

LIFE ON A PLATE

SEASON 3, EPISODE 3: ANDI OLIVER

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SPEAKERS

Andi Oliver, Jimi Famurewa, Alison Oakervee

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, Alison, how are you doing?

Alison 00:37

I'm all right, thank you. How are you doing? I've got to say congratulations on last week's Guild of Food Writers win!

Jimi 00:42

Well, thank you very much, that really makes it sound like I've sort of forced you to say that, like I've written it into your script or something. But no, thank you. That's really sweet of you. It was the loveliest possible surprise. And yeah, it was really, really nice. I feel like, you know, we're gonna be able to celebrate in some form because yet again, you have sent me a consignment of delicious things to try and this is a proper spread this time. You've kind of given me strict instructions to get things ready. What have you sent me? What are we going to be trying?

Alison 01:16

I really wanted you to try these lamb shawarmas from Waitrose. I know you and your wife, when you're busy, often get deliveries and takeaways so I just thought this was better than one of them. It's faster – all the cooking has been done for you. You just have to put it in the oven to heat through for 25 minutes.

Jimi 01:35

Let me give it a go. You're absolutely right. 'Cos I think obviously in my line of work, I try a lot of different things and I'm, you know, quite adventurous in terms of food, but you can't always match that adventure with the time needed or the inclination. So yeah, this is perfect.

Alison 01:52

So a lamb shawarma is just a really slow-cooked dish of lamb and it's heavily spiced so you've got some amazing aromatic spices in there; you've got cardamom...

Jimi 02:06

The smell and that spice is brilliant. I love... Shawarma is fascinating because it's – I don't know you see it quite a lot everywhere, you see it used for making vegetables, you see like cauliflower and celeriac shawarmas. But yeah, this looks great. So, I've got some houmous here. I've got some lettuce cups and some salad that you told me to get.

Alison

Bit of flatbread...

Jimi

Yeah, let's give it a go.

Alison 02:30

Depending on how you want to try it, you can eat it in the flatbread as a sandwich or just have it as a mezze, sharing.

Jimi 02:37

Mmmm. [Eating] Oh my god. Really, really good.

Alison 02:42

Just the lamb, it just melts in your mouth. And yeah, it's just packed full of all those lovely spices.

Jimi 02:48

Yeah, yeah, there's a real sort of... you can get the cinnamon, the fragrance, the sweetness, and you're right, it's kind of, it's a bit like a magic trick, isn't it, that you can get that sort of slow-cooked, falling-apart, like spoonably soft texture.

Alison 03:03

I love the fact that all the hard work's been done for you. And you can just empty it into the tray and 20 minutes later or 25 minutes later it's all cooked and delicious, and all that slow cooking has been done by other people.

Jimi 03:10

The meat is you know, it's kind of – shawarma is what we would possibly more recognise as a kebab, like a kind of style of cooking on a vertical spit. You go over to Mexico and it turns into like al pastor, which is like brought over by Lebanese immigrants there. And so it's kind of all around the world, this way of cooking. And it's really replicated not just the spicing that you recognise, but the texture, like the falling apart, tender – you've got the little kind of different... there's this real textural interest. Yeah, yeah, it's a kind of contrast there. I really love it. Oh, my God, I'm gonna have to pull myself away from it and get us down to business basically. We should probably get on with introducing our guest on this episode, who is the absolute human whirlwind that is Andi Oliver. Andi is probably best known as the host of the *Great British Menu* and it was great to hear from her. The significance she feels of being,

you know, a person of colour, a woman of colour, and having that role, and how she agonised slightly over moving from being a judge on the show to being a presenter...

Alison 04:27

I mean, I loved talking to her and hearing... she gave us a sneak peek from her kitchen about the new cookbook that she's been working on. She was in Antigua and she ended up being there over Christmas and the January lockdown. And so she spent time with family, really understanding Antiguan cuisine and all the differences in Caribbean food, so I can't wait for that book to come out.

Jimi 04:51

I do think that that was a bit of an exclusive; I don't think she's spoken about it. So yeah, I think we should pat ourselves on the back for that. But you're right, it was really great to speak to someone in their kitchen, I think it's the first time we've properly done it. And she was, you know, pointing out things and it was triggering her memories about food. And she's so great on the links between food and music. Both those things have been a huge part of her career. She was a musician in the band, Rip Rig + Panic and obviously she's been a food writer and broadcaster for a long time. She talked really movingly about food and how it helped her through the time when her brother Sean died tragically young and just how food kind of pulled her through, and sharing food with people, and just the power of mealtimes and family and community to do that – food being the glue that knits all that together. And she's a punk as well, apparently, which I didn't really know. She was great on the importance of the punk movement and the awakening, and how important it was for her growing up as a young black woman in Suffolk and you know, the only person that looked like her for miles and miles. She was a riot. She was lots of fun. So, let's stop talking about it and let people enjoy listening to it. Here is our conversation with Andi Oliver.

Andi Oliver, welcome to Life on a Plate.

Andi Oliver

Hello, lovely people. How are you?

Jimi

We're great. All the better now you are here.

Andi Oliver

I'm all right now I've got back up off the floor.

Jimi

I wasn't sure if we were gonna talk about it, but Andi set our hearts racing because just as we were preparing to record, we thought we'd lost her! She kind of fell with the most dramatic fall ever. And I genuinely was worried. But she's absolutely fine, that's the good news.

Andi Oliver 07:00

It was a bit slow motion, wasn't it, because I fell over my shoe – because I've got these flip flops on. I fell over them *and* the headphone wire *and* the stool. So it was a very complicated thing.

Alison 07:11

But from our point of view, it was the best bit of slapstick going.

Andi Oliver

That's why I did it really, just to amuse you.

Jimi 07:17

Yeah, just as a sort of physical icebreaker. But anyway, never mind your fall, we want to talk about your rise, to be honest. And you seem to me – obviously you've had such a varied and rich career as a restaurateur, as a broadcaster, as a musician – it feels at the moment like with your hosting role and the *Great British Menu* and how successful that's been and how much people have responded to your personality and your character, and you're appearing on front covers, it feels like having had that variety of things that you've done, like now, your popularity has never been higher and it's surging. What's that, like from your point of view?

Andi Oliver 08:03

No one is more surprised than me, for a start. What is going on? At one point, about a month ago, I was on TV twice a day for four days a week and I felt like I had to apologise to people. "I'm really sorry to be bugging you all constantly on the TV." I don't even know what's happening. But it's joyful for me. And I wasn't sure about taking on the new role on *GBM*; I had a little bit of trepidation about it because...

Jimi

Why was that?

Andi Oliver Well for a start I love sitting in between Oliver [Peyton] and Matthew [Fort]. It's one of the most hilarious days of the week – a couple of hours in between Oliver and Matthew arguing with them about food is just a lot of fun. It really, really is. Because I was a judge initially. I was a judge initially for the first couple of years and then Patrick Holland at BBC called me up and said, would I do it? And I said, "No." No, actually, they asked me to do it and I said "No." And then Patrick Holland called me – he runs BBC 2 – and said, "Please," and I said "Well..." And also it's not just that I was worried about missing the boys but I also thought, "Actually, I'm not a comedian." And I, you know, before, Susan had done it and she's very, very funny – Susan Calman. She's very, very funny. So I was a bit like "Hmm, I'm not really good at being funny to order." Do you know what I mean? It's like, I like to have a laugh with people but I'm not like, jokey-jokey. And, and then I also was concerned that I didn't want to lose any sense of authority, because I also think it's important that there is a woman of colour on TV, in the food industry with authority, and I think that's a really important position to hold and I take it very seriously. I just think that you know, our industry, I love our industry, but it's incredibly white, and it's incredibly male-driven. So, you know, and also age-wise, I'm 58 years old; I just turned 58. So a woman of my age, of colour, in a position of authority in our industry – I just thought it was really, really important that I didn't lose that position. So I was concerned about that. I was concerned about that. But actually what I realised and what Patrick said to me is like, "No, I just want you to expand your role. I want you to, to broaden it out; I want you to connect more with the chefs and do more things." So I was like, "OK, when you put it like that, I'll do it." So I said "Yes." And I'm really, really glad that I did.

Because I enjoyed the Christmas series and the last series so, so much; engaging with all of the chefs on their entire journey with the dish, the evolution of each dish, seeing – I mean, they worked so incredibly hard. And these are people at the top of their game, you know what I mean? They all are.

Jimi 10:48

Well, you know, food is clearly the thing that has been a constant throughout your life and anchored, you know, so much of what you've done, so we wanted to kind of take you back a little bit as well. And in terms of where that was born, where that kind of came from, can you ever remember a time where you weren't completely invested and interested in food?

Andi Oliver 11:08

No, not really. Not really. It's funny because somebody asked me this yesterday. And I said, "Well I started cooking stuff at, you know, at home obviously with my mum and dad, but I was really little, I was about five or six or something. And I started making the cauliflower cheese every Sunday for Sunday roast – you know standing on a stool making the cauliflower cheese. So one of the first things I ever learned to make was a white sauce. And then I learned how to cook rice very early. And, you know, just the basic things that were in our household. At school – I got in trouble at school when I was about 11 because the Home Ec teacher tried to teach us to cook rice. And she did weird stuff. You know that weird stuff where people boil it like pasta and then they drain it? And then I went, "That's not how you cook rice." She went, "This is how you cook rice." I was like, "No, it isn't!" I got sent out of the class for being rude. I was like, "I'm not being rude but I'm telling you right now, that's incorrect, lady! That is weird and that's why your rice looks all sloppy and weird." And so then I think I realised very early on – my father was a real sort of bon vivant, you know, he was a terrible father but he loved a party. He was really good at having parties and he was a brilliant cook. And I realised very early on, the power of food to connect people and to bring joy and happiness and actually to dispel a sort of mood that you don't necessarily want. You know, if you start cooking, you put some on tunes... music and food are irrevocably linked to me as well. It's like: put on some Sam Cooke, get in the kitchen and life's all right generally, I find.

Alison 12:52

What kind of food was your dad cooking for those parties?

Andi Oliver 12:55

He was cooking mainly Caribbean food; he would do quite a lot of kind of old-school Caribbean things like souse – like pickled bits of pork, shall we say? Interesting bits like tails and nose and ears. You know, it's kind of interesting to me when people talk about nose-to-tail eating like it's just been invented; I'm like, "Mate, have you ever been to a black household?" It's basically poor people's food – you know, people would have to eat the whole lamb; you couldn't afford to leave bits out. You had to cook all of it because that was what you had to get you through: you pickled it and you stewed it and you canned it and you did everything with it because you needed to make it last.

Jimi 13:40

And it seems just looking at your background as well, that because of your father and your mother's work, which was with the RAF, right, you were what they'd call an army brat in the American lexicon.

Andi Oliver 14:05

Yeah, an army brat and a latchkey kid. Do you remember that – a latchkey kid?

Jimi

Yes! So for the uninitiated, explain what a latchkey kid is, because I was a bit of a latchkey kid as well.

Andi Oliver

It just meant that your mum and dad or whoever it is that looked after you – your mum or your dad or your auntie or your granny, whoever you lived with – was at work. So you'd have to let yourself in when you came home from school and make your own tea. That's all it meant. But it's interesting to me that that has become a little bit demonised these days. And there's a lot of guilt around, you know. I've noticed a lot of young parents have a lot of guilt about not being home or not being able to be home when their kids are coming home from school. But I never minded my mum being at work; I never minded my dad being at work. To me, that's just what happened. It was like, people had to go to work. If you don't go to work, how are you going to pay to live in the house? It doesn't make any sense to me to feel guilty about earning money to sustain your family. I just think that the idea that you're able to stay home is an incredibly – you know, I hate to use the word 'privilege' because it's boring, everybody goes on about privilege all the time – but it really is quite a kind of rarefied notion, to me, the idea that you can stay home and just be home the whole time with your kids because it's nice for everyone – I'm like "Blimey, you've got loads of money, haven't you?"

Alison

You say you went home and had to start cooking dinner. I mean, your parents had taught you how to make cauliflower cheese, and good white sauce and cook rice... What were you cooking?

Andi Oliver

So my brother loved a pie. He was very into pies. So I used to make pies, mashed potato, good gravy. I learned to make good gravy early on. I'm a very big fan of gravy. There was always good food at our house and you know, we moved around. We lived in Cyprus for a bit and we got quite a lot of cooking ideas and thoughts from that part of the world as well. That was when I really started to love food, actually... was in Cyprus, you know to consciously think, "Wow, this is really interesting to me." You know, when I was about six or seven; you know, you have those funny little moments that you recall when you're little and I just remember those moments in Cyprus. There was a man who had a food truck by where my mum worked, and he used to do loukaniko sausages – you know, they're like a kind of Greek Cypriot merguez – and he used to do those with, now it wasn't halloumi, it was more of that sort of melty frying cheese, the softer one, I can't remember what it's called, but that cheese in a hot fresh bread. And so we'd be like, "Oh, let's go and pick up mum from work," because then we'd get these amazing hot sausages and this bread, and that taste – I'll always remember.

Jimi 16:48

So the contrast then: Bury St Edmunds in the 70s. You talked a little bit about, in the past, about some of the challenges and things that you faced but also about, you know, the really firm friends that you had then. How would you characterise those early years of your life?

Andi Oliver 17:04

I found it very difficult coming back. It was the 70s, it was, you know, I often describe it as before anybody turned the lights on in Britain. Everything was a bit black and white and grey at that time. It was just like, you know, it was a lot of corrugated iron everywhere, wasn't there? It was a bit weird. And it was quite racist; it was Suffolk, it was the 70s, so there were people calling us names and there were some really unsavoury things happened that I found very confusing, really upsetting. And I retreated; a bit of me definitely recoiled from the world and retreated into myself. I used to read a lot anyway, but books really became my sort of saviour. But I had two incredibly – I had a lot of mates as well – and I had two particularly good friends, Sue and Louise, who are still two of my dearest friends in the whole world. And I do think that something about surviving overt nastiness and bigotry – the gift that you get from that is that you learn to be kind. As a person, you learn not to be that bigot. Or you become a terrible bigot yourself, I suppose. You could go either way, right? But for me, it taught me not to do that to people; it taught me to find out who somebody is, and it taught me not to judge and decide and make sort of strange blanket assumptions about another human being just because of their colour or their sexuality or the fact that they're different to me. It actually taught me to enjoy difference and to celebrate it and so yeah, I love the fact that we're all so different. I think that's what makes the world go round.

Jimi 18:58

Yeah, well that love of difference and that embracing of people that have come from all different walks of life seems like something that you found when you moved to London – like, you moved there at 17, which seems crazily young.

Andi Oliver 19:12

Yeah. Oh, I couldn't wait to get out of Bury St Edmunds; I was like, "Can I leave now? I'm ready and I'm going." I left school when I was 16 and like within a year I was gone. I barely took my O Levels and then I was gone. I didn't even get any – I've got like one O Level – and then I was out of there basically. But you know, what did that do to me, that was before I left? It was punk rock – punk. Punk was the biggest gift I could have gotten. The Clash and The Slits came to Bury St Edmunds and did a gig when I was 15/16 that literally changed my life. Ari Up, who was the lead singer of The Slits – if anybody's listening and don't know what I'm talking about: punk rock, 1970s, there was a band of women, young women, called The Slits who were literally one of the best things that's ever been on this planet. They were just unbelievable, just pure fire – energy. And Ari came on, Tessa came on, Viv came on, Palmolive came on, came on the stage and I just went, "Oh my god, that's it! It's over. I'm not doing anything else. I'm only doing that. And that's all I'm doing." And you had a song called *Typical Girls*. And we went back to school going, "Yeah, typical girls. You're all typical girls." It lit a fire in my belly, literally. And beautifully, later on, they became family to me actually. Tessa, the bass player is my sister-in-law, yeah, she's my niece's mother and stuff. So it was like, it's like they were my fate, they were my destiny, those girls who then became my family. And The Clash, again, were just amazing. You know, it just was... it was young people with fire. And in my head and in my soul I suspected that you didn't have to do everything other people told you, that there was another way and there were other choices you could make. And everybody kept telling me there wasn't and I didn't believe them. And then The Clash and The Slits came on and I was like, "I knew it! I knew they were lying to me. I knew I could do whatever I liked." So as soon as I could get out there, I got out there and did whatever I liked.

Jimi 21:05

What was the reaction of your parents? Not just to kind of just wanting to leave home and your kind of lightbulb moment with punk and rebellion and this other world that was out there – were they trying to keep you sensible?

Andi Oliver 21:16

My dad was horrified but he'd already kind of left home by then anyway. My parents were divorced by the time I was 16; happily for me, that wasn't traumatic for me because they used to fight all the time. And me and my brother were like... me and my brother used to sit there going, "Oh my god, why don't they just get a divorce? They clearly can't stand each other. Move out, for god's sake!" So then he left and we were like, "Phew". And then, so my mum's quite a maverick. She's a teacher but she's always had a very rebellious spirit, my mother, and she's always taught me to follow my heart and to listen and to trust my intellect and to listen to the voices that are, you know, your internal instincts – not the voices in my head but my internal instincts – and so she was just like, "Go do your thing. Go do you. Follow your road." And I had my cousins in London which was helpful, so I came and moved in with them and then and then very soon afterwards I joined Rip Rig + Panic, which was the band that I was in with Neneh when I was, you know, a child.

Jimi 22:25

Neneh Cherry, yeah, of course. Yeah. Punk isn't known for its culinary sensibility or the food that was going on, you don't get the sense that it was a big part of it.

Andi Oliver

No there wasn't a lot of eating...

Jimi

With your interest and passion for food – how did that kind of last throughout that time? You and Neneh clearly loved food...

Andi Oliver 22:48

Well, we just started cooking. It was interesting because Neneh grew up in the boondocks of southern Sweden, as well as New York. And she had gone through quite a similar experience to me: she was the only black girl in this weird little town, she got called loads of names, she felt a bit inadequate and all of that stuff. And her parents were fabulous hippie musician artists – wonderful, wonderful human beings – and had taught her to listen to her heart and follow her spirit and she came to London and then we met each other and we just recognised each other and we recognised something in each other almost immediately, in fact not 'almost immediately' – immediately. And we started singing together about three weeks after we'd met; I joined the band, she was already in the band. And we started cooking together almost immediately; we used to do dance routines, because we were still kids basically! We were talking about this the other day to our kids and saying it's so funny. She got married quite young to the drummer in the band, Bruce, who is our dear friend, and we used to make – you know how teenagers, kids make your parents watch you do dance routines – we used to make Bruce watch us. We'd go, "Watch this, watch this!" And we'd do some, like, weird dancing and he's from America, he'd be, like,

“That’s great guys, what’s for dinner?” Do you know what I mean?! And we would cook these huge feasts. And also, we didn’t have much money but we always, always wanted to bring people together. So, you know we would have these big parties as young people, as people do, and then people had space because you could afford to have a co-op house or a squat, so you’d have these big houses. You know what I mean? Even as young people it was much easier to be young and poor in London in those days. So we would have these big parties and Neneh and I would get like 50 mackerel and roast them all or make loads of chicken and rice and potato salad and do all these things which were retrospectively quite odd.

Alison 24:51

Quite unusual for people that age to be cooking mackerel...

Andi Oliver 24:55

Yeah, you know honey-baked chicken, mackerel, rice and peas... You know, when Fab 5 Freddy and those first hip hop guys used to come over, we used to make them dinner after the gigs. They used to come because they’d have been on the road for ages. There’s this guy called Futura, who was a graphic artist, a graff guy, and Fab 5 Freddy, all of those boys. And we would see them after the gig and they would come back to Neneh’s flat and we’d make them chicken and rice. They would wait for the rice and peas to be cooked, because they’d been on the road for ages just eating, like, no home cooking, desperately missing their home and their mum and stuff. And they’d be like, “Oh, my god!” yeah, they loved it.

Jimi 25:35

I’ve got visions of word getting out and all these tour buses pulling up at Neneh’s flat, and they’re not even on tour, they’re not even playing any shows. They’ve just heard about the rice and chicken.

Andi Oliver

They just come for the chicken and rice! Honestly, it used to make them so happy, it was hilarious. Bless them!

Jimi

It just shows, like, the different worlds which you’ve kind of crossed over, with that communal, collective sense that you, you seem to always have had of gathering people and keeping people together and using food, as you said right at the start, as a connector – as a way to sort of bridge those gaps.

Andi Oliver 26:09

I think it’s the sort of first or second human instinct, isn’t it? It’s like, you know, music and food: breaking bread and the drum, I call it, because these are two of the first things that anybody, that any humans ever did with each other – played each other music to communicate, right? And gave each other something to eat over some kind of fire or managed to catch something and share it with each other. You know, I think it goes back so, so far. It’s innate within us. It’s an innate instinct. And obviously, it’s something that I’m particularly drawn to, but I think it’s instinctively within all of us actually.

Jimi 26:47

You mentioned your brother earlier, and he was the one that brought you and Neneh together because he was in the band initially. And he so tragically died at a very young age of sickle cell anaemia, and that must have been – at such a young age – that must have been so horrible.

Andi Oliver 27:07

It broke me, it broke me. I was 25; he was 27. And it broke me, it really did break me. I realised that... I actually became quite ill after he died. I developed a really serious eating disorder. I drank a lot. You know, having a child actually helped me not completely disappear, I think, because I felt like I was disappearing. It was such a difficult... I was so young. And it was so sudden and he just was gone. You know, and Neneh and I – all of us – we were just destroyed by it; he was so at the heart of us, you know, my brother. He was an amazing guy. He was the most brilliant bass player. Terrible cook, terrible cook, but a brilliant, brilliant man. And I mean, obviously really missed still. Luckily, he had two kids. He's got Theo and Phoebe. And they've both got children now, so he's got three grandchildren. And I miss him every day still. But also I think the older I get as well, there's a certain... you get a bit more philosophical about the people you've lost and the things that have happened in your life, don't you? And so the older I get, the more grateful I feel that I had him at all, that we even had him for 27 years. I'm like, "Gosh, well, at least we got 27 years." It could have been shorter than that. So there is a certain amount of that that has crept in, but I do also... it took me a long time to get back onto a track of life that was kind of productive. Actually, you know, the thing that started to really help me was I started working at a place called the London Lighthouse, which used to be on Portobello Road. It was an HIV AIDS hospice and they did a lot of palliative care there. And I started working there on a Friday on women's day. And I used to go in and I met all these incredible women who were living with HIV and AIDS. Some of them had children, and you know, they knew they were dying, and the courage of the people that I met there, and the passion with which they lived their life reminded me to keep living, reminded me to keep putting one foot in front of the other. So there was something in, again, reaching out to other humans and connecting with other people... In fact, that's why I started broadcasting: somebody there, who also was a volunteer, worked at GLR (which is Greater London Radio) and said, "Will you come and do, like, a show, do a pilot for a night-time show?" And I was like, "Alright." And then I ended up, the next thing I knew I had a nighttime show on GLR. And I was like, "Oh my gosh!" I didn't know anything about broadcasting at all. And then they were like, "This is how you drive a radio desk," and I was like, "Are you sure? Are you sure you want to put me in charge of that? It looks very big and there's a lot of buttons on it; I'm not sure it's a very good idea."

Alison 30:12

And they trusted you.

Andi Oliver 30:13

And they trusted me. And like I told you before, I did take all of the BBC off air for about two minutes. But that's...

Jimi 30:17

Yeah, I think you will have to explain this a little bit.

Andi Oliver 30:21

So, I was in the studio and at midnight, what happens is, for local BBC stations, everything goes over to the World Service. So I was recording something and it was just before midnight, and I was about to finish, and I pushed the wrong button, and I pushed the button that turns all the other buttons off in the world, it turns out! And everywhere, everybody's radios went dead completely, instead of flipping over to the World Service and my producer was literally having a conniption through the window. And I was like, "What? What?!", and just like, "Turn it back!" And then I flipped it back up, and it probably was about a minute, but it felt like hours afterwards – I was like, "Oh my god I took the whole of the BBC down."

Jimi 31:06

I feel like they've probably moved that button now, and it's, like, 'Andi's Rule' or something and you're in some sort of guidebook.

Andi Oliver

Don't do what Andi Oliver did, absolutely!

Jimi

Right at the top, we were talking about *GBM, Great British Menu*, and, you know, the real sensation, you've been on that. Like, you know, you go online, and it's like you're almost like a meme, like how much people love you and your looks and your fan... But the thing that you said about the importance of someone like you being in that role, and having that authority about food, it would just be really great to hear how you sort of navigate that journey as a broadcaster.

Andi Oliver 31:48

Well do you know what, I'm used to being the only black person in the room. I've been the only black person in the room for quite a lot of my life, or the only other 'something' in the room for a lot of my life. Because I think, actually, because I started broadcasting, and broadcasting has been, you know, hasn't had much diversity in a lot of the areas that I've been broadcasting in. And so I'm sort of used to it. And I don't even... I never think about it consciously. I just get on with doing my job, because if you sit there and think about it consciously then you're going to... you know, say if you're the only woman somewhere, if you sit there thinking, "I'm the only woman!" you're just gonna... there's no point. You've just got to get on with what you're there to do. And so, you know, me and my daughter Miquita call it accidental politics, do you know what I mean?

Jimi 32:42

Miquita Oliver, of course, who's a long-standing broadcaster in her own right.

Andi Oliver 32:46

Long-standing broadcaster in her own right, since she was 15 – my girl. And we call it accidental politics: just the very fact that you're in the room, and you turned up and you're doing your job is a political statement in itself. Because people often say to me, "Oh, you don't do outwardly feminist things, or you don't do outwardly things that support..." and I'm like "Just by my life and living – that's a political act for me." How I live my life and what I do with my life is my politics. Being in the kitchen, doing the food that I make, and living the way that I do has always just been, that's how I see – politics

and life are intertwined. I don't think you need to necessarily have to stand on a stage and yell at people to be politically active.

Jimi 33:33

But people seem to have really responded to your honesty, even something like the fan, which you know, everyone was like, “Oh, we love your paper fans!” You're waving a fabulous one as we speak. You talked about the reason for that fan. And...

Andi Oliver 33:47

It's my menopause, yeah. I'm getting really hot flushes. Anthony Horowitz apparently... I don't even remember this... Anthony Horowitz, who's a writer, was one of our guest judges and he said, “Oh, that's a marvellous affectation.” And I said, “It's my menopause actually!” Apparently I shouted at him, and my producer was cracking up. But it's not an affectation: I'm boiling! I'm having a massive hot flush. And, you know, menopause is... people do talk about it but people don't talk about it enough and they don't talk about really what it does to you. It's quite discombobulating. And it can really throw you off. You know, like I'm talking to you now, that's one of the reasons – I started having a hot flush, and it kind of comes internally, and you're talking to somebody and it's like, it's like a feeling of dread is the best way I can describe it. And it rolls up your body and then I get this thing where my skin starts tingling and then I get a hot flush. I wake up in the night with my heart palpitating, going really, really fast because it's trying to cool my body down. So I go around the country with a big, giant electric fan that I take to hotels – because I don't trust them to have a good-enough fan and if I wake up in the night and I'm hot and I can't open the window, I will have a panic attack. So keeping cool is, yeah, it's top of my list. It's right at the top of my list.

Alison 35:08

But it's a great example, you know: having you just being out there with your menopause fans, giving permission to other women kind of around the country to just, if they need a fan, to take it, to just admit it rather than just suffer in silence. Tell us about your cooking because I look at you – you're an expert in your field, but yet you've had no formal training, you kind of learned from your parents... Where do you get your inspiration from? You come up with the most amazing flavour profiles.

Andi Oliver 35:37

Oh, thank you that's lovely. I don't know, you know. I think it's a bit of obsession – slightly; you know, I sort of wander about just obsessing about food. I made a really lovely pineapple chutney this morning; I got up at six o'clock and there was a pineapple looking a bit moody and I thought, “Hmmm I don't know about that.” So I just made a chutney – and I had ginger... So I'm a bit of a kind of, “Let's see what's in the house” kind of person. So it's got ginger, I've got fresh turmeric, fresh ginger, some cumin seeds and coriander seed, I have a box of Scotch bonnets, so it's got a Scotch bonnet in it, I put some rum in it, it's got some demerara sugar, and then I used a bit of apple cider vinegar. And it's actually come out very, very well, I have to say: I'm quite pleased with it. And a little bit of cinnamon, it's got a little bit of cinnamon. So, oh and there was a mango as well that was about to go so I chucked that in there too. So I'm a little bit of a kind of, you know, ‘use what's there’ person. I just had the most wonderful time because at Christmas, I went to Antigua for supposedly six weeks. And it ended up being three months because of lockdown, which was incredible. But it gave me time to write. So I started writing a

cookbook finally. And I've actually had time to really think about, you know, combinations and doing things with... because I think there's a really interesting thing for me at the moment where I'm really exploring the idea of identity through food and how it places us and how it positions us. And I think that when you are from a migrant people, from a diasporic community or diasporic lineage, whatever, then your historical food, the traditional food becomes very, very important to not just you but to everybody around you. You know, try taking away... try changing pasta and see what happens, you know what I mean.

Jimi 37:34

It's fantastic news that you are writing it down and setting these ideas and these kind of fascinating connections around sort of different food and diasporic communities down. How much does that kind of funnel into the restaurants that you've run and the food businesses? Because you had Andi's in Stoke Newington in London... and then Wadadli Kitchen.

Andi Oliver 37:58

Yeah, and then we did One Love last year, and now we're doing, we're opening another – Wadadli Roadside, we're calling it – in Hackney Wick in about six weeks or so, in the middle of the summer, we're going to be opening up there. And that is going to be – we're calling it Wadadli Roadside because often the best food you get is by the side of the road, right? So we're doing Wadadli Roadside and we're doing spit roasts, like spice-rubbed chicken; we're doing this really great thing where we are confiting all the root vegetables and then putting them on the spit and then roasting them and then we're glazing them with all this like molasses and lovely spices and stuff, and then we'll slice that down. And you get that with, like, buss up shut roti, or the coco bread. And then upstairs we're going to be doing Caribbean seafood boil, and we're doing like coconut-spiced butter and buss up shut, and it's going to go on the table... Bibs, you have to wear bibs. I love, I love... I've always wanted to have a restaurant where people have to wear bibs because I just think, "Get messy! Let's just let go!"

Alison 39:12

Now there's a question that I always ask everyone; no one escapes without answering it. Is there an ingredient that you always have in your store cupboard, that the Oliver household falls apart with when it's not in the house?

Andi Oliver 39:24

Garlic, I love garlic. I put garlic in... I'm a garlic – I'm the queen of garlic. I've got wild garlic oil; I've got wild garlic in the freezer. I've got a fresh garlic in one side of the kitchen, I've got dried garlic, I've got black garlic paste in the fridge. I love garlic! I just love the kind of rooted kind of sexiness of garlic. It's in, yeah, I love it in everything. I mean, I think I possibly over-garlic some things because I will go in deep with the garlic, I go in big because I love it and it's in all of my... I start most things off with garlic and onions.

Alison 40:00

Now, kitchen grill: quickfire questions, but feel free to elaborate! Tea or coffee?

Andi Oliver 40:06

Tea – all the time. I love coffee. I can't drink it; it makes me really, really ill, unfortunately. And I only discovered it a few years ago and I was like, "Wow, this stuff's fantastic," and I started drinking loads of it and it made me really, like, bad; I was in quite a lot of pain – really ill. And with tea, I drink herbal tea. At the minute, at the moment I'm drinking vanilla rooibos. I'm really into it and I drink it with a little bit of oat milk in it and it's delicious. I don't like, you know, builder's tea, and I actually had to teach myself to drink hot drinks. I never used to drink any hot drinks at all. I never even used to have soup. Because I was like, "It's so boring," because every spoon is exactly the same. I'm like, "Is this still going on? This is boring me to tears, my God!"

Alison 40:52

Porridge or cereal?

Andi Oliver 40:54

Porridge. I love porridge of all kinds. Cereal very occasionally. You know what, I like cereal out the box. Dry. Like, a handful of Rice Krispies is quite nice actually as a snack, isn't it?

Alison 41:07

What about fruit or vegetables?

Andi Oliver 41:11

Ooh, that's hard! You can't make me choose between fruit and vegetables. That's not fair. That's just mean, Alison. OK, I guess... I guess... I guess... Aah! Vegetables. Aah! I say that looking at a mango and I love my mango.... Oh God, I guess I'm going to have to go with vegetables, I don't know!

Alison 41:33

So I'll move on quickly, so you didn't have to think about that one for too long. That hurts. What about mash or chips?

Andi Oliver 41:41

Err, oh, again, very, very tricky. I guess, mash.

Alison

Mash?

Andi Oliver

I guess mash because the mash will soak up the gravy. Oh, yeah. So, a chip will soak up the gravy... I do do curried goat and chips. Chocolate curried goat – we finish the curried goat with raw chocolate and then we serve it on, like, chips that have been marinated in turmeric oil so they're really golden and delicious. And then you put chocolate curried goat on top of that. So that is a thing. So I'm changing my mind, actually, I'm lying. OK, it's chips. It's chips. Sometimes...

Alison 42:17

Today. Today, it's chips. Tomorrow it might be something else.

Andi Oliver 42:26

You're making me feeling really naughty, Alison. I don't know why!

Alison 42:29

So the next one's going to make you...

Jimi 42:31

I love that this was allegedly a quickfire round!

Andi Oliver

I know, I'm sorry!

Alison 42:39

Starter or pudding?

Andi Oliver 42:40

Starter! Starter. I don't have a very sweet tooth. I don't really care about dessert. I don't care about chocolate and stuff like that – can't be bothered. It's like, take it or leave it. But you know, get me some delicious bit of beautiful carpaccio or something else beautiful at the beginning of the meal and I'm very happy.

Alison 42:56

What about, fried or poached?

Andi Oliver 42:58

Well it depends what it is. That, *that* is an impossible one. Because, so, I mean if I think of an egg... it depends on the day! I mean, these are impossible questions! How are people supposed to answer this? All right, I'm gonna go with: poached.

Alison 43:16

Poached? Oh, I thought you might have said fried. What about parsley or coriander?

Andi Oliver 43:21

Parsley. I think parsley's just, I think parsley's more versatile, actually. And there was a moment when – do you remember when everybody discovered coriander? And it's like, "Guys, guys, guys, you're not meant to put it in everything. And you're not meant to use so much of it."

Alison 43:36

What about butter or olive oil?

Andi Oliver 43:41

Butter! Full, full, good, salty, delicious, wonderful, glorious, Irish butter. I'm gonna live in it; roll about in it...

Alison 43:53

Cut a slice of it. Now I think this is a really easy question. Recipe or freestyle?

Andi Oliver 44:01

Freestyle. I mean, I mean, that's what recipes are for. Recipes are a starting point. Recipes aren't a template; you don't need to do it exactly. Recipes, you think, "That's a nice idea. But I'd like to do it a bit like this." That's how I hope people use my recipes. And that's why I want to encourage, because what we want to encourage with recipes is confidence in the kitchen, because you want everybody to feel confident enough to cook it their way. They don't have to cook exactly as you cook it.

Alison 44:37

Yeah, definitely, or using the ingredients – they've got to have the confidence of going, "I haven't got this but I've got that and that's similar enough."

Andi Oliver

Exactly!

Alison

Brilliant. And then, how about, high-tech or wooden spoon?

Andi Oliver 44:41

Wooden spoon. Every day, all day, every day. Do you know what, shall I tell you something? I've never used a sous vide in my life. I've never had one; I've never used one. I mean that's not like some sort of pompous thing, I just haven't ever – it's just never come up. I've never had one in my kitchen, it's never come up. I mean I get the usefulness of them in a big kitchen when you've got to get, you know, 50 loins of lamb ready or 120, or something like that and you've got to get them all exactly the same. And then you can just reverse-sear and you can finish them and all of that makes total sense. But, texturally what it does to food is not always fantastic. You know, especially fish. Stop putting it in a bag! I can't bear it. Literally, just, oh my god. It makes it all mushy!

Jimi 45:30

Andi Oliver, thank you so much. That has been an absolute riot. You have just rocked our world. Thank you so much for being on.

Andi Oliver 45:44

Oh, it's been lovely. You're really, really welcome. It's been great.

Jimi 45:50

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 Andi Oliver. 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.