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Chew On This Getting Naked With Jamie Oliver

Margaret Ambrose

With his ragmuffin hair, Mick Jagger lips, and loud-mouthed attitude, Jamie Oliver could be another British rockstar. And with the media frenzy surrounding his current visit to Australia, you would think that he is. Every literary function he attends to promote his new book *The Return of the Naked Chef* has been sold out. Book-signing engagements become an exercise in crowd control, while his publishers, Penguin, have been flooded with calls from young girls wanting to know what hotel he is staying in. It's easy to forget one thing – he's not Ronan Keating, he's a chef. He's less likely to trash a hotel room than cook in it.

But listening to Jamie Oliver, you have to wonder if someone has bothered to tell him. On the Neil Mitchell radio show, he is besieged by calls from hyperventilating teenage girls – and seems thrilled. "How old are you, darlin'?" he asks in a smooth, bedroom-toned voice, complete with an ever-so-slight lisp ("And then you add the lemonth to the mixthure...") that would make even the strongest woman weak at the knees.

In truth, Oliver is struggling with the international superstar pace. "It's been really frantic and I have seen heaps, but it's pretty damn hard. And I just bought a house over the phone," he says, adding that he's seen it only once, "and I'm getting married in June – the biggest things you do in your life, I've done in the past month. I'm just really looking forward to going home and seeing my missus."

And while he may be basking in the limelight of being Celebrity of the Moment, Oliver goes to great lengths to let us know, *it's about the food, man*. In his case, cooking isn't about delicate sauces and seven ways to serve pine nuts; his success in the kitchen hinges on his quest to make recipes unadulterated, and cooking simple. "What does it for me is when people come up to me in the supermarket and say that they used a recipe from my book for their engagement or something, and it went really well. That's what it's all about."

To hear Oliver talking about cooking is to witness a love affair between man and his food. "Pasta is just the best meal," he gushes excitably to Melbourne radio listeners. "It suits most people's economies, and sauces can reflect any season. I couldn't live without pasta – I'd become depressed and lose my libido! Pasta's like Viagra – it keeps you going!" (Following my conversation with Oliver, I actually dish out \$80 for a pasta-making machine. Does it live up to Oliver's rap? That's another story.)

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Oliver's unbridled enthusiasm for cooking has taken him from working as a chef in his parents' pub in Essex, to London's exclusive River Café. And soon, the cult-like TV series *The Naked Chef* was whipped up, complete with two best-selling tie-in books. Not bad for a 23-year-old lad who claims he never had any ambition. "I'm not a food God – I'm just a bloke who likes cooking."

"I never really aspired to anything other than to not be told what to do. And I've been really lucky. [The producers of *The Naked Chef*] came to me and said they wanted me - so I can call the shots. Which is pretty rare – usually they try to bump you up and say 'smile more' and stuff like that, but not on our show. It's just me cooking for my mates. There are no make-up or hair people on *The Naked Chef* it's just us – cooking."

Which is precisely the appeal of *The Naked Chef*, say fans of the show. The food is simple and you don't need to be a gourmet to prepare it (Oliver's instructions include "plonk in some onions" and he'll start recommendations with the words "it's bloody good to..."). The acerbic Australian cooking identity Bernard King (remember him?) calls Oliver's style of cooking "nothing new" and certainly nothing to get excited about. But according to Oliver, "nothing new" is exactly what people are getting excited about.

"The title *The Naked Chef* sums up the idea: It's basically stripping food back to the bare essentials," he says. "I had been cooking food in the restaurant for some time, but found it difficult to recreate many of the recipes at home for lack of time, space, equipment, or sometimes, the availability to the average shopper of good quality produce at a reasonable price. So, in an effort to re-create some exciting restaurant recipes in a limited kitchen, I found myself stripping down these recipes to something quite basic."

If Oliver's mission is to get people back into the kitchen, it seems to be working. At functions and book signings, he is quizzed about "How much fennel is too much?" by those aforementioned teenaged girls, and is complimented on his mushroom risotto recipe by forty-something men. "I have never seen such a diverse group of people interested in cooking," Oliver admits. "I've always had a lot of confidence in my recipes – but look at what I do. It's not brain surgery."

If food gets Oliver excited, Down Under fare sends him over the moon. "The food scene in Australia is amazing!" he exclaims. "I think Australians are very proud of their food and they should be. Fantastic fish is more accessible and you have great fresh fruit and vegetables." (Oliver then goes on - and on - about the exceptional quality of root vegetables, but, trust me, you don't want to go there.)

"Aussies have a real adventurous attitude to food, but I'd already been Aussie-ised before I came here," Oliver boasts. "In London I've mainly worked with Aussies and after a while you pick up the vibe – right? In London it's more classic this and classic that. Now we're having an influx of Aussie and New Zealand chefs, so we have more of a diversity in the cooking."

And cheese, don't get him started on cheese. "I think you have fantastic cheeses in Australia, but it's a shame you have to pasteurise everything. It doesn't taste as good. Ask any of your farmers and they will tell you that pasteurisation is the bane of their lives. It's like, people in power who don't know anything about cheese cannot bombing the problem." The

anything about cheese, carpet-bombing the problem... The way he talks it's enough to make you start drafting a letter to your local MP.

Oliver believes the secret to great cooking is to relax and enjoy. "I love going home and cooking, but sometimes when I've been out drinking I think 'I need a grease hit' and I'll get some fast food. And that's OK." And as for spending a fortune on rare ingredients and hours in the kitchen? "Let's stop doing that shall we, babe?" Yes Jamie, let's.

***The Naked Chef* (RRP \$39.95) and *The Return of the Naked Chef* (RRP \$40.00) are published by Penguin and are available at most book stores.**

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