

LIFE ON A PLATE

SEASON 3, EPISODE 4: SAT BAINS

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

chef, thought, dish, restaurant, scholarship, food, Waitrose, people, salt, big, home, star, work, love, cook

SPEAKERS

Sat Bains, 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. Alison, hello. How are you doing?

Alison 00:36

Hey, I'm all right, thank you. How are you?

Jimi 00:39

I'm really good. And yet again, it's because you've been up to your old tricks.

Alison

You got another surprise?

Jimi

Yeah, you sent me another intriguing thing to try. And the really good thing about it is it's more ice cream or at least looks like it's more ice cream. What's the story behind this one?

Alison 00:57

So, this is Waitrose No.1 Chocolate Ice Cream. And it's got a swirl of blood orange sorbet in it. Try it, open it and have a spoonful! Have you got a bowl?

Jimi 01:09

I have, I've got a bowl; I'm going to try and class it up rather than just shovel it in straight from the carton. Which, you know, I'd be tempted to do because just peeling the lid off – it's really striking, like that deep, almost fiery red of the orange sorbet. And it's not just like a little trickle, it's a huge kind of swirled bits of it and then you've got a really intense dark chocolate. I'm going to dig right down so that I can get a little bit.

Alison 01:40

The oranges are Sicilian blood oranges, so they're grown in Sicily, under the foothills of Mount Etna, where you've got really fertile volcanic soil, warm days, cold nights, and the variety has this really intense colour.

Jimi 01:59

This is the kind of thing that you will say as you dish it out – some extra volcanic benefits to it. I can't stop eating it, Alison, that's the only problem. And I'm just, I'm just going... my sort of world is now this bowl of ice cream and blood orange sorbet. What I really like about it is it's kind of like a ready-made dessert to-go. You don't need to add anything else to it. You could just break this out, you know, barbecue season: you've done a big sort of operation, say, for the actual barbecue itself, you don't want to think too much about the pudding – you just break out a few tubs of this.

Alison 02:33

I mean this No.1 ice cream – they've got some real corkers in the range. They've got coconut and lime ice cream; they've got a delicious strawberry and West Country clotted cream ice cream. I've been trying a few, just for research purposes, you see. But there are some delicious ones.

Jimi 02:49

Due diligence!

Alison

I take my job seriously, you know!

Jimi

I'm sort of slightly flabbergasted: it's really, really good. Thank you so much for sending it over. I love it. Well, I mean, much as I would love to sit and eat and just devour food with you, we should get on to talking about this episode's guest. And it is Sat Bains, the hugely acclaimed chef. And he was somebody that – you were a bit surprised about your response to him, right?

Alison 03:20

I so was! Do you know what, all the research we did and all the background and he comes across as being somebody who I got the impression that he was a bit of an angry chef, and he kind of does lots of workouts and is quite hard. But he's got such a soft, caring side to him. And that's really shown in the way he cares for his team and his chefs and all the plans that he puts in place and just the way he looks after them. And I kind of came away thinking, actually, he's got this big hard image but at the same time he's just a real softy too.

Jimi 03:51

No, you're right. He's got this kind of confrontational, maybe quite overt, unforgiving image in the media. But he is, as you say, he was like an absolutely lovely guy. The way he talks about the importance of caring for his staff is really relevant in light of all the conversations around hospitality and trying to attract more people to the profession. He talked interestingly about his childhood and his upbringing and how that's really shaped him. He grew up in Derby in a Punjabi household where his dad owned a corner shop and Sat had to work at the corner shop quite a lot, it turns out. And that Punjabi-household

work ethic, you know, really instilled this drive in him. But I think he also acknowledged that he missed out on things and he'd, sort of, not been able to be a kid in the way that his friends were and that kind of led to some later rebellion which was quite interesting to hear about.

Alison 04:48

They just showed him some really tough love, if you know what I mean. I think that was really clear when he spoke about his relationship with Amanda, his now wife and business partner at Restaurant Sat Bains, because, you know, at 16 they threw him out because of her. And, you know, that was just tough love. And now that's led to him, and his restaurant is now in Nottingham. So...

Jimi 05:09

Yeah, it's been quite a journey and it was a real privilege to hear him map out that journey. And it's so unlikely – both his success at this restaurant that's got two Michelin stars and is under a flyover and a pylon, in the deepest, darkest Nottingham – but he talks about the importance of that in such a vivid, beautiful way. And he was great. And it was the most pleasant sort of surprise. So here he is, here is our interview with Sat Bains.

Sat Bains, hello! Lovely to see you, you're looking well. I wanted to start off by talking about... when I've spoken to a lot of chefs that have come out of this quite difficult period, they've talked about the changing of their role and having to almost be like psychiatrists, as well as bosses in the traditional way, and really help people through. How have you found that and how have you responded to that?

Sat Bains 06:13

We kind of... about five, four or five years ago, sort of 2015, we changed our whole dynamic and approach to running the restaurant. So, what we did is, we thought, "What is it these young, very talented people that come into our industry, what do they want? They want a career path; they want to get paid well; they want time off; they want good holiday; they want pension; they want health insurance, and also with that health insurance comes counselling." So what we did is we took a big leap of faith, and we went to a four-day week. So we're closed Tuesdays, we open Wednesday to Saturday – so that means the whole building's closed from Sunday right through to Wednesday. And it's very psychological, because what happens is, when you work in a six- or seven-day operation and you have two days off, you still kind of are conscious of what's going on at work because you've still got to go in, almost running, to catch up with where everyone else is. So whereas you close the door, there's that relief where your shoulders drop: nothing can happen on their section because no one's there. And there's no one looking after their station for them or no one looking after their starter section, and from a kind of like an expressive freedom point of view, they've closed that door. So you know what, "I'm not back to work till Wednesday." And it gave them such a great lift, I would say. And I think, then we introduced the health insurance, and as soon as we did that, we were really adamant that it has to have some counselling in there, because they're not always going to come to me, they're not always going to go to their friends, not always go to their parents. So having an independent – I think you're allowed six hours, you know, which is a lot. We never had that, you know; I've been a chef 33 years, so I thought... That's my, my wife's idea of "What is it they want?" So yes, pay them really well, give them good time off, look after them and we also feed them really well. So we have two meals a day – top-end, not necessarily top-end in terms of like foie gras and truffles, but beautiful eggs or beautiful poultry or

beautiful salad. And it's gotta be... we always have one maxim: it's got to be good enough for if you were going to feed it to someone you loved.

Jimi 08:28

Nice, that's fantastic.

Sat Bains 08:30

And when you have that, you have 30 or 40 staff and they're all sitting together and eating... When we put the same effort we do into giving our customers to our team, they feel valued. So, there's tiny little psychological little things that we've kind of ticked. And I think that's really... So the answer to your question is: that's probably been invaluable in this period, but we were always at the end of the phone if they needed to talk to us, or in person. So yeah, it's a strange time, that's for sure.

Jimi 08:57

Yeah, you have spoken about what you feed the staff being so important. And yeah, you know, Alison and I were talking before about being really fascinated by this idea – because it's called the family meal, isn't it? And it's very important in restaurants.

Sat Bains 09:11

It's massive; it's massive. And also it... you know, I have friends – and this is no lie – that would feed their team in a metal bowl – like a dog bowl. And that, what does that message send?

Alison 09:26

Wow! That's not very motivating for the staff.

Sat Bains 09:28

No, but back in the day, years ago, there was top chefs that would feed the trim off the stockpot.

Jimi 09:35

Yeah, it's kind of Dickensian, almost, thinking about that.

Sat Bains 09:38

And that's the problem we've got with our trade, our profession. It's still got that stigma: that you are a workhorse, you don't need to be skilled. You know, we've got people that are very highly skilled, very talented; they need nurturing, they need feeding, they need looking after, they need putting on the right path. That's my role. Now I'm 50 years old and I've been in the trade 33 years and my wife's been in the trade 35 years. Her mindset is – she's looking for little details that people probably miss and she wants them... she raises the standard of the team. Like, I've seen it happen and it blows my mind that she's got that much sense of detail. So she's always in the background; she doesn't like the – well, even I don't particularly like the limelight – she's more of the behind-the-scenes and kind of like pushing everyone into the right direction and picking them up, and just getting that, kind of steering the ship.

Alison 10:31

So give us an example of what the family meal might be. You know, it's Thursday today, so what would you have eaten yesterday?

Sat Bains 10:38

So, we had a panzanella salad with chicken kebabs, like pure breast – so you've got your protein, and avocado, so you've got your fat and you've got your salads, so you've got your folic acids and all that. So then we've also introduced, two years ago, at 8.30 we do a protein bar, which is high energy. Because in service – chefs are different because they're tasting – but front of house, they don't eat after 5 o'clock or 4.30.

Alison

No, but they're running around.

Sat

Yeah, so their energies are low. So we make a protein bar with whey, cocoa, peanut butter, and it's weighed at 50 grams and they all take turns in little teams to come in the back, and you see their surge of number one, joy, because we're looking after them; number two, they feel nurtured; and number three they feel like they've got some fuel in them that's going to see them through to the end of the night. So I thought of it like a sports nutritionist: what would you do if you are in a four-hour period of training? You'd get little bites of like banana or peanut butter or nuts or sultanas – so we incorporated it all into a bar. And I think why isn't everyone doing that? It's just so mind-blowing.

Alison 11:51

Is it one person's job to do the cooking or do you take it in turns?

Sat Bains 11:57

They all do it in turns. They have teams, yeah, so the idea is there'll be one from the savoury section, two from pastry, one from the back room, and they do part of the meal each, so that they all come together. Because we've tried it where one guy does it and he gets kind of like slaughtered because it's a lot to do.

Jimi 12:16

There's a lot on it, isn't there? Yeah, there's a lot riding on it, like it's kind of the definition of a tough crowd as well – like, loads of two Michelin-starred chefs!

Sat Bains 12:24

And you know what's mad – the food the guys eat can change the mood so drastically. Like if they know it's been done like, "Oh my god, this seasoning's incredible. Oh my god, this piece of fish is incredible, perfectly cooked – as if it was going out to a guest." But if they see it's, like, got the protein coming out, like the white scum that comes out and it's been left and dried, they think, "That guy don't care." And they mark his card, you know what I mean – "I hope he's not on staff food next time." Do you know what I mean? It's amazing how many favours you can win by doing a great meal, because all the staff are going, like, "Listen – like that bolognese you made, or that pasta, was incredible."

Jimi 13:04

That notion of things being cooked with love as well – I've seen you talk about it in relation to your family and your upbringing and food when you were growing up. What did that look like? I've also seen you talk about it being carnage because of so many family members.

Sat Bains 13:21

I mean, I grew up with a big household; there was six of us in our family. It was three sisters, me, my mum and dad. So because we all lived in Derby's close-knit community, all my dad's brothers lived in Derby, so the weekends was always like a festival. It was always like loads of kids milling around, it was very noisy. I had a really noisy childhood.

Jimi 13:40

Did you like that noise? Or were you kind of shrinking away from it?

Sat Bains 13:44

I liked it when I was in it. Because I was young and I was like “Yeeeah!”, you know just going crazy on my bike, on my BMX. But I also had to work, so my childhood was a bit mixed up because I had to work from the age of 13 because Dad had shops. So I lost a lot of my youth, having to do school, then work, school, then work. So I was always a bit, like, empty where my mates were out playing and they would knock on the door with a ball and I could hear the bounce on a Sunday afternoon, about 6 o'clock. But dad would send me to bed, and the light – it was still sunny. And that traumatised me for years. So I rebelled – in my 30s and 40s I never went to bed. But it's amazing how childhood plays on the future. That's where a lot of our issues come from anyway. But growing up was amazing, the food was amazing. So, so Mum would cook – because she was working, she was a working mum, food was kind of like a little bit rushed. You know, we talk about this love aspect. So yes, it was tasty and that's all I knew. There was curries and then on Wednesdays was bangers and mash and Fridays fish and chips. And Sundays was always meat, so we used to have meat at the weekend. So keema is my favourite – minced lamb curry with peas. So, when we used to eat you had to sit down at the table at 6 o'clock, you couldn't move, you couldn't watch telly, you had to eat, so it was, like, discipline...

Alison 15:07

You weren't involved in the cooking of it with your mum?

Sat Bains 15:09

No. No interest in cooking whatsoever. Because what happens in an Asian community is that the men sit in the front room; the women work in the kitchen. And I was like the go-between because I was the oldest nephew. So, I was the guy that would go and take the, kind of like, kebabs or the samosas into the room for the men, who were all drinking, then go back to the women... So I'd heard both sides of the story. So my auntie was going, “How's your uncle? Is he drunk?” And I'm like, “No, no, no.” And he's smashed. And they were like, “Oi, come here you, what's he doing?” “Nothing!” Because they wouldn't go in. It was hilarious to see the two... But food-wise, you know, we grew up with curries: spinach was my worst curry, I hated it because you'd smell. Because Mum would cook it in a pressure cooker and you'd smell it on the way home. And I was like, “Oh God, I hope it's not my house!” And you'd know all your clothes for two days were going to smell of spinach. So, you had this love-hate relationship with

home cooking, because it was always – I wanted the Westernised food and we were cooking Punjabi food. But it's just such a weird... like life does this circle and now we're doing Mum's food and...

Jimi 16:23

Yeah, well, let's go ahead and talk about that because it couldn't be a neater full circle, because you've launched Momma Bains, a business with your mum. Where did this come from? How long was it in the works for? It's incredible.

Sat Bains 16:37

Well, in fairness, we thought about lockdown and everyone doing boxes and doing takeouts. And one thing I've realised is that... I'm very admirable of the guys that have done it because it's really hard to get your restaurant-style cuisine onto a box, into a box, onto a plate, with someone that's not necessarily skilled to replicate it, paying good money. I just couldn't do it. It takes 14 of us to cook for 35-40 covers. And I just couldn't fathom the physicality. So I thought, what's missing in lockdown is community, closeness, family. And it was like 'Eureka!', like, Mum's food! Mum's food. Like when we left home... so, when I said my mum wasn't a great cook when we were at school, and at home, it was because she had jobs. So it was a chore, you know, when it's a chore it's like, "Quick, make a Brussels sprout curry", but it's delicious but it wasn't, you know, it wasn't what you wanted. And then what happened was when we left home, Mum would invite us back on a Sunday, and one sister was in London, one was somewhere else and one was somewhere else, and we'd all meet every like six months, and the food was like, "Whoah, this is amazing! Was it this good when we were younger, or did we just get used to it?" And what it was, because we were coming home, Mum would spend all day and she would take time and she put love into it so we could taste it. And we were like, "Oh my god, she's put love in it!" And how mad is that when you think about it? It's like, it's the craziest concept, but it's the truth. Like, when your siblings or your sons and daughters are coming home, or your children, you want to cook for them so you spend all day making their favourite foods. You sit at the table, everything goes into the middle of the table with a pot... so one pot of aloo gobi, one of spinach, one of this, keema, and you help yourself with a little spoon. And my wife loves aloo gobi, she loves keema, and it's like the best thing you can imagine. So we thought: "That is what's missing." So we spoke to Mitch at True Foods that we use. And True Foods is a company that makes stocks for sauces, and he works with Waitrose already, so he works with Heston and all the rest of it. And I said, "Mitch, I've got an idea." So, it was hilarious: we'd go up to Yorkshire with Mum, we'd go in with a really small batch of raw ingredients of say aloo gobi or chickpea curry, and we'd make it into like five or say 10 portions. And then we had to upscale it to 500. And it was like, "What the hell are we doing?"

Alison 19:14

And getting it to taste the same, on that scale, is so hard.

Sat Bains 19:16

It was brutal, it was like, "Oh my god, what have we done?"

Jimi 19:21

What's it been like working on something with your mum, having your mum as a business partner, like, crossing the streams in that way?

Sat Bains 19:29

I'm never gonna do that again. And I would advise anyone: do not do it.

Alison 19:35

And this is from a man who works with his wife!

Sat Bains 19:39

That's totally different. She's got her rules, I've got mine and we meet in the middle. Mum? You are still eight years old. I've never been told off so much. And, you know, I'm 50 years old! And I turned back to being... "Mum, shut up!" I just said, like a teenager, "Mum, shut up." And I'm actually rebelling all over again; I'm like, "What am I doing?"

Jimi 20:04

But it just seems like an amazing continuation or a really, sort of, new, interesting twist in your journey as well because you talked about rebelling then, rebellion, and you sort of rebelled in the biggest ways imaginable, didn't you? Like with your career and with, you know, meeting Amanda, you were effectively thrown out of the house at a young age, which... I've seen you talk about it and say that it was one of the best things that ever happened to you with hindsight, but you can't have been feeling that way at the time.

Sat Bains 20:35

I think it was... I was trapped. As a young man, I was trapped. I was trapped because I was the only boy; I had the family name on my head, I had to carry that on, in the Sikh tradition. So there was a lot of pressure on me from a very young age and I felt it, and I felt a little bit trapped. Amanda was, you know, a young girl, she was a manager of a restaurant; I was a commis chef there. And she was like, you know, exotic to me and I'd never really gone out with lots of girls. And Mum found out, Dad found out we were seeing each other and straight away it was one of them – it was, like, black or white. It was like, "OK, are you serious?" and I was like, "Well, I don't know, but I like her. I've got feelings for her." I never really had a chance to explain that I was like, "It's a girlfriend," because we weren't allowed girlfriends as a kid. And then, next minute, sister turns up to the restaurant with two bags and says, "Mum wants you out." And that was it – never went back; best thing that ever happened. So at the time, Amanda was independent, she had a flat; she left home at 16 so you can imagine what kind of person leaves home at 16 and has their own flat and their own career – and then this absolute dosser turns up with long hair, with a 'tache shaped after Prince, who was my idol. I knocked on the door with those two black bin liners, goes "Mum don't want me back, can I move in here?" She was like, "What?" Like, she might not even have been serious, do you know what I mean? And we just sat there; we both cried, for about an hour, going, "What the hell are we gonna do now?" It's a weird – you know, life is so crazy, no one knows what's around the corner, no one knows what's going to happen. But at the time, even though I was sad, I was kind of relieved. I thought, "Oh my God, I haven't got to work at the shop; I haven't got all that pressure on me, haven't got all that weight on my shoulders that was expected of me that I didn't even know about that, I'd just been told... like, what the hell."

So, I already went to college; I was already doing catering; I already worked in a restaurant. But even going to college was an issue because Mum didn't want me to go to catering college because she thought it was effeminate. And my oldest sister, Manjit, she said, "Mum, let him go to college." So then I went to college, went to the restaurant where I met Amanda, then I lost my job there because I was a bit of a dosser. I went to Nottingham where Amanda is from. And she stayed in Derby and I was travelling every day to the masonic halls. And I worked in this really strange masonic Freemasons environment. I was like, "What is this?" So I was there two years, went off to various jobs. And I was a head chef at a very young age – too young, way too young – I was 24. I didn't know what I was doing. I read Marco – blew my mind – Marco Pierre White, his first book *White Heat* blew my mind, and I was like, "Oh my God, I want to be a chef."

Jimi 23:13

In terms of your teaching, your culinary education, at some point, French cuisine became the thing. And that kind of high level became a real sort of passion and the thing that your style grew from, in a weird way. You talk about Marco there ... Was there a moment where you were like, "OK, this is the thing. This is where I need to put all my energy and where I need to excel."?

Sat Bains 23:46

I think I was very creative. My first passion at school was art and I wish I took up art. I wish I took art up. I love doodling, I love sketching I love kind of abstract art – I love things that make sense to me.

Alison 23:57

Is that something that you still do?

Sat Bains 23:58

Yeah, I use it a lot. So I've got dishes based on Anish Kapoor, his abstract art piece. And my wife bought me for my birthday an Anish Kapoor print, no, sorry, an original, and it's all pink. And it's kind of like powdery, and straight away it says strawberries and cream – so I'll work on a dish. And I love Rothko; I love geometrical and I love kind of like abstract and I love things that make sense. Like, I love circles, so I could have a dish with three circles. But then I have to fill the gaps of what the three circles are and how they complement each other.

Jimi 24:34

Yeah, you doodle dishes first, as well. Is that right? You kind of draw them?

Sat Bains 24:38

I do. I love it. I do doodles all the time. Because I was... the majority of my training was self-taught... because when I left college. I dossed around; got sacked twice; went to work for Raymond Blanc and his brasserie at Petit Blanc, six months, that was it; went to L'Escargot, another three months. And that was it; I'd had enough of working for anyone because I thought, "This isn't about cooking, this is about someone trying to stitch you up. This is about – this, this ladder of all these talented young men just trying to tread on you to get to the top." There was no family feeling, no camaraderie, there was no, like, "Hey, guys, if you're in the mess, I'll come and help you out, and you help me out if I'm in the mess." Everyone was just trying to outdo each other with their macho.... No one taught – I never spoke about

food. And then I came back and I was really disorientated with everything. I went to work in a pub, again, loved it, had my own freedom, kept thinking of the art aspect. Then I ended up working in an art gallery. And what was nice about that: every two weeks or a month, they would change the whole scenery of the whole restaurant, because they had a restaurant upstairs – 19 covers – and I was the head chef, just me and another guy. And I was trying to do all these dishes that I'd probably copied from like books or recipes from French masters and what I'd seen on the internet or whatever. And then I kind of like entered the Roux Scholarship. And I was a real underdog, never had the training that you should have. I entered it and I remember saying to the guy, "I'm gonna win." This was the last year I can win, the last year I can enter. And all he said is, "I know you are." And that was it.

Alison 26:09

Can you just tell us a little bit more about what the Roux Scholarship is? It's something that chefs often bandy around...

Sat Bains 26:16

Oh, it's massive. So the Roux brothers, the biggest influence to modern French gastronomy in Britain, absolutely the start of the whole movement within the first three-star at Le Gavroche. Albert and Michel worked out a plan. "Hang on, there's not a lot of brilliant chefs out here. Instead of looking overseas and getting a load of French guys in, why don't we train these guys up and send them to France? Give them a chance to work with the best – my mates, all our friends that are in France, all these three-stars." So they built this scholarship, which is called the Roux Scholarship. And it's like 36 years old now. So, the idea was, they would take a competition; they have an entrance, an entry form you fill in... of who you are, your dish, whatever it is. Then you have to then go to the next round, which is the dish that you've submitted – you've got to cook it. Then from there you go to the final, and that's normally a classical dish that you've got to produce in a set time. Classic Escoffier. Escoffier, you know, the godfather of modern cuisine, was with the Ritz, at the Savoy and all that so, so he – his repertoire, I still use today. He was the first chef – Escoffier was the first chef that introduced the chef de partie system, like: pastry section, you'd have a commis, a chef de partie, a sous chef in that section, er, larder – garde manger, whatever. You had this kind of structure, which was very military based, which is still used today. So they were from that era, they brought that to modern times, they introduced this scholarship. The first ever scholar was Andrew Fairlie, rest in peace. And he was like a massive influence to me.

And over the years, I just kept hearing about the scholarship and how someone was going to France or going to wherever and you'd read it in *The Caterer*. The only chef I ever wanted to work with or for was Michel Bras, who is this phenomenal chef in the Aubrac region; only open for six months of the year because the weather's so terrible. And his food's about nature, it's about abstract – he was an artist – and I just kind of fell in love with him. And I then applied. He only had two stars; the maxim is you've got to work in a three-star. So I already thought, if I won, I'm gonna ask, "Can I work in a two-star?" I needed to work for this guy. So I entered – underdog – so in between entering and getting through to the regionals, the restaurant closed. The owners turned up at our house, me and Amanda, little two up two down in Nottingham; and he goes, "Er, Sat, I've got some bad news for you: we're closing." It's like, "What?" And that was it, just like that. We're like, "What the hell are we gonna do?" So, the scholarship became this kind of tunnel vision: that's my way out; I've got no choice now. I don't know how I'm gonna do it. I don't know if the gods are on my side or there's fate – whoever's out there, whatever's out there,

I've now got to read up, I've got to be ready. And then you get through. And then I go and do the regional, and Rick Stein was a guest judge that year because it was a fish-based main course and I did tuna with a parsnip purée and spinach and a red wine jus. And everyone, I remember, around me, I could just smell sesame and soy – they were all going down the oriental route. And I'd got chicken wings on, I was roasting them and making a red wine deglaze. I made a classic red wine jus. So then I'm like, "Oh my god, this is crazy." And then – I get through. And I'm like, "What?!" So that's six of us in the final at the Four Seasons Hotel, in London. I think to myself, "I'm out of work. I've got no job. I'm in the final with six guys." There was five other guys. One worked at Aubergine (Gordon Ramsay), one worked in a two-star, one worked in a one-star, and there's me that's got no... I'm out of work; I've got no pedigree. So I get there and I already saw two contenders that I thought, "They're gonna nail it." So they gave me the recipe. It was like, rack of lamb, French trim, sauce paloise, which is like a hollandaise with mint, tomato concasse, and then some potato rosti, pommes Anna with artichokes in between, like, globe artichokes. And the two things that I read up the night before at home which I had not ever prepped was skate and artichokes. So I was prepping the artichoke like that, and I was looking at that guy like, "What's he doing?" So I was doing the same. So I absolutely blagged it. I remember just sitting there in the line at the front, Michel Roux, rest in peace, Senior. Michel Roux starts announcing, and back then there was a runner-up and a winner. In my head, the man I thought was the winner, they shouted the runner-up. And it wasn't the one I thought, so I thought, "He's won." So just for a split second, like a crazy, chilling moment, the room went quiet in my own head and I had a tall hat on, like a chef's hat. And I sat down like that, I just said, "Just say my name, just say my name, just say my name, say my name, say my name." And they said my full name and "Satwant Bains". And all you heard was Amanda and Peter screaming. And I'm in shock and I get my hat and I lob it, and Michel picks it up later and he goes "Can you sign it? Because I think you're going to be a big star."

Jimi 31:27

Oh wow, what a moment.

Sat Bains 31:29

And I said, "I want to go to Michel Bras". So we write to Michel Bras; he goes "Because I've got three stars this year I'm not taking any stagiaires on." I was like, "Nooooo!" So funnily enough, I read *Waitrose Food Illustrated*, back in '97/'98, and I remember seeing this spread on Le Jardin de Sens, South of France, two twins... And the way that the magazine covered it was, it was like five pages and they had their dishes on glass plates and it was like vibrant – it jumped out. 'Cos it was like that Roussillon area of France, which is like – beautiful vegetables, wine region. And I remember all the chefs lined up, all in white, white jackets, white long aprons, white hats, and the sun was out, there was a white building... it just looked so beautiful and I thought... that's what jumped out, because when I didn't get the position with Michel Bras, I remember reading that Jacques and Laurent worked for Michel Bras, in that magazine. And I thought, "Oh my god. I've got to go." So Waitrose saved my life, really.

Jimi 32:38

One thing that I really wondered about when you were describing the Roux Scholarship there and the other cooks that were doing sort of Asian-influenced stuff, and I've seen you talk in the past about your Punjabi heritage and not wanting to be pigeonholed. It feels like we've come so far in terms of, you

know, people's appreciation of South Asian cooking generally and Punjabi cooking especially. Have you felt kind of more that you can just embrace those things now, like with Momma Bains?

Sat Bains 33:05

It was never about embracing, it was that I never wanted to misinterpret my journey, because it would be too easy to go to Indian food, because that's my heritage. And I could make it refined, make it fine dining, if you want to call it that. But that's lazy and also, it's too expected. There's a level of like anomaly involved when people don't know what to expect – cos Sat Bains, Sat Bains [French pronunciation] it could be French, they don't know? So there's always been that kind of mispronunciation. And there's also an element that I'm quite unattainable because I don't do a lot of things that a lot of guys do.

Jimi 33:44

You must have had to like resist that so much. And in terms of – Alison and I were talking about, you know, obviously what you've done with the location. It's comparable to, say, what Heston did in Bray and what Tom's done in like Marlow, but they've opened other businesses: have you not kind of wanted to do that same kind of conquest?

Sat Bains 34:04

I'd never say never but I don't think I've got that in me, where I can do several... Because here is about the personal journey I've had, and I want you to taste that. And that's how it's been for all this time, but I've never thought of... there's been opportunities, there's been possibilities to open other places but there's a problem I've got with dilution and that's just me. I've got a philosophical approach: we live, we enjoy, we have a certain amount of time on the planet – make the most of it and whatever gives you that, is it money, is it peace, is it love, whatever it is, for me it has never been money. I've never been money-driven. My fulfilment comes from outlet of creativity. So that's my richness. If I have a place where I can do that. And don't get me wrong, this could be something in London – so “Sat, we want you to do a concept in London. You don't have to be there every day but we want you to oversee it.” Like, yeah that's easy, that's not too difficult... But *this* is kind of like where I love, and I've evolved and become who I am.

Alison 35:17

You spoke earlier about the effect that Marco Pierre White's book *White Heat* had on you. Is it true that you have quite a collection of cookery books? I saw something about 800, 10 years ago.

Sat Bains 35:30

Easy, yeah. I've got about 1,000 now, yeah. So what it is, again it's irony. It's like when you're young, right, you save up; each month you get paid and then you find you've got say 30 quid left and you buy a book – Nico's or Raymond Blanc's new book or Ramsay's – and you read it cover to cover, like, preciously. Right? And then you almost like, “Oh my god,” and you absorb all that in, and his story and you look at his recipes and you think, “One day, I'm gonna go to his restaurant.” And what happened is as you got older, you got books sent to you. Chefs are sending like three, four books a month. I'm like, “Oh my god.” So now you no longer read them. So now it's become a bit of a library.

Alison 36:16

So when you're cooking at home, how much of them do you refer to?

Sat Bains 36:19

No, when I'm at home I'll do lots of omelettes, or I'll cook chicken a lot. I don't eat much red meat to be honest, but I'll have some lamb mince... We do, like, a chilli beef mince dish with loads of spices, then finish it with chilli, onion, ginger and garlic, and it's like a dry mince. And you sit it on baba ghanoush, you throw it on; fresh red radishes that have been just soaked in water and salted, so you've got that crunch, and then just pour two fried eggs on top of it. It's incredible!

Jimi 36:51

Yeah. That sounds amazing.

Alison 36:55

There's a question that I ask everyone. Do you have a store-cupboard ingredient in your house that you always have, you know, and if you travel you take with you and that kind of thing?

Sat Bains 37:05

Soy sauce. Soy, yeah, I love it. I'm addicted. I love condiments. I'm a condiment kid. So on my full English breakfast, which is like once every two months, I'll have mayonnaise (this is one of Heston's tricks, by the way, he taught me this), mayonnaise, brown sauce, red sauce, mustard... now I've added sriracha, I've one-upped Heston! And I love dipping the sausage in a bit of everything and then the egg and, and I'm like, "Oh," it's like the condiments just make the breakfast for me.

Jimi 37:35

Maybe it's because of the art link but I'm imagining almost, you know, it's like an artist's, an artist's....

Sat Bains 37:43

It looks like that, like a palette!

Jimi

An artists' palette, yeah.

Sat Bains

It's bad because me and Heston, we met in 2000 and we've been brilliant friends since, and his mind is incredible. And I think the guy that changed British gastronomy, for me, was him. And the way he looks at food and the way his mind thinks and his creativity – he's on another level. But I love... we talk for hours when we talk because we talk a similar language. And he's the only guy I have that relationship with. Out of all the chefs, I can only talk to him like that.

Jimi 38:10

Yeah, no, well, he's a previous guest on this podcast and

Sat Bains

He's next level, yeah I love him.

Jimi

Yeah, you're right, he's great to talk to about food and I can see that you two would, as you say, speak in the same language...

Sat Bains

Into a rabbit hole.

Jimi

Yeah, loving those rabbit holes. And also, it struck me that the notion of like, the journey, as well; I've seen you talk about the 10-course menu at the restaurant, at Restaurant Sat Bains as being almost like this, this progression, this play, this kind of, you know, this immersive exhibit.

Sat Bains 38:44

It is, yeah, because I love going to the theatre, I love listening to music. So, I looked at other genres to say, how can you relate it to eating out for two, three hours? Cos that's the only thing I could think of. So you're almost taken on this journey by emotions, like "Oh my god, what's next?" So I thought, what can you do that's two and a half hours, to relate. So, I fell upon this thing called the Freytag Pyramid. And it's how you make – they use it in theatre, it's how to create a show, almost, like, a play. Like, you have an introduction, that's the introduction of the characters. So, our introduction, to take it from there: we do the five tastes. So there's a little glass ball with a little perspex with holes in, and it says, 'Bitter, salt, sweet, sour, and umami'. And each dish is five little tastes, and it's all the five tastes. So that's me introducing you to the characters of the whole night: introduction. Then it goes through all its plots, of like, you go cold, hot, sweet, sour, whatever. Then you get a crescendo, which is the main course and then there's a little twist, cos we have a thing called the crossover. So, the crossover is something we devised in 2010/2009, where – everyone goes like sorbet or something like a palate-cleanser – we thought, "Well, still keep the savoury element but let's slowly add a sweet element." So at the moment we've got creamed rice pudding with salted raspberries with sake granita and Rice Krispies. So it's rice, thrice. Do you know what I mean? So you've got this tiny little dish in a sake cup and in the bottom is salted raspberries. You've got the beautiful purée of creamed rice pudding with vanilla, a pinch of salt, some candied Rice Krispies, then a sake granita served on top. So, your mouth just explodes. With sharp, cold – we use nitrogen for the sake granita – and then it's got salt, sweet, sour, creamy, luxury, salt. And you're like, "What's going on here?" And the idea is to get you ready for dessert.

Jimi 40:59

Yeah, hearing you talk about – you know, in this incredibly interested, curious, thoughtful way – talk about theatre and artistic theories and stuff, is maybe a bit against what some people's view of you as this kind of uncompromising chef sometimes, that you're kind of like, you know, this big, rough, tough, fearsome chef. Do you feel that sometimes that kind of what your nature is, and what you're really interested in, can get lost sometimes?

Sat Bains 41:27

I probably don't give people that side of me. It takes a long time to describe your ethos as a chef of 33 years. And this is the perfect kind of platform, but to really understand – it's thousands of little things that make up the big thing, and I can't stress that enough. It's down to the cutlery, the tables made out of deer hide for a nod to Wollaton Park, cos they use deer, so we don't use tablecloths. And the table legs are made out of knives, from Blok Knives. And the cutlery block is a block that's got three lots of cutlery in a stack, like a cassette, so you don't have to have that potential of looking around and seeing who's using what cutlery, you can use a spoon... So we've kind of made it more accessible as a two-star restaurant. So there's thousands of things we've done to give you... that you don't really need to know about as a guest, but there's a reason for every single thing you see or don't see. We've thought about it. And I'm doing that with just 10 dishes.

Jimi 42:31

Yeah, it's incredible. We should get onto the kitchen grill, shouldn't we, Alison?

Alison 42:36

We should! It's kitchen grill time: quickfire questions. You can explain, you can elaborate on your answer... Tea or coffee?

Sat Bains 42:48

Tea. Both! I'm drinking probably two litres of oolong a day at the moment. I love it. And I like a beautiful – we use Difference Coffee for our espresso capsules which is incredible; their Jamaican Blue Mountain blows my mind. But I'm at the moment drinking just black filter.

Alison 43:04

Lovely. Porridge or cereal?

Sat Bains 43:08

Oh, I love both. Porridge.

Jimi 43:10

I'm always surprised that cereal – you know, people still really love cereal. I thought it'd be porridge all the way.

Sat Bains 43:16

See I like Weetabix... With natural honey, and I put protein powder on it.

Alison 43:19

OK, nice. Fruit or veg?

Sat Bains 43:28

Oh, both. Veg, more veg.

Alison 43:29

More veg, OK. What about spicy or mild?

Sat Bains 43:33

Spicy. Always spicy, yeah.

Alison 43:36

Mash or chips?

Sat Bains 43:37

Oh, man. OK, this is the problem, right: as soon as you said that, mash went to Jean Robuchon's mash, which is the best mash in the world, which is almost equal, if not 60%, butter – which is a small spoon and blows your mind. Chips went to Heston's triple-fried so, I'm lost. Can I dip the chip in the mash?

Alison 44:07

Ha, yeah OK, that'd be good, that would be amazing. Sight or smell?

Sat Bains 43:12

Sight – I'm a visual learner.

Alison 44:16

Bacon or smoked salmon?

Sat Bains 44:18

Bacon.

Alison 44:18

Bacon. Parsley or coriander?

Sat Bains 44:22

Coriander. I hate parsley. It's become this generic thing that everyone puts on... but have you ever eaten it when it's actually in a stalk and someone puts it on...? It's like a cow and you're chewing for an hour. I like it in very small doses. But coriander is – I know so many people that hate coriander, they hate the smell...

Jimi 44:41

It is really divisive.

Alison 44:44

They think it's soapy – but it adds so much more flavour.

Sat Bains 44:50

I love it, I love it.

Alison 44:51

Butter or olive oil?

Sat Bains 44:52

I think we're predestined to love butter, but olive oil is good as well. So, we use Manni olive oils, which is amazing. But yeah, I think butter.

Alison 45:03

Butter? OK, and then, cheese or pudding?

Sat Bains 45:12

Oh, you guys are killing me! So I did, my first proper road trip across Champagne was with two of our really good friends and with Amanda. We drove. So we went from Folkestone, we drove to Champagne and we did the best tour of wines you can imagine. And we went to a restaurant, a two-star, and they had this cheeseboard that comes on a door. A door. And then a little bit, like a half door, like a stable door, for goats' cheese. So we're eating this cheese and said "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, we'll have a mixture". And I'm not lying, this one cheese I had, and my mate did the same, we had... the hair stood on our arms; we got this chill, and we almost had an out-of-body experience. But we had to eat Epoisses to get rid of this taste. It was that bad – or good. So this local farm makes it an old abandoned, must be like, a drum on a tractor. So it's highly illegal. But it blew my mind. It's called Soumaintrain or something like that; I can't remember the name of the cheese. So when you have to say, "We had to eat Epoisses to get rid of this taste," it tells you how strong it was. But it blew us away. We couldn't stop. It became this thing, you know, I was just obsessed. But I love dessert as well...

Jimi 46:36

What, you were obsessed with how strong and how bad it was but you kind of liked it?

Sat Bains 46:41

But it was so tasty. The initial was like, "It's rotten... but my god I want it. I need more."

Alison

And was it really creamy?

Sat Bains

It was creamy. It was almost collapsed. It had this pinkish rind to it that was just knackered. And we're like, "What the hell's that?" And it stunk. And we talk about it today – it was like two years ago, but we just talk about that cheese that we had to eat Epoisses to get rid of the taste.

Jimi 47:10

So, cheese, I'm guessing. Cheese rather than pudding.

Sat Bains 47:14

Yeah, cheese, definitely, yeah.

Alison 47:14

And Sat, that is the kitchen grill.

Jimi 47:16

Well, I think it's a perfect note to end on really, and Sat Bains, thank you so much.

Sat Bains 47:26

Thanks for your time guys, I really appreciate it.

Jimi 47:28

You've been listening to *Life on a Plate* from Waitrose. I'm Jimmy Famurewa. Thank you to my co-host, Alison Oakervee and our guest Sat Bains. 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.