British raspberries. And that's because it's berry season. These raspberries have been picked when they're just at the right time so they're perfectly in season. They're sweet. They're not too sharp or tart. Try one, have one.

Jimi 01:28

OK. All right. They're also massive as well.

Alison 01:32

I mean, we've got the perfect climate for growing berries in Britain. They like it in the sunshine, but they don't like it too hot. So a bit cooler than the continent is just what they need. And that's why they're so sweet.

Jimi 01:42

They thrive. OK, here we go. Oh wow. Mmm.

Alison 01:49

They are delicious just to eat on their own as a snack.

Jimi 01:52

You're right, there's not... there's not the usual sort of instant tartness that you quite often get with raspberries. There's a lovely kind of soft sweetness initially. And then the kind of acidity comes in really nicely at the end. I'm going to have another.

Alison 02:08

They're not full of seeds like you associate with that raspberry jam and conserve.

Jimi 02:13

Wow, they're really, really good. And actually, I must confess, quite often, if I'm having raspberries on a granola with some yogurt, I will dribble sort of a little bit of honey on them because I'm kind of like, I've been burned too many times, so to speak, with very tart raspberries. So that's my kind of little, slightly shameful cheat.

Alison 02:32

But these British raspberries don't need any extra sugar. In fact, they'd be great for a pavlova where you've got all that sweet meringue at the bottom and then having that sweet but tart berry on top. The raspberry on top will just counteract it. But they're great for breakfast with yogurt, or even as a savoury dish with a bit of rocket and mozzarella.

Jimi 02:52

You're blowing my mind here, Alison... like with a savoury salad. I would never think to do that. But you're right. I guess it makes sense. The sweetness and acidity that you'd get from a dressing, say, is kind of evident in these. But wow, they are really good. Well, we should probably talk about our guest, rather than talk about raspberries. This, I think is one of our favourite episodes and guests to date, it is John Whaite, best known as winner of Series Three of *The Great British Bake Off*. But he's also the author of five books, he appears on shows like *Steph's Packed Lunch*, and just an all-round lovely human. He was great value, wasn't he?

Alison 03:35

He's such a lovely man. You know, I've loved talking to him. But I've actually worked with him quite a bit before. He's written some beautiful recipes for us for *Waitrose Weekend*. And he's more recently created a really gorgeous rainbow layer cake for Pride month. And that recipe was in *Weekend* and it's now on waitrose.com.

Jimi 03:54

Yeah, the way he talked about the significance of Pride, how it related to him, you know, as a young sort of lad from Lancashire, growing up on a farm in an environment where he didn't necessarily feel like he could fully be himself. And that journey he's been on... it was so great to hear in the way that he talks about his kind of route to self-acceptance and embracing his northern roots both in his life and in his cooking. It was all so good. And I think there were a few kind of emotional moments for me and I think for you as well. But we also laughed till we cried as well. Very frank on mental health, on the importance of being yourself. And, you know, just very honest about the things we don't see behind the gloss of social media and things like that. And it's such a lovely thing to hear. So here we go, here is our *Life on a Plate* conversation with John Whaite.

John Whaite, thank you so much for joining us. It's lovely to see you. I feel like I always say this with people that we've met through things like *The Bake Off*. But, obviously, you've got your community online and your cookery school, but I feel like I know you, like I feel like, you know, you must have this all the time and particularly as it was, it's almost a decade now since you won *Bake Off*.

John Whaite 05:25

It makes me feel so, you know, craggy and old. And it is nearly a decade. But yet, the beautiful thing about food is that people are interested in food, you know, it brings people together. And that sounds like such a cheesy thing to say. And I cringe when I hear it. But food is a glue that brings people together and, like you said, it is a community and to meet my students at the cookery school, to see pals on Instagram posting about their food, it just... it just makes you feel as though all the horror in the world which is going on right now, it makes you feel as though there's something that we have in common. And something that we can latch on to and still communicate about.

Jimi 05:54

Yeah, yeah, completely. Yeah. Just reflecting on that... 10 years... And, you know, you won the third series of the show, I think it was...

John Whaite 06:03

Yeah, it was.

Jimi 06:04

When you look back at that, John, what are some of the biggest changes, both personally, and in terms of your approach to food as well, and baking and the things that you've kind of learned and moved on from or left behind?

John Whaite 06:15

I think for me, it's been a huge drop of pretence. Like when I came into the industry, and when I was on *The Bake Off* and stuff I was, as a person, I was deeply insecure, you know. I was 23 and I kind of had to go through, go through that world, you know, from *Bake Off* in the public eye, at the same time as overcoming personal traumas. And, you know, I don't want to get too deep involved in it. But, you know, it was a really difficult process to actually... to grow up basically, because it took me a while to grow up. So, personally, it was, it's been a difficult journey since *The Bake Off*. You know, I'm still very privileged and I've got great family and all of that, but the things that I've had to kind of overcome and through therapy and that kind of thing, it's been, it's been interesting. But yeah, going back to the question, pretence for me, I tried to be a bit posher back then, I tried to be a bit more of a food snob. I tried to create really elaborate recipes with all these ingredients in the kind of Ottolenghi style, even though Ottolenghi is not snobby at all, it's really very good. You know, I tried to fit in, I didn't really know who I was. Whereas now I know exactly who I am, you know, well, at least the 2021 version of who I am. And I'm comfortable with it. I'm comfortable in my own skin for the first time in 32 years. And that really percolates into the food that I create, it percolates into the way I teach at the cookery school, you know, celebrating my northern accent. That's something I used to try and quieten and dampen, whereas now I'm proud to be a working-class ruffian from Wigan.

Jimi 07:50

And I don't know if this ties into it, but you grew up on a farm as well. And that idea of that background, and how that kind of shaped you, and shaped your approach and stuff...

John Whaite 08:00

But the thing is, I mean, it's interesting that you mentioned farming, because I found that in farming, in traditional farming scenarios, it's often quite a hierarchical situation in the family, but also on the farm itself. It's very, very traditional. Almost very, very Dickensian. And I think that was kind of part of the problem for me, overcoming that kind of expectation from... because farmers generally consider themselves I think fairly, you know, upper working class, middle class. So for me to kind of overcome that kind of expectation from my farming parents, I think that was part and parcel of it. But the food side of it, on the flip side, we learned to appreciate very basic food from a very early age and we created that in an almost... I always consider farming food is like Italian food, very rustic. Let the ingredients speak for themselves. Not too many frills, that kind of thing. So yeah, the farming food, the basic food, was always something to celebrate. But the kind of hierarchy of farming contradicts that in a way.

Jimi 09:02

Yes, yeah, the sort of farming politics...

Alison 09:05

It was a dairy farm that you grew up on, wasn't it?

John Whaite 09:07

It was a dairy farm. So my first job when I was younger was to go and feed the calves. So I used to have to get up at five o'clock in the morning, put my overalls on and go and feed the calves. But I thoroughly enjoyed it, you know, to hear the calves especially in the wintertime, when you'd hear them

breathing heavily in the barn and it was like blowing a gale outside, and the barn door would be banging against, you know, in the wind. It was just a very, very cosy, comforting experience.

Alison 09:32

What kind of food did you have as a child?

John Whaite 09:34

Very rustic food. So lots of Lancashire hotpots. Mum's a great cook but she has no pizzazz or flair; she kind of threw things in the oven. And she'd always cook with love. So it, I always think, you know, you can taste it when a mother cooks or a father cooks for you – or someone who loves you, it doesn't have to be necessarily a parent but maybe someone you love – when they cook for you, you can always taste it, even if it's rustic. So Mum used to cook a lot of hotpots, a lot of roast pork, that kind of thing, and always a roast dinner on a Sunday. It was very meaty. It was always a very meaty affair.

Jimi 10:06

Yeah. Was there ever a side of you that growing up in that life, you talk about it now, with like real appreciation and feeding the calves and it sounds idyllic, but like Minette Batters was a former guest on the show and she was talking about craving maybe some of the normality that she saw in, or perceived normality, she saw in her friends' lives. Did you feel that as well? Were there times when you just kind of didn't want to be, you know, a farm kid as it were?

John Whaite 10:31

Definitely. I think it was very much bittersweet experience for me. It really was very bittersweet, because on the one hand, we had this, this land to kind of roam around and build dens, and it was very free and liberated. But on a personal level, you know, growing up gay in a kind of very anti-queer environment, which would traditionally be anti-queer, you know, it was difficult because as beautiful as the freedom was, I was kind of a prisoner because I knew that I was gay, but I didn't want to express that, I didn't want to come out. I didn't want to talk about it because of... I perceived that there would be great judgement and rejection from my family. So, yeah, it was bittersweet. Bittersweet is the perfect way to describe it because there's so much to be proud and happy about. But, at the same time, it was quite a... it was an experience that really kind of diluted or made me at least suppress my identity for a while.

Jimi 11:23

Was there a turning point? You've talked about your partner, Paul, who you're engaged to – was it him? Or maybe somebody else that made you think yes, it's OK, there are people out there like me?

John Whaite 11:34

No, I mean, I think as we kind of went to, you know, Manchester's Canal Street and started to meet like-minded people. But for me, this was only, it's really only been in the past few years that I've been openly gay and I've spoken about it. I haven't, I still haven't been fully accepting of the fact that I'm, you know, here and queer and proud. And it really has only happened in the past couple of years. And I think that's because I think, you know, therapy, going through the therapy for the past 10, however many years, has definitely helped, but just being comfortable in my own skin. And I really hate the phrase 'self-care' because it kind of conjures these images of candles and, really, self-care is much

more disciplined and painful than that, you know. Self-care is going through trauma, forgiving people, accepting weaknesses. But I think going through that process has really made me love who I am. I think it sounds cheesy, but it's really nice. It's helped.

Jimi 12:32

Yeah. When does baking come into it for you then, like as a.. as a kid? And was it... what was it about baking in particular, and cooking in general, that you were drawn to?

John Whaite 12:42

I think on the one hand, it was very connective, it kind of connected me to Mum. So I would bake a lot with Mum after my parents divorced and when we moved into the farmhouse, and I think I had a deep-rooted fear that I was losing my Mum perhaps, you know, she remarried and all of that. So I think the baking was a great way of connecting and staying in touch with her. We lived together but staying emotionally connected I mean. But also I was obsessed with witches when I was younger. I wanted to be a witch. Every Halloween I'd dress as a witch and have a broomstick, a cat, a little skirt on, and I think, for me, it started as an interesting kind of alchemy, baking in particular, you know. So you put all these disparate ingredients into a pot and out comes a cake. Whereas when you make a roasted leg of lamb, it comes out as a roasted leg of lamb. Nothing changes. Obviously the flavour and texture amplifies and is much improved, but with baking it's like... it is witchcraft. It's really wonderful. And I still love that, it still really blows me away how you can make sugar into caramel, or you can make milk and eggs into crème patissière. I love it so much. And I think it's also about control. I think in a time in life when I was feeling very much out of control, baking... you have to be very precise about it, you have to be very calculated and accurate. So, for me, it was kind of a way of keeping my hand on a rudder basically.

Jimi 14:11

The obvious question is what kind of things were you baking? What kind of things were you cooking, like the first things you were cooking?

John Whaite 14:16

Well, it started with green microwavable cakes. I kid you not. Because I remember that Mrs Gore at high school... we would learn how to make microwavable cakes. Which is, you know, if you want a cake in five minutes it's fabulous.

Alison 14:30

So how old would you have been about then?

John Whaite 14:33

Oh, I was at high school then, so I must have been at least 11. I used to bake with Mum much earlier than that, when I was five, but that was kind of, you know, the butterfly cakes where you'd lop the top off and fill it with floppy cream. But my kind of emancipatory baking, as we'll call it, perhaps where I was on my own with no reins at all... It was, yeah, when I was making green microwavable cakes. And I'm colour-blind you see, so I just grabbed the first bottle of food colouring and just chucked it in and hoped

for the best. I mean, you know, I did then branch out to pink and orange... But, yeah, the first bakes left a lot to be desired.

Jimi 15:05

The green seems like it ties in nicely with the witch theme as well.

Alison 15:10

And then what did you progress to, after the microwavable cakes?

John Whaite 15:14

Well, I didn't bake a lot during like, my teens, my late teens, I didn't bake at all. In fact, when I got back, when I got with Paul, and I was working in between uni... Because I dropped out of university, I can't remember when it was. I dropped out of uni because I did not want to go.

Jimi 15:32

This was your law degree?

John Whaite 15:33

No, this was... I went... I started off at St John's at Oxford doing medieval and modern languages. I couldn't stand it. It wasn't for me. I didn't feel ready. I didn't feel perhaps emotionally prepared. I didn't feel like... I just didn't belong basically. So during that gap year in my job, I found that I was getting really depressed. I was getting severely, severely depressed. Like I'd have to take a week off work. And I found that during that week off work, I would bake five or six cakes a day. And this was... I was living at home, so I had to do it in Mum's Aga. And I can't, I still haven't mastered baking in an Aga. So everything was burned, or undercooked or underbaked. But it was the process of it... for me it was very spiritual, I think, and I think it is spiritual for me.

Alison 16:25

So what made you apply to *Bake Off*?

John Whaite 16:27

I was watching the first and second series, and at this stage during the second series, I'd gone back to university – I'd gone to Manchester – so I was closer to home. And I was doing my law degree. We were watching *Bake Off*, Paul and I, and I found that every single time *Bake Off* was on I would... whatever the technical challenge was that night, I'd go to Waitrose and I'd get the ingredients and I'd do the technical challenge until... even if it was till one o'clock in the morning. I would... I was obsessed with it. You know, it was probably, you know, it was probably a bit much but I just found... I just thought I'm gonna apply for this because I... you know, I knew I had a talent for baking. I knew I enjoyed it. And I thought, let's just have a bash.

Jimi 17:08

That idea of being maybe a bit obsessive about things and wanting to know how things work, and maybe a bit, you know, when you get an idea, you just kind of really go for it and you're all in... that

seems to be something that pops up a lot in terms of your life, you're kind of quite committed in a way that maybe not everyone would be.

John Whaite 17:26

Yeah, I think you've hit the nail on the head that I am like a dog with a bone. If I get an idea, I want to do it and I want to be the best at it. I want to be perfect at it. But actually, you know, in the past year, you know, having gone through this great personal epiphany of who I am and stuff, I've realised that that perfectionism, perfectionism in general isn't about fulfilling your own desires. It's about pleasing other people. And as I've accepted that, I've realised that I'm much happier to be here to make a fool of myself on TV, or to make a recipe that is, you know, perhaps a bit basic, but delicious. So I think I'm kind of separating myself from that... that negative perfectionism, yes. You know, on one hand, like you say, perfectionism can propel you, it can really make you competitive. It can make you want to achieve great things. And I think that will always stay with me because that's a personal... Yeah, that's for me. But this idea of this pretence, you know, it's separating myself from pretence again, and, yeah, I'm kind of happier to be a bit more slapdash and rustic.

Jimi 18:23

Relaxing into it a little bit... Because the thing that's... that I, again, like, looking at your sort of biography, and immediately after *Bake Off*, and you know, you win the series, and it's at the time that the show is really becoming this sensation, I think, and it's kind of that tipping point. And then you go and study at the Cordon Bleu. You're famous, and you've won this big popular show, but for you, you still wanted to go and study and learn more.

John Whaite 18:54

Yeah, I just... wanted to be, to learn because I always think, you know, I always value... I've always valued my education, even though I dropped out of Oxford because I didn't want to be there, I've always valued being taught by the best people. Because I think, sometimes, I think the risk with a show like *Bake Off* is that you win it and you might think I'm the... you know, I'm the bee's knees, I can do anything. But actually I think it's really important to always remind yourself that you aren't... every day's a school day, as they say, you're learning new things. And if you can go to Cordon Bleu or to another cookery school and learn... and learn new skills... That was my aspiration... to become a professional, basically, to have that... those foundation skills that would then set me up to write books, to write recipes, to teach other people, to do TV. I wanted to be a professional. I didn't want to just be... you know, and that's no disrespect to other *Bake Off* winners who haven't gone on to study, you know, they are no... I'm no better than them in any way, shape, or form just because I've studied, but it was just again, a personal aspiration, which is something I really, really wanted to do. And yeah, it was hard work. So let me tell you, goodness me!

Alison 19:56

I haven't done Le Cordon Bleu but I used to work for Le Cordon Bleu and I used to just see the assessments that the students used to do and I'm in awe of anyone that has done the patisserie course at Le Cordon Bleu, but I guess it's amazing foundations that it lays down.

John Whaite 20:11

That's it, it's the foundations because when I was doing it – I think they've updated the recipes a bit more now – but they were very traditional, very 70s, very French. And we had to do sugar sculptures and boxes made of chocolate and it was wonderful. It was great, great fun, but it's... some of the stuff that I learned was just from another planet, you know. You would never do it now in this day and age, but it was a wonderful skill, a wonderful skill set, great foundation and again, discipline, you know. I'm a sucker for discipline although, you know, you troll my social media, you might think this guy has no self-control. Sometimes I don't – I've posted things I'm embarrassed by but that's just life – but really I am quite disciplined and I'm quite a shy person as well. I'm quite, believe it or not, I'm quite introverted, quite shy and quite disciplined.

Alison 20:56

The thing I always find fascinating about you and your recipes is... you've done a lot of writing for me on *Waitrose Weekend*, and also you've done videos for our social media channel. But you do a lot of savoury dishes too, and you've done more savoury books than sweet. What do you prefer? You kind of were known for becoming famous for baking but savoury seems to play quite a huge role in what you cook.

John Whaite 21:21

It does because, you know, I don't... I don't eat cake every single day. I really do have to watch what I eat. Part of that's because I've got an eating disorder but also, you know, it's perhaps not wise to eat cake every day, I don't know. But I do eat three square, solid meals every day at least... you know, savoury ones and... yeah, and I love cookery as well because it's... I think it's so different from baking. You know I mentioned it before about roasting lamb – it stays as a lamb leg whereas baking is lots of different ingredients. And I love how if I get a little bit, perhaps, bored... because I do get bored easily as well, that's my problem... if I get bored of the baking side, I can then, you know, explore savoury... and savoury, still it's something that I'm exploring more and more you know,... baking, I think, the discipline of it, the ratios, I've got that down to a tee and I know what's what with the baking, but cookery... I'm still kind of in my toddler days with that. And that's exciting.

Jimi 22:14

Yeah. You mentioned there about having to watch what you eat and being kind of mindful of that. And you have been... you've spoken really beautifully and honestly about, you know, the struggles you've had with eating disorder and its connection to the mental health problems that you've also been, I think really sort of vitally upfront and open about and it's like completely to your credit. How have you sort of made it work when you're working in food? It must be such a... it must be such a difficult thing.

John Whaite 22:44

It is. It's about managing and recognising triggers. So if I'm going through a particular period, at work or in my life where I feel that, you know, I'm out of control and out of... everything's sort of spiralling, I've noticed that that's when the bulimia will kick in. It's a coping mechanism. It's a kind of a strategy of staying in control. So it's just about recognising those triggers. And, you know, taking a step back. So I remember during *Bake Off*, for example... well, it was after *Bake Off*, when I was writing my first book, I was testing a recipe for some English muffins, and it went completely wrong. And rather than just walk

away and go and see a pal or have a pint, I just sat there, cried and I forced all 12 of these muffins down, and then had to go and, you know, purge. And yes, it's just about recognising that it's a frenzy. You know, bulimia is quite a frenzied... It's almost like a shark attack. It's that phrase... like, my eyes glaze over. So I kind of just have to just breathe and take a step back.

Jimi 23:43

And this is something that you... I was just gonna say, this discovery was made through talking to a therapist, right, and you kind of found out... so you didn't know what this was until relatively recently.

John Whaite 23:53

I knew it was... you know, I don't want to say abnormal, but I knew it wasn't perhaps healthy behaviour. So I spoke to my therapist, mostly for my depression and for, you know, my anxiety, but I mentioned this, and through my therapy sessions... we don't actually really talk about the bulimia in a kind of CBT way, we don't try and deal with it. We talk about relationships, about the past, about things that perhaps have triggered this lack of, you know, this... the way that I'll see myself and I see life. And yeah, therapy is so... talking therapy is so important for an eating disorder. It really, really is. And I think I shied away from psychodynamic therapy during lockdown one, because it's such a heavy topic, you know, going back through your past and trawling... but you have to, you know, you really have to acknowledge those demons and go through trauma and forgive it and let go of it. Yeah, yeah. So yeah, if anyone is listening and struggles with that, I just want to say to them, you know, please speak to a professional about it.

Jimi 24:55

Yeah, no, it's really good advice and I imagine... Have people been in touch with you and sort of... 'cos you're talking about these things on *Steph's Packed Lunch* and, you know, in kind of mainstream forums and stuff, and it must be of real value to people that haven't heard anyone... you know, there is so many stigmas around.

John Whaite 25:12

Yeah, exactly. I think that the food industry, you know... people look at the food industry and think it's this gorgeous, you know, glitzy, glamorous industry, but food, food isn't about that... food is about not necessarily the celebrations we have, not just the celebrations of food we have, but also the struggles we each have with food. And, you know, even if you don't have an eating disorder, particular foods can still trigger very horrible memories of childhood and that kind of thing. Because of, you know, where the olfactory bulb is in our head, and, you know, it triggers memories, you know, physiologically, scientifically triggers memories. So yeah, I think food... food is a much broader subject than just, you know, the glamorous side of it. It's life... food, you know, really is life.

Alison 25:54

And actually really rare for a man to speak out about an eating disorder.

John Whaite 25:59

Well that's it... and men don't speak, you know, men are much... much more, not afraid to speak, but they've been conditioned not to... this idea of what manliness is, and what... you know, it's nonsense, you're a human being.

Jimi 26:10

Yeah, even though there are so many more of these discussions happening today, we've still got so far to go in terms of people being upfront and open about it. And, you know, even on a very low scale, I think of, you know, my male friends, and they're the ones that have, you know, set ways of eating or are on a keto diet, or like, you know, it's kind of... it's such a part of how all of us try to... try to find balance in our relationship with food. You mentioned there that, obviously, there can be some quite challenging or difficult triggers or attachments that food or dishes have. But then the flip side of that is obviously there can be such positive and happy associations. What are the things for you that you crave, that you love, that scream comfort?

John Whaite 26:54

Oh, I'm a sucker for anything with melted cheese. You know, I love melted cheese. And yeah, I kind of love Spanish food as well. Because you're raised to go on college trips to, like Santander and Salamanca and I spent a summer in Madrid once when I ran away as a teenager.

Jimi 27:15

Oh hang on, don't just breeze past that, you've got to tell us a bit more about that.

John Whaite 27:20

Well, I went... originally, I went across to Salamanca to teach English to Spanish kids. And it was a one- or two-week affair. But then I met a Spanish lad who I took an interest in. So I ended up staying with him for longer than I ought to have done. And, yeah, we used to eat the most incredible food and Spanish food has got a real place in my heart. But you know, rustic Italian because the thing I love about Italian food as well is that people think, you know, the notions that we have here about spaghetti and all that nonsense. Italian food is so regional and so... even within the regions, you've got families who will create food in a particularly different way. And there's a great Italian restaurant in Lancashire, actually, in Gisburn called La Locanda, which is a really, really great one. So yeah, I love starchy carbs. I love cheese. Yeah.

Jimi 28:13

You're making me hungry just hearing it to be honest. You're talking about travel quite a lot there as well. And one of the things that Alison and I really wanted to talk to you about was in 2019, I think it was where you went to Canada to volunteer on a farm. What happened there?

John Whaite 28:29

I'd gone back to university; I'd actually gone back to do my barrister training. Because I, you know, I kind of thought that I had to. I had to please other people and become a barrister. This is post *Bake Off*. You know, I had five books out at the time, I was.... no I was working on my fifth book as I was in Canada, actually. And yeah, so I ended up getting pneumonia from stress. And I had to drop out of the

law course. And I kind of felt like I'd failed, and I felt... I felt suicidal. You know, I really, really did think I was going to end it. And so me and Paul sat down and I said, "Look, I'm going to have to go away somewhere, I don't ... you know, I need to get out of the country. I need to go where I want to go and be with nature. And it was so weird because I went... I applied to this this volunteer platform, an organisation called WWOOFing. So it's World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms. The farm I got... I was lucky enough to be put upon... was a farm where the woman was a nurse and my mum was a nurse but also a farmer. So there were so many parallels with my... it was so bizarre. And I think, yeah, I think they were... you know, they were really strict. It was get up at half six, make breakfast, have coffee together, out by seven o'clock, have the animals fed. And it really was the most grounding experience because it was you know, I'm not gonna lie, it was privileged escapism, you know, you know, there are so many people in this country in the world who would go through the same mental health issues that I've been through and wouldn't be able to afford to take the time to do that or leave the kids. So, you know, I must acknowledge that it was privileged entitled escapism. But I was lucky enough that I was able to do it. And yeah, working on the farm was just... it was just so grounding and you know, to be with animals that relied entirely on me to help them and to feed them. And to clean them.

Alison 30:13

I mean, it was a hard winter because I remember seeing the photographs that you did post while you were there on Instagram. You know, it's a hard winter and lots of snow and ice and breaking the troughs of water, so the animals could just drink for the day and...

John Whaite 30:26

But that was what I loved most about it; it was exactly that. I remember the cows, I had to drive the quad up to the cows every morning. And every morning, there'd be two or three inches of ice on top of the water trough. So I had to use a piece of wood and just hack away and then use my hands. And yeah, it was... I loved it, you know. It was like, almost like Wim Hof, you know, that cold-water breathing technique. It was almost like that, because you realised that you were... I got to know the cows: there was Pandora, Fergie and Cash. And they'd come up every morning... Cash the calf would come and lick my face as I was taking the ice out. And, you know, there was no communication other than... well there was communication, there was a great deal of communication with the animals, but there was no verbal communication, there was no expectation or judgement. And that, you know, for me, that was a really important thing.

Jimi 31:11

What was Paul's reaction to this, to something so extreme? Yeah, I guess he understood that it was, you needed something that extreme to respond to the extreme thoughts and feelings that you were having, clearly.

John Whaite 31:24

He did. He didn't... he had no judgement, all he had was complete support. You know, I... he is an angel walking earth. He really is. He's the most down-to-earth, lovely human being anyone could ever meet. And I, he just... he was there. You know, he said, "I'll look after the dog, I'll sort everything out, go and do it. Because I think, you know, he knew... like the animals, there was no judgement from him.

You know, he knew... he knew that I had to go and do it. And then he actually came out, he flew out to Canada for the last week of the farming, and the farmers got to know him. And that was also really nice, because the... you know, the farm was in British Columbia, in quite a conservative area. So, you know, not everything goes there. And I said to the farmer, "Can I bring Paul out?" and he was like... Dan the farmer was this really kind of old-school guy, and he was like, "Just don't be smooching in front of me." So I get that, you know, I get that's where it comes from. I understand that they're his boundaries, because that's what it was for me. That's exactly what it was: boundaries, because boundaries in life, whether it's the bulimia, whether it's oversharing on social media, whether it's you know, drinking too much, for example, it's all about boundaries. And that's what the farm was: it was one big boundary.

Jimi 32:43

We mentioned earlier that you are shy, even though people would not really see it. But one of the more recent things I saw was you cooking naked on *Steph's Packed Lunch*, with just an apron on, so that was...

John Whaite 32:55

Yeah, we had some nudists on. And so one of the producers Lucy who is a really, really wonderful producer, she said, "Let's get everyone naked." So Steph... the beautiful thing I love about Steph is that I've worked with loads of different presenters, but she is just so down to earth. She's a pal, she texts, she's daft but she's sometimes rude. And it's just such a lovely show to be part of. Yeah, so when they asked me to cook naked, I kind of thought when I heard that former Home Secretary Alan Johnson was going to be naked, I thought, "Well, then I've got to do it." But also, you know, it's about body image and about celebrating, that kind of thing. And I'm under no illusions, you know, although I'm trying... the bulimia is in control... in a way, you know, my bodybuilding and that, you know, exercise – I know that that's just another form of the bulimia, so it's... I've got to be careful with that, you know.

Jimi 33:44

Yeah, we should go back to the bodybuilding, as I don't think you've talked about this... this is another new thing that you've kind of gone all in on. Weight training seems like it's been a big part of your experience. And it's kind of... it's quite annoying because, you know, we all had these plans about lockdown and emerging as new kind of svelte, ripped people and it looks like you've actually done it, John, which is infuriating, like you look amazing.

John Whaite 34:08

Well, I think again, it was about control during lockdown, you know. My cookery school was on the verge of collapse, because we didn't get any government help unfortunately, no, nothing at all. No, it's all right, we're still... we're coming back in July. But I had to do something, you know: it was either drink two bottles of vino verde a night or to actually control myself. And so it was bodybuilding. And I found for me, when I work out I listen to either classical music or yoga music – very, very slow, slow music – and it's a kind of meditation. Again, I have to be careful because of the body-image thing and yeah, dysmorphia, you know, plays into it. But yeah, bodybuilding and CrossFit is... I absolutely love it and I used to be so anti-sport. I'm discovering that John Whaite is a completely different person to who I thought he was. And I like him, you know.

Alison 35:02

And does Paul join you with the exercise as well?

John Whaite 35:05

No, no, we don't... if we work out together in the gym, we often fall out. Because when it comes to deadlifting, he has not got... he doesn't want to do it, let's put it that way, and I'm a control freak. So yeah.

Alison 35:22

What about cooking? Does he... do you allow him in the kitchen?

John Whaite 35:25

I'm ashamed to say this on a Waitrose podcast. But when... at the end of lockdown when... sort of towards the end of winter this year, he was doing all the cooking and every single night apart from weekends, we would just eat chilli – beef chilli, because it was packed with protein. It was easy. And he would just make a giant batch at the start of the week. And then we'd just live off that for the week. You know, because I kind of... there are times in life when I can't face cooking. You know, I really can't face it. Him taking care of me was making a giant batch of chilli.

Alison 35:58

That answers one question because during last year, you were doing a recipe a day on Instagram... that's what it felt like, I was watching you on your stories posting. And I was like thinking, "He's doing all that? How's he cooking dinner as well?" But now I know.

John Whaite 36:14

Beef chilli. It was in the fridge ready to go.

Jimi 36:16

You mentioned the cookery school there, which again is another thing about, you know, your post *Bake Off* career that I think is quite striking and quite admirable that you sort of took what seemed to be like a different path. Like as you were in this kind of huge position of fame and, you know, power and opportunity and you kind of were looking to pay it forward, it seems. Like obviously setting up a business but you wanted to teach other people and that felt like a full-circle moment as well, because you worked on it with your family and it was on the farm, wasn't it, it was on the farm you grew up on?

John Whaite 36:48

Yeah, it's on the farm that... where we grew up. And we spent 18 months renovating it, because it's in an old Grade Two listed barn so we had to have all these different surveys, you know – a bat survey, owl survey, a highway survey. So it took a long, long time to renovate this barn. And it was a barn... it was where cows were milked... up until the 1950s my family used to milk cows in this barn. And so, you know, there's a lot of cleaning to do. And yeah, I just... I don't know, I kind of wanted to set up the cookery school because I, you know, I've always – although I am a bit of a traveller, and I'll, you know... spiritually and physically I like to roam, I always still need an anchor, I always need that security. And I think for me, the cookery school was, it was also a great way of, of kind of not wasting money, you

know, I wanted to invest money in property and a business and I kind of wanted to just be a bit more sensible, because straight after *Bake Off* it was a bit wild, you know, I'd be a bit lavish and silly, and I don't... I don't regret it. But perhaps I could have been a bit more sensible. And so I think, yeah, part of the growing-up process for me was to open the cookery school, but you know, I love it. I love teaching people. I love the interaction, you know, on a cold, crisp winter morning to have 10 strangers or, you know, sometimes familiar faces now too, but to have 10 people and me crowded around the kitchen island. And, you know, we create... they always come in and in winter, I always give them a slice of spiced pumpkin and whisky loaf. And the candles are always lit. And we always just, yeah, we just spend the day being silly, but learning new things from each other. And then we have a few drinks at the end. And it's just... it's community, you know, it's belonging. It all comes down to identity and to belonging and to mutuality and respect. And yeah, that's what's so beautiful about food is that it embodies all of those values.

Jimi 38:43

Well, it does seem like that return to home and not just kind of physically but spiritually as being kind of a big part of your story. And I know that you... you did live in London for a while, didn't you? And was it...

John Whaite 38:57

I did. Yeah, we loved it.

Jimi 38:58

Yeah. What was the decision of going back? Because it feels like it's really important. And you know, we started off talking about you kind of embracing your Northernness as well. And that being a big part of the recent years.

John Whaite 39:10

I think that's exactly it. I think it's as I kind of came to terms with my identity and who I am and started to learn exactly that... you know, my identity, I think I just wanted to be at home. I love London for its diversity, for its restaurants, for its markets, for its people. But, for me, being cosy and quiet around my log fire at home with my dog and my partner, that's all I want from life. All the work I do, you know, even... I love TV work, I love writing books, but it's all just so that I can have a quiet life with my partner. And that's the most important thing. And that's my anchor. That's the anchor that I've been looking for all my life is exactly that: just home.

Alison 39:47

You and Paul have been together for quite a long time. 13 years. So he was with you before you did *Bake Off*?

John Whaite 39:56

He's witnessed these multiple transformations. We always laugh and say it's remarkable that we're still together because, like I said, I get bored so easily. I always chop and change who I am, you know. I'm Adam Ant, basically, or Madonna. I'm constantly changing my image. But the one thing that's been consistent in my life is Paul.

Alison 40:18

Doesn't he do the designing for your books?

John Whaite 40:21

Yeah, he designs them. But sometimes (like *Comfort*, for example, my book on comfort food), I designed the cover of that. He obviously put it together but I said, "This is what I want." And yeah, we work really well together. Because he is... he can interpret what it is I'm trying to express. And he knows me and he's so calm and patient about it. You know, don't get me wrong, sometimes we'll fight, you know, fight all night long shouting at each other.

Alison 40:51

You're just a normal couple.

John Whaite 40:53

But you know, I always win.

Jimi 40:58

That notion of, you know, I mentioned it before, but talking about your relationship with Paul, and it is just, you only need to look at a few interviews with you to see that he has been this constant in your life and kind of support throughout all the things that you've gone through. Again, just contrasting with what you talked about, where you were younger, and you were kind of struggling to kind of find yourself in looking for kind of, you know, echoes of the person that you that you saw yourself as like it's such an important thing. And you create this cake with Waitrose: a rainbow cake for Pride.

John Whaite 41:30

Yes. Well, we want to celebrate, you know, the LGBTQI plus community wants to celebrate queerness, we want to celebrate diversity because, you know, growing up in a conservative farming background, for me, as I've said, you know, it was very difficult to embrace sexualities and cultures and all of that, you know, it was kind of... it was a taboo to even talk about that kind of thing. And as I've come on this – I hate this phrase so much – but 'spiritual journey', you know, as I've grown up, I've realised that being queer and embracing that is such an important thing. And Pride, you know, I used to think Pride was just a big, throbbing drunken festival. There is part of that to it. But mostly Pride is about saying to any minority, we love you, we hear you, you are welcome here. And, you know, I can't talk about this without getting emotional, because especially with the rainbow flag, you know, the original emblem of the gay community and the queer community was a pink triangle, which was what was sewn on to the outfits of prisoners in Nazi Germany, you know, queer prisoners, and we embraced that for a long time in our community. And then after the riots, which started the Gay Pride events worldwide, a guy called Gilbert Baker in San Francisco redesigned what the gay flag would be and that is the rainbow flag. And that has recently undergone a bit more of a transformation to be even more inclusive. And, you know, only in the past few years have I seen that flag as a life raft. You know, it is about identity and about acceptance and about love. And it's getting rid of that little voice in my head from when I was a child that would say, "Don't be too gay, you know, don't do that, you're being too gay." It's not listening to that voice anymore. It's saying, "Be as gay as you want, lad." And I'm so proud to have been asked and to

have created the recipe for Waitrose because it's a great platform to educate people on this subject. It's a great platform to share a really good recipe, by the way.

Alison 43:37

It's a beautiful recipe. It's a gorgeous recipe, isn't it? It's delicious. And, you know, we've got the video of you making it so you can follow your guide and hear more about you talking about how to do the cake and the meaning of Pride to you as an individual. And it's also online too. So, it's just a fantastic, beautiful cake.

John Whaite 43:42

And I use a great technique in it with them. It's not a technique I invented and I wouldn't want to, you know, to claim that but it's a technique where you use two acrylic discs to put the buttercream on the cake and it makes it so neat and perfect. And perhaps perfection is something I shouldn't avoid. When it comes to cakes, I think Pride cake needs to be perfect.

Alison 44:16

Before you go, there's a question that I ask everyone. I'm basically really nosy and have to know if they have a storecupboard ingredient that's a must-have in your house.

John Whaite 44:26

The old, pretentious me – the guy who was trying to impress people – would say something really obnoxious. But I think for me, it's just got to be either a bottle of Worcester sauce or a bottle of sriracha – that's all I want. You know, either that or a bit... maybe this is a bit more pretentious, but a bit of miso paste goes a long way.

Alison 44:42

I've also got a kitchen grill for you, to ask 10 quick questions.

44:45

Let me limber up.

Alison 44:48

Tea or coffee?

John Whaite

Coffee

Alison

Mash or chips?

John Whaite

Chips

Alison

Fruit or veg?

John Whaite

Veg

Alison

High tech or wooden spoon?

John Whaite

High tech. I can't believe I just said that. I feel like I've abandoned all my morals and my virtues but yeah, high tech.

Alison 45:04

Sight or aroma?

John Whaite 45:06

Aroma, because it's so... you know, just smell triggers instantly memories, you know.

Alison 45:10

Ice cream or sticky toffee pudding?

John Whaite 45:13

STP. I always call it the little black dress of the dessert world. STP – the LBD.

Alison 45:22

It's good. Fried or poached?

John Whaite

Fried.

Alison

Sofa supper or restaurant meal?

John Whaite 45:27

Sofa supper with a blanket, a log fire and a nice bottle of wine.

Alison

Baguette or sourdough?

John Whaite

Baguette. Ficelle, in particular – you know the string baguette. I love a ficelle.

Alison Nice! Butter or olive oil?

John Whaite

Butter. Butter, butter, butter all the way.

Alison 45:50

Thick slice of it. That's it. That's the kitchen grill done. It's just a way of being nosy!

Jimi 45:55

Alison just privately logs and collates the answers and comes up with her own.

John Whaite 46:03

It doesn't actually go on the podcast, it's just...

Jimi 46:06

... for Alison's records. Well, John Whaite, thank you so much for joining us. It's been such a beautiful, emotional, honest, funny conversation. And it's just great to see you – kind of almost a decade into our time of thinking we knew you – emerging in this wonderful, fantastic way.

John Whaite 46:26

It's been an honour, honestly, thank you so much, guys. Thank you.

Jimi 46:34

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 John Whaite. If you've enjoyed this conversation, you can find lots more like it by subscribing wherever you get your podcasts. To learn more about the series, go to waitrose.com/podcast