

## **LIFE ON A PLATE**

### **SEASON 3, SPECIAL 1: BACK TO SCHOOL, SCUMMY MUMMIES**

#### **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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#### **SPEAKERS**

Jimi Famurewa, Ellie Gibson, Helen Thorpe

#### **Jimi 00:05**

Hello, I'm Jimmy Famurewa and welcome to this special episode of Life on a Plate, the podcast from Waitrose. It's September, playground gates are open again, in kitchens across the land lunchboxes are being packed. While in school canteens, pies are being baked, custard is being stirred. We wanted to mark the monumental back-to-school moment with an episode focused on the joys – or otherwise – of school food. I feel very well versed in this, having – let's say, mixed memories of school dinners myself, ranging from the very comforting, to the somewhat distressing. And I've also got two young sons who are running that particular gauntlet now. Unfortunately, Alison was not around for this episode, but to compensate I was joined by two fantastic guests: Ellie Gibson and Helen Thorne, otherwise known as The Scummy Mummies. We couldn't think of any two people better placed to take a wry look at the subject of children's food. They are an amazing comedy pair with a hugely successful parenting podcast called The Scummy Mummies Podcast and they're in the middle of a live national tour right now. And also Helen has found the time to write a best-selling book recently. They each have two children, too. So between us we had a lot to talk about including the merits of chocolate custard and school canteen mash – so here we go. Please enjoy our Life on a Plate Back-to-School special.

Right then, here we are, welcome Scummy Mummies, Helen Thorn and Ellie Gibson. We know each other a bit, don't we? And I've been on your podcast and there was a foods link there because we did it in an incredibly noisy burger restaurant.

#### **Helen 02:01**

Yeah, in retrospect that was a bad choice, but to be honest, they offered us free burgers and cocktails and we were like, well – you know, screw the sound quality the audience can just turn it up, it'll be fine.

#### **Jimi 02:13**

[Chuckles] I think it was a good call. I'm so excited to have you on here and there's so much I want to dig into with you guys but I want to start off... and this is a back-to-school themed podcast. And I just wanted to check in with both of you, with the whole back-to-school sensation. Some people really thrive on it, don't they? The new stationery, that feeling of sitting up alert, and right, let's get down to business

and returning to work. Or just getting in that mindset. And some people really struggle with it. Which camp do you fall into? I'll start with you, Helen.

**Helen** 02:52

Oh yeah, I was that kind of nerd. I remember especially when I was in high school, getting excited about new books and the smell of new Sharpies, and all that sort of stuff – and I think as a parent I feel that as well. Even though the kids don't need new lunchboxes, I get them anyway [laughs] – it's such a waste. So I get a bit excited about it. And also there's the excitement because I'm a single parent of them actually going back to school!

**Ellie** 03:19

That's nothing to do with being a single parent, I think it's all parents to be honest.

**Jimi** 03:21

I was going to come on to this. Yeah, obviously after we've come through the wringer of home schooling and 18 months of disrupted school time, does that just override everything in terms of... is the sensation just pure gratitude and joy that they're going back?

**Helen** 03:39

Absolutely. I want to give all the teachers a lot of kisses and a lot of hugs in a very, very enthusiastic way: 'Please take them!' Yeah, so I think that's it, and also, I like the blind optimism of starting a new year – it's like starting the New Year, it's like January 1<sup>st</sup>. Yes, we're going to cut back on screen time; yes, we are going to only have healthy lunches; we are always going to be on time; we're not going to have nits! That sort of triumphant: we're going to be that better family this year. Sort of [laughs].

**Jimi** 04:10

Lasts for like four days.

**Ellie** 04:17

Till Halloween when they're just eating Cadbury's for breakfast again. It's all over.

**Helen** 04:21

Yeah, exactly!

**Jimi** 04:22

Would you say that you share that optimism Ellie? That sense of a blank page and a fresh start and we're going to be different this term guys, we're going to really nail it?

**Ellie** 04:33

Oh definitely. Definitely. And also I think it's because it's autumn as well. So Helen and I, we both don't really like hot weather. We don't like the summer. As Helen always says, we like a cup of tea and an opaque tight. So the autumn for us is much... but also it's our birthdays in October, both of our birthdays. So we've got that to look forward to. And this September, I'm feeling especially

back-to-schooly because Helen and I are running the marathon on the third of October. So we've given up booze basically. We've given up booze and we're trying to eat healthily, and we're doing all these runs. So it definitely feels like, yes, by October 3, we're going to be super women. And we're going to be incredibly healthy and properly ready for the Olympics. Although we did have a discussion yesterday about how we must research a pub to book a table in for immediately after the marathon. So I don't know how long that's going to last.

**Jimi 05:16**

Priorities are absolutely straight. I definitely want to come back to that because I've run the marathon – always great when you've run the marathon, to have an opportunity to bang on about it endlessly.

**Ellie 05:28**

That's the only reason we're doing it so we can talk about it.

**Jimi 05:32**

Exactly, get the medals out. And just to return to that. But sticking with school and the notion of school food and school dinners – it occurred to me when we were looking forward to this conversation with you, even the term 'school dinners' just seems really loaded in our day and age and not necessarily in a positive way. What does it bring to mind for you? I say 'school dinners' and what do you think of?

**Helen 05:57**

Oh, I think that's a very English term because in Australia we didn't... we just ate outside because it was never really cold. And I always had the same lunch every day, which was like a miserable sandwich of Vegemite, and probably half an orange, and just... really, like a packet of sultanas – like a little packet of raisins and things like that. And then on Fridays we were allowed to get food from the Tuck Shop. Or we used to have – when I was growing up: Sav Day. Which was saveloys and someone would wheel in a massive big pot of overly boiled, massive hotdogs – you know the red ones – and some would be split and you'd have them in a bun but it will be... it was like 50p or 20p, whatever – and we'd have... 'Ooh, it Sav Day' and there'd be these sort of limp – I mean we all know what they look like – things coming out of this big old pot, and the water had gone pink from the outside of the red wrapping. That's what I think about school dinners – that was meant to be special food. I was like: Oh!

**Jimi 07:03**

[Laughs]. Wow. Yeah, I mean as you've hinted at there Helen, you grew up in Australia and I had this picture of – I don't know like the bounty of Australian fresh produce and beautiful seafood and all that – but no, it was just the big vat of bright red saveloys [groaning noises from Helen]. I always feel as well, like Sav Day – I've literally never heard of that kind of thing. You always feel like sometimes someone from another country could just be winding you up – like Sav Day is not a thing. Like I'd go and say it to an Australian and they don't believe me for a second. I'm sensing that it wasn't really a... it doesn't spark joyous memories for you, Helen. But what about you Ellie?

**Helen 07:48**

I definitely... I really remember the nice things, I really remember we used to have roast beef, which we never had at home. I think because I grew up in the 80s I think it might have been something to do with mad cow disease. My parents... maybe we just didn't have the money – we didn't have a lot of money growing up, so we never had beef at home. So you used to get this roast beef and it was like – you know when I was looking at my kids' trainers this morning, and the sole has just started to come away from the bottom because of too much football. It really was exactly like – it wasn't even like leather soles, it was like those rubbery soles. And this sort of tepid gravy, that sort of tasted of like stock cubes and bathwater in misery. But I really liked it, I really, really enjoyed that. And I quite liked an Arctic Roll but I think they were the only things I liked. So yeah, eventually my mum let me have packed lunches, but I don't think... I don't want to say she couldn't be bothered to make sandwiches – because she probably did – and she'll kill me. But I used to have pies – I used to have pork pies in my pack lunch. And then for a change, sometimes I was allowed a steak pie. You know, like you get in the little packets? I think I asked for them because I really loved them and I wouldn't heat it up. I'd just eat it cold with the little white globules – the actual white globules of fat visible in... it was delicious, absolutely delicious. And my big son has been clamouring for a packed lunch, and I keep saying no because I know I'll end up making the sandwiches, and I just can't. There's enough going on in the mornings. But now I'm thinking: could I send him to school with a cold steak pie, or in the modern age is that unacceptable? I don't know [laughs].

**Jimi 09:20**

I want to hone in on pack lunch, did you always just feel like pack lunch was always a better option because it did feel like... I remember just being so jealous of the pack lunch kids, there'd be a little mini KitKat, and maybe some Lunchables, or, you know a kind of cheese string, or... all this mad processed stuff.

**Ellie 09:39**

What are you talking about – did you go to Eton? [All laugh] At my school, yeah you were lucky to get a packet Sun-Maids, like Helen said. Maybe if you know, if you're really posh you might get a Capri-Sun, but goodness me, no – I don't remember it being that fancy.

**Jimi 09:54**

But did you just think that pack lunch was always higher in the food chain – pun-slightly-intended, in terms of lunch choices at school? It sounds like there wasn't much affection for school dinners beyond the beef for you Ellie?

**Ellie 10:09**

No, no, not really. I know it is different now, I think. So my sons are 10 and six and I think they get a choice of things for school dinner. I don't remember having a choice really. You had what there was. And I do wonder sometimes if it's gone too far the other way. I do appreciate schools and Lord Jamie of Oliver made a huge effort to improve health and healthy choices – which I think is obviously fantastic. But I think since we had a change of government, as well, I'm not sure how much focus there is on that anymore. And there's been some changes while my kids have been at school – you know, they've just been complaining about the lunches a lot more lately and I think there is an issue there with who's

making these lunches now, because it did used to be schools and dinner ladies, and all of that, and now it's outsourced, and it's companies and what happens when they change companies.

**Jimi 10:56**

Yeah, yeah. Helen, what have you found in terms of your kids and what they eat at school relates to how they eat home? Are there things that they will try at school and they just won't have at home?

**Helen 11:08**

Yeah, it sort of started in nursery actually, and my kids would eat anything at nursery. I'd get the report at the end of the day and they're going: Hugo had a tuna wrap with some sardines on the side. And I was like: 'Who is this kid?' And I would never even think of feeding them that. And then when they got to primary school they just developed this palate of beige, and so Hugo for the first five years of primary school ate a jacket potato every single day. And I was thinking – because I kept going: 'No I don't want to make pack lunches', and I make pack lunches now. And I was like, no because I want you to explore your palate, and there's all these options. And I thought, ah stuff it, I'm just going to make pack lunches because it was after the lockdown, I was making lunches anyway, and we were just in that routine. But yeah, because I had this hang up about my very miserable pack lunches as a child, I think I've overcompensated. I'm like: 'You're going to have this', and so I get very excited about making the pack lunch in the morning right?

**Jimi 12:09**

What sort of things are we talking because I feel we've seen these really idealised pack lunches. I see them on Instagram and social media – and it will be little sort of grapes, and some cold edamame, and then there's a theme day, and someone's whittled this little... it's very advanced. Is that the level we're talking about? What sort of things are you doing?

**Helen 12:31**

No, I just get excited because he's got a yoghurt and a Babybel cheese. [Laughs] Which I never had – I was like: woo hoo! Or a random set of biscuit, or something like that. But I've got lunches that they like and he is basically eating a ham sandwich every single day. So I don't know if that's better or worse than having a jacket potato.

**Jimi 12:51**

But I think in terms of maybe feeling happier and feeling – I don't know – that sense of connection and being looked after is probably quite a nice thing for kids to have. Particularly after the period that we've had and that sense of you having that little package that you've made for them that they open up each day – and they can ask you directly, or can you do this, can you do it that way?

**Helen 13:14**

But there is that one thing, like I always chop up some cucumber, or apple – and we have posted about this on The Scummy Mummies Instagram – that the cucumber goes to school and then it comes back again. And then that's the game. It's like – should I just put the same piece of cucumber in again?

**Ellie 13:33**

Just varnish it, just varnish it. It'll live for ever.

**Helen 13:36**

Exactly right. Just shrink wrap it, just so the other kids see that he's got this beautiful mixed salad.

**Jimi 13:47**

I'm so glad you mentioned Scummy Mummies there in relation to this because obviously your long-running, hugely successful double act – as you say, you've got an Instagram account, you've got a hugely successful podcast, more than 200 episodes, five million downloads. It's amazing. But so much of what you guys have done, and the image of perfection, and the parental pressure that you've pushed against – it does seem to relate to food as well, and that notion of kids being fussy eaters and what you need to get on the plate, and you mentioned the beige food. I know that you've been standard bearers for the fish finger tea, haven't you?

**Ellie 14:30**

Well, I love food. I'm obsessed with food. I read about it all the time. I cook all the time, and I love restaurants and all of that. But yes, definitely. So food's always been a huge part of my life and definitely with my first son, I didn't do all the puréeing and stuff like that. And then I had another baby and I did do it – but he was he was premature which I think... Wasn't your...?

**Jimi 14:53**

Yeah, my son, my youngest, Remy, he was premature as well. I think we spoke about this.

**Ellie 14:58**

Yeah, yeah. So my son Joe was born nine weeks early, so with him it became about feeding him in the hospital – and there was a whole lot of stuff about that. And I had to use a breast pump to get the milk going, and so I'm a person who likes a goal, I like a target, I like a mission – so I went on... You know how Stalin used to like start these grain...? He used to get the whole of Russia producing enormous mountains of grain. That was like me with the milk. I had my own drawer. I produced so much milk that in the freezer at the hospital... This is not because I'm sort of Superwoman by the way – I'm not saying it's very difficult for many people to produce milk, and I'm not saying there's anything good or special about me – but I just took it incredibly seriously, was very lucky.

**Jimi 15:45**

I do remember there was that whole thing where you would take it in, and you'd drop it off, and they'd be given the breast milk – and when Remy was in the NICU Ward, and it was this big thing, so yeah.

**Ellie 15:57**

But you do, because when they're in hospital and you're at home, you have to set an alarm, so every three hours you have to express so you have to wake yourself up in the middle of the night. So anyway I produced loads of milk and then when he came out of the hospital he was absolutely fine now. And it was all fine. But then... and I was obsessed with getting his weight up, so I was doing all the puréeing

when I could, but then I was also like: 'Hey I have these biscuits, I have these...' I don't mean Jaffa Cakes obviously. I mean like nice little organic wheaty things. But I just gave him food and snacks whenever he wanted because I just wanted him to eat. And here we are a few years on – and weirdly the first child eats all sorts of things: eats sushi eats curry, you know loves a roast dinner, all of that. Joe, will basically – like Helen was saying, beige food: pizza, pasta, chicken nuggets. He doesn't want... he doesn't want your roast beef, Jimi. [Jimi laughs] He hasn't got time for that. He'll only eat chocolate... This is what I'm saying, he will only eat chocolate ice cream. He won't even eat another flavour of ice cream. He's very specific. And I entirely blame myself, but it's just what happens, isn't it? So that's the thing. I think that as with so many other things with parenting, it all just changes as they grow older.

**Jimi 17:10**

And yeah, you mentioned adventurousness with food and wanting to pass that on a little bit and introduce them to new things. I know that both of you are both very into your food. And have you had that point where you're just like, okay, the jig is up in terms of like, Helen, in terms of trying to introduce kids to things that are maybe a bit out of their comfort zone. Do you still try and do that? Or has that ship sailed? I think I'll just give them what they want.

**Helen 17:39**

Yeah, I'm in the camp of whatever's easiest. You know, I've got enough on. And so many friends have reassured me saying, look, I only ate sausages for the first 20 years of my life, or things like that. I love when they're older parents say: 'Look, look – my daughter who's now a human rights lawyer only ate peanut butter on toast.' Well that's great, you know, that will lead to amazing career prospects [laughs]. So I think you have to give yourself... because I just don't want mealtimes to be a stress, because I work really hard, and the kids are at school, and we've all got these things on. Actually mealtimes is our chance to connect and we actually have our best conversations sitting around the dinner table because nobody – you know, there's no devices, there's nothing else and we can let the chat meander. So if it's not me going: 'Eat your broccoli,' then there might be some lovely moments to connect as a family, because I just think... And also the way that our work works, the way Ellie and I do – we've got Instagram and Podcasts, and all these other things that we have to do for money. Gladly! But I never feel like I'm 'off'. And so I think dinner times, I've sort of gone – well look, I've got this trio of vegetables. I always put down cucumber, carrot sticks and red pepper. And that goes with every single meal. And then I'll have some kind of beige protein, whether that's a sausage, or chicken nugget or something else, or a fish finger. Or a pizza. And so that's my standard thing. And I think, well look, there's three different types of vegetables, three different types of colours. And yeah, they probably drink about four litres of squash. It's fine. They're very hydrated [Jimi laughs]. That's kind of my approach to that but my daughter's a bit more adventurous. But in the end it's like – well, you know, it is a bit like 'fed is best', so that's that. But you know, I had all these aspirations when I had my children that I'd have like: Friday night will be Japanese night and all this sort of stuff. And now I'm like: 'Ah, pizza again – yep, yep, yep, yep.' [All laugh]

**Jimi 19:50**



Yeah, it's a strange thing, being a parent, isn't it? Because I remember pizza used to be the most exciting thing in the world and now it's like the mere mention of pizza between me and my wife, sometimes it's like: 'Oh my God, can you imagine eating a pizza without having to because there's a child present?' I wanted to congratulate you on your book.

**Helen 20:11**

Oh thank you.

**Jimi 20:12**

It's really great, like honestly. And Ellie as well – because you write a very moving chapter. Just to start with your experience – and please do only share as much of it... I know you've spoken about it a lot. You've written a book about it. But in terms of what happened to you and your decision to – as you have done throughout your work with Scummy Mummies – just share your experience. At what point were you like: Okay, I'm going to have to be honest about this very private, very difficult thing that you were going through.

**Helen 20:42**

Yeah, so in March last year, I found out my ex-husband really basically wasn't who he said he was. And we became separated. He had an affair. It's fine! So he moved out very quickly, and then yeah, we went into lockdown. And so for the first three months it was a bit like pregnancy – Ellie and I kept it quiet, because – you know, I was processing it. But when it came to June and Ellie I could meet up again we recorded a podcast basically announcing that I was single, and now a single parent. And from that moment on we were really surprised with the feedback that we got from other single parents who said thank you for representing me, or thank you for talking about it on your platform, because the platform is really big now. And Ellie and I have had very similar... you know, we were both married, both had two children, lived in South London – so there was lots of similarities. And now we're slightly different. Still real big scumbags [all laugh]. But yeah, I think I just decided that I would be really open and honest about my journey as a single parent, but also not shying away from that I *really* liked it.

**Jimi 21:56**

It's in the name of the book, isn't it? *Get divorced, Be happy*.

**Helen 21:59**

*Get divorced, Be happy*. And it's not telling everyone to do that. It was about the surprise that it wasn't a decision that I had made. But it was... it has been a surprise as to how absolutely gloriously happy I am since becoming a single parent. And I think I'm a better parent because of it. I have my children five days a week, and then I have two days to recover, then back again. But I think, I just... there are some nights that I don't go to bed until midnight because I'm doing all the jobs. It's as someone said, it's not single parenting, it's double parenting because you're doing both – you're doing all the roles. And I often take photos of almost ceiling-high recycling and the mess that I've got going: 'Oh my God, no one else is doing this at 11 o'clock at night' and I'm still going to make sure there's something in the pack lunches for tomorrow.



**Jimi 22:58**

You've had a lot of food specials on The Scummy Mummies Podcast as well, and it has been a real... something that you've returned to and talked about. What are the things that people most often talk about in relation to kids and food? Is it the fussy eating thing?

**Helen 23:11**

Yeah, I think fussy eating is one of the things and I think it's one of the greatest let downs of parenthood. Because you start with such enthusiasm. You think: 'Oh, welcome to the world of food young person. Listen, look at this, you can share these beautiful meals and things like that.'

**Ellie 23:29**

Oh, I like that story Helen about when you made something from scratch for Hugo.

**Helen 23:33**

Oh, that's right. I made a pizza from scratch. And I said: 'Here kids, I made it from scratch'. And they're like: 'I don't want scratch. I don't like scratch,' and they put it in the bin. [All laugh]

**Ellie 23:43**

Nobody wants scratch. [Laughter continues]

**Jimi 23:50**

Oh no. Oh my God, I feel like a lot of parents will have a version of that where they with the best intentions... I remember making what were essentially homemade fish fingers. Posh ones – like goujon things. And they just got completely rejected. And it was so heartbreaking. Yeah, are there any other things that you could think of?

**Ellie 24:13**

But here's the thing, there's fussy eaters and then there's... I'm discovering there's a whole new brand of fussy eaters. So as I say, my youngest son, Joe was what we know of as a 'fussy eater'. He will only eat 'yogurt', if it's spelt without an 'h', that sort of thing. Right? My eldest son, Charlie, he's much more of a foodie – but he's now become fussy in the sort of fine dining sense. So now, we'll go to a restaurant, and you know how kids have no volume control, and they haven't yet learned to sort of, you know, monitor their behaviour in public properly? So he'll be like: 'Hmm, Mum, I don't think this steak really is medium rare. I'd say it's a bit on the bloody side.' In front of the waiter. [Jimi laughs] But you know, I'm English – we don't complain about food unless there's actual maggots coming out of it. We just keep quiet. Keep your head down. And when they come and take the plate half full of food away, you just say: 'Oh, I'm just not very hungry.' That's what we do in Britain. They'll be like: 'Yeah, I don't know if it's en pointe' – like what are you talking about? [All laugh]

**Jimi 25:12**

I was going to ask about eating on tour as well. Do you have any sort of rituals or...?

**Ellie 25:17**

When we started Scummy Mummies for the first few years we didn't make any money. We didn't have any money, we couldn't afford to eat out and stuff like that.

**Jimi** 25:23

What would you do then?

**Helen** 25:24

We'd have a kebab in bed. That sounds terrible! But we would share a double bed in a Premier Inn and eat kebabs. [All laugh] Again: that sounds gross!

**Jimi** 25:37

It feels like a lovely twist on the Morecambe and Wise in a bed... you two just with a kebab, in a Premier Inn.

**Ellie** 25:44

I'm sure Ant and Dec do it to this day. With curry sauce. But then after a few years, we did start to make money, and so we hired... I used to do all the driving as well, and it became to us, we started hiring my dad – my dad used to be a comedian the 80s – he became our roadie hilariously in his 70s. So because he was... he sort of knows the game and stuff... and one night he said after the show, he said: 'Why don't we go for a curry?' And we were like: 'Ooh, that's a good idea Dad.' Because curry houses very often are the only places – especially going to smaller towns – and they're the only places open after 10 o'clock at night when we finish work. So, it was brilliant, we got into this ritual of now every single night after the show we go for a curry. We ring them in advance to make sure they're open, we get in there as quickly as we can, we order immediately so the waiters can get it done, and get out of there. And we have some lager and it's just an absolute delight to be honest. We have been known to have curry four nights in a row on a long tour [Jimi laughs]. And I'm just not sure... we've been back to the same recently – didn't we Helen? We went to two gigs in Chipping Norton and we just went to the same curry house again 24 hours later.

**Helen** 26:54

Yes [Jimi laughs].

**Jimi** 26:58

If it ain't broke, if it ain't broke...

**Ellie** 26:59

Exactly.

**Jimi** 27:00

When you do get those pockets of time with the whole family, how are you spending it? What are you... like obviously locked down and the last year intensified that – and I know Helen you're talking about you'd have a routine of going for walks together, and watching movies, and things like that. Do you ever cook together? Do you ever engage them in that way and get them into the kitchen or anything?

**Helen 27:26**

Yeah, like this morning, my son's favourite breakfast is pancakes, bacon and syrup

**Jimi 27:33**

Fantastic – an excellent choice.

**Helen 27:37**

I know. So he was making the streaky bacon, and I was doing the pancakes, and then Matilda, my daughter, she was flipping the pancakes. So I was like: 'Kids, if you're getting Mum up at 8am, we're going to do this together' – so that's really nice. And I like doing that. And we have sometimes what we call 'wrap' – not that we 'rap', we wrap dinners – and then we all get like tortillas and they just have lots of bits of things. And I quite like those kind of dinners. And Hugo and I always used to make flapjacks together. And it's really whenever... that was when he was in nursery. And there's something about making those together that I'll remember when it was just the two of us and Matilda was at school. And so there's nice little memories interwoven into some recipes.

**Jimi 28:24**

What about you, Ellie – thinking about your youngest there, can you engage...?

**Ellie 28:30**

Sometimes I let him arrange the chicken nuggets on the tray himself, Jimi [Jimi laughs]. Or spell out rude words with the chips! No, pancakes are a big thing. And they quite like making cakes – which I don't like making cakes – it's too fiddly. Weighing all the things out, I can't be bothered but they're quite into it. So we do a lot of them. But I make us do the food processor cakes because I can't be bothered. So stuff like that. But yeah, they like a bit of cooking but I'm determined to – by the time they leave – which at the moment I hope will be never, but ask me when they're teenagers. But I've said to them: 'You are going to learn how to make a roast dinner.' So proper gravy, roasted chicken, roast potatoes, you're going to learn how to cook a steak correctly, and make scrambled eggs on toast, and spaghetti carbonara – because if you can make those things, you only need five ingredients. You need vegetables, potatoes, chicken, bacon, eggs, and maybe a bit of parmesan, pasta – ok, maybe seven or eight ingredients. But the point is I want them to be able to cook, to know they can always cook a proper meal for themselves – or a lady, or a man that they're inviting round. You know?

**Jimi 29:41**

Yes. Is that something that you've... Because I couldn't agree more. And is that something that you felt from when you encounter those people that literally can't cook anything, or have no sort of interest, or...?

**Ellie 29:56**

Yeah, I had a boyfriend who had never cooked pasta and I taught him to cook pasta and I was like: 'You have to... so give it a little stir to stop it from sticking.' So he got a metal spoon out of the drawer, stirred the pasta, and then just put the spoon back in the drawer. And I was like... where have you...? [Jimi]

laughs] I think he had one of those... I'm sure she was a lovely mum and she did everything for him out of the best of intentions, but I also remember staying at his family home once and I said: 'I've got iron a shirt for work, where's for iron?' And he went: 'Oh we don't have one.' I was like: 'You definitely have one, I've seen your house, your mum has an iron.' And he didn't know where it was because he'd never ironed anything. So I'm like yeah, let's not do that maybe.

**Jimi** 30:40

But I think food and self-sufficiency with kids and equipping them with those basic recipes is really, really valuable and actually to bring it back to school I've noticed – certainly with my kids – that they've really loved doing cookery lessons at school and doing some of the home schooling video lessons that my eldest engaged with most were when it was a cook-along-thing. and he really responded to it. I don't know Helen, have you found that at all? Have you seen that with your kids?

**Helen** 31:16

Oh it's so funny that you mention that because I said to Hugo yesterday, I said all clubs and societies will be coming back to school and I said: 'What club would you most want to do? Do you want to do football or Spanish?' He's like: 'Is there some kind of like cake decorating club?' [Jimi laughs] 'I want that one.' And that's my son! Exactly right. And my daughter is in high school and she's done food technology and they had to make burgers from scratch. And she was so excited. She loves a burger. And it's really nice to see the joy in completing something or making something from scratch and that sort of thing. So they both have really enjoyed that. And also when the kids do – every year at my kids' school – they did a different country for every year level. And part of that was a week of food. And I think that was the only time that they really tried new food is that, because it had some kind of meaning, and also all their classmates were doing it, so there's that kind of influence from school which you just don't get at home.

**Jimi** 32:18

Yeah, it can be a really positive can't it? And obviously with food tech stuff, and teaching them stuff – the end game of them just making you dinner, and having these live-in butlers is basically what we're all striving toward.

**Helen** 32:32

Yes please!

**Jimi** 32:33

I know we've established that maybe my classmates when I was growing up had the bougiest pack lunchboxes going, but did you ever have that sense of things that you really wanted, like when you were growing up? Because you weren't allowed to have them and you saw other kids having them? Were there any things that were really prized that you were denied?

**Ellie** 32:54

Jimi, I've got two words for you. I've got two words for you: Um Bongo. [Jimi laughs] Aah, they may or may not drink it in the Congo. I suspect it's not actually that popular there. But I remember Um Bongo

coming out and my... we weren't allowed fizzy drinks... like at parties and stuff. But at home, we never had fizzy drinks. There was a brand called St. Clements that in the late 80s brought out an orange squash that had no colourings and additives. But my mum was convinced that if we had tartrazine and sunset yellow, and all that, then we'd actually turn orange, and so we were allowed that – but with that, we were only allowed a bit of worthy squash once a week. And then they brought out this... I saw the adverts with the cartoon, with all the animals in the jungle drinking the Um Bongo – and it was all I wanted. And of course we weren't allowed to have it, and it was too expensive and all that. And then I think I went to my friend's house – it was my friend Nyoka, and her grandma had got a carton of Um Bongo. And there was about four of us kids and it was like: 'Oh my God!' And bless Nyoka's grandma, she could see the problem arising, so she got some ice, and some water, and she started like watering it down. But then we started fighting about how much she'd watered it down in the different cups and who was getting the neatest Um Bongo. And I remember, and I drank it and it was like nectar. It was like nothing I'd ever tasted. I was just...

**Jimi 34:13**

It didn't disappoint. You'd built it up and it did not disappoint.

**Ellie 34:17**

It was absolutely fabulous. And is one of the happiest food memories of my life. [Jimi laughs] Tinged with a little bit of resentment that I did not get the strongest cup. So that was it for me.

**Jimi 34:30**

Helen, have you got any that spring to mind?

**Helen 34:33**

Yeah, I just wanted something with a name brand, because my dad did all the shopping, and he always bought like essentials or home brand. Everything I had was like, you know, a home brand. The home brand is called Black and Gold in Australia – so we always had Cola – not Coke [Coca-Cola] – and all that sort of stuff. So I think obviously we're byproducts of this media saturation, like Ellie was saying about Um Bongo, and I just wanted a fancy thing. And I remember for Geography we had to use food labels and do a poster. And looking back at it now, I thought what a terrible way of shaming kids who had all the labels – and all my labels all looked exactly the same because we had to say: 'Ah, where does your food come from?' kind of thing. And so yeah, I remember trying to find something that wasn't home brand, and the only thing I could find was Tabasco sauce. So I'd keep the label off the Tabasco because it wasn't... it's one thing we could get that wasn't home brand. But isn't that funny that they're the sort of pillars of things.

**Jimi 35:51**

I definitely remember going around to friends' houses and it's like: 'Oh my God, they've got this... they've got Sunny Delight [SunnyD], they've got like... Oh my God! Yeah, it's weird that food can be a real focus for that weird – I don't know – jockeying for status as a kid, or whatever, and just really craving the thing that you are denied. Helen I wondered – your memories of Australia and food growing

up, do you have longing for those things now you've been in the UK for quite a long time now. Are there specific things that you crave? Have you tried to pass on things to your kids that you grew up on?

**Helen 36:35**

Yeah, absolutely. And my mum gave me what was called the *Nursing Mother's Cookbook of Australia* which has all the recipes that I grew up with and she gave this cookbook to me before I left. And there were times during lockdown – and you know I haven't seen my parents for a couple of years now – that I made the macaroni cheese that I grew up with. And even the smell of it, like this is this macaroni cheese you make with... I know! It's with a can of tomato soup, bacon, chopped up onion, chopped up pepper and macaroni and then lots of lots of cheese on the top.

**Ellie 37:06**

That's not macaroni cheese! [Jimi laughs] It's pasta bake!

**Jimi 37:14**

No, but to Helen and her family it's macaroni cheese.

**Helen 37:17**

Thanks Jimi.

**Ellie 37:19**

I once had a spaghetti carbonara in Cambodia that came with carrots and peas in it. I think it's like that. [All laugh]

**Jimi 37:26**

A local riff. Have you got any of those Ellie, because I've definitely got things that obviously when my mum cooks Nigerian dishes – I think I've even written about this for my kids, it's crazy that connection – and being able to cook the things that I grew up eating for them, and seeing them enjoying it feels amazing. And it's weird it can feel like a strange cheat code like they accept some things that they wouldn't eat in any other context but because it's cooked by grandma, or it's made like grandma-style – are there any of those Ellie for you?

**Ellie 38:04**

Yeah, my grandma's spaghetti bolognese – that classic English dish: spaghetti bolognese. [Jimi laughs] Far be it for the English to appropriate another culture. But yeah, my mum cooks that for them. They really like it and stuff like that. But it's really the roast dinners that I've inherited from my mum. Sunday lunch was a big thing for us and so... and in lock down especially we had... we do still most Sundays we sit down and we have a roast. I mean they sit down for about 12 minutes, then Joe asks for a ham sandwich, then they go away and watch a film. But Pete and I will still sit there for a few... and there's something about sitting down – and I love cooking, and I like the ritual of it myself. And if I'm completely honest, I like the break of it. And I remember that when the kids were very young as well. There's much of this sort of guilt around saying: 'Oh can you watch the kids for half an hour while I sit down and read a magazine?' 'Can you watch the kids now while I go off in the kitchen and stir a risotto or make the

gravy or peel the potato?' But simultaneously perhaps listen to a Podcast, or do something lovely, or as I was doing this morning watch Love Island. I know it's problematic – let's not get into it. [Jimi and Helen laugh] So for me cooking... I remember liking cooking especially and I still do, because it looks like a worthy service. And it is – but it's also secretly a retreat, and an escape, and a soothing for me – a very soothing experience.

**Jimi** 39:37

So I think it's about time for us to do Kitchen Grill, which is the traditional end to our podcast. It's a quickfire selection of food-based questions and we've given them a school dinners theme this time. Feel free to elaborate a little bit if you want to. But here we go... Chips or mash?

**Together** 39:37

Mash / Chips.

**Jimi** 39:37

Whoa, whoa – that was like almost instant, wow!

**Ellie** 40:04

I feel like mash – mash it can occasionally go wrong but the chips – chips are very rarely fantastic.

**Helen** 40:10

I just love chips, so it was like: Chips!

**Jimi** 40:14

Sponge or crumble?

**Both** 40:20

Crumble. Crumble definitely.

**Jimi** 40:22

Ooh nice, we've got yeah, a unanimous one. Baked beans or peas?

**Helen** 40:23

Peas!

**Ellie** 40:29

Well, what are we having with it?

**Jimi** 40:30

Whatever you want... it can be the perfect combination – but just, you know, one or the other.

**Ellie** 40:37



Oh baked beans because it's more practical – you can put them on toast, you can have them with your breakfast – yeah beans.

**Jimi 40:41**

More versatile. Yeah, in agreement Helen?

**Helen 40:44**

No, peas all the way. Love a pea! I eat them cold from the freezer sometimes, I love a pea.

**Jimi 40:51**

Vanilla custard or chocolate custard?

**Ellie 40:55**

Vanilla custard.

**Helen 40:58**

Vanilla. Absolutely. Yum, yum, yum. It's more versatile. It can go on anything.

**Jimi 41:00**

Yeah, again – I think I see where you're coming from there, like chocolate custard seems a very specifically school dinners thing.

**Ellie 41:07**

Also, it doesn't taste properly of either custard or chocolate. Like it's neither flavour, it's just sort of tepid. Unpleasant.

**Jimi 41:14**

Brown custard effectively. Chicken Nuggets or fish fingers? Ooh, this is a tricky one. This is the...

**Helen 41:24**

I'm going to say fish fingers because one of my favourite hangover foods is a fish finger sandwich. Iceberg lettuce. Too much mayonnaise. A cheap white loaf.

**Jimi 41:36**

Ham sandwich or cheese sandwich?

**Helen 41:40**

Ooh, I'm going to go with cheese because it's always good, and what I like is... after the children's, if the corners have started to turn, I put butter in a pan and fry them up. Oh, I was going to say very effing lovely. Absolutely delicious.

**Jimi 41:56**

Hummus or mayo?

**Both** 41:01

Mayo / Mayo.

**Jimi** 42:03

Okay, I think we'll move swiftly on. Blueberries or little box of raisins? Those raisin boxes, wow.

**Ellie** 42:10

Oh, blueberries – definitely.

**Helen** 42:12

Blueberries are more satisfying.

**Ellie** 42:15

Yeah, raisins can be very dry.

**Helen** 42:17

Yes, and I don't like it when you get the occasional little stumpy twig on one. You know, you just get like a little stumpy bit of wood? And you know, I don't want that in my mouth.

**Jimi** 42:25

Yeah. Wotsits or Quavers?

**Ellie** 42:29

Wotsits.

**Helen** 42:31

The giant ones are preference. Giant Wotsits. Oh, bring it on!

**Ellie** 42:37

I'd rather have salt and vinegar Discos though, I feel like you've let yourself down.

**Jimi** 42:42

Oh, okay. That was the real choice there. Babybel or Dairylea?

**Ellie** 42:49

Ooh, probably Babybel but that was the real treat of the 80s. My friend Rosalyn, her parents always had the wheel of the Dairylea, which again, we were never allowed to have. And they would just give you a triangle of cheese as a snack. What a joy. I'm going to have those at my next wedding for the starter. [Jimi laughs]

**Helen** 43:05

I would say Dairy Lea, and also, quick dinner: Boil up some pasta, two triangles in the bowl, tiny bit of pasta water – whizz, whizz, whizz: carbonara.

**Jimi** 43:17

Wow. [All laugh]

**Ellie** 43:19

Camboian style. Add carrots and peas.

**Jimi** 43:21

Is this like your macaroni cheese as well?

**Helen** 43:26

You're welcome Britain [laughs]!

**Jimi** 43:27

All the Italians listening, just – kind of – angrily removing their headphones.

**Ellie** 43:32

I think you should do a whole recipe book: *Helen's tiramisu*. Simply get some Angel Delight tips and tea bags on it. There you go – it's basically the same.

**Jimi** 43:42

Well, that was it. That was our Kitchen Grill. And yeah, I feel like we've learned something about you and about food in general. And we've got to come away with a few useful recipes. So there's that. Thank you so much, guys, Helen Thorne, Ellie Gibson: The Scummy Mummies. You've been such a joy. This has been so much fun. It's just great to see you both doing so well. And just great to see you. So thanks for coming on. And yeah, hopefully see soon.

**Ellie** 44:09

That'd be brilliant.

**Helen** 44:10

Thank you so much. Bye!

**Jimi** 44:17

You've been listening to a special back-to-school episode of Life on a Plate, the podcast from Waitrose. I'm Jimmy Famurewa. Thank you to my guests, Ellie Gibson and Helen Thorne, also known as The Scummy Mummies. 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](https://waitrose.com) forward slash podcast.