



THIS LIFE JOHN RAMSAY

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[Clockwise from top left] John with his terrier, Jed; the dining room at John and Kim's cottage in Strathtummel – scene of many delicious dinners; the kitchen is basic but functional and has all the chef needs; a stash of ingredients, including Australian favourite Vegemite; a map of the world is essential for inspiring new dishes and, for this well-travelled couple, new destinations to visit



Kim Ramsay has her own private chef. Dinner, which goes from fridge to table in 30 minutes, might be a soupy Malaysian curry or a zingy stir-fry. After a long shift at Dunkeld Primary School, the smell of lemon grass and galangal is pretty good to come home to.

Not many head teachers in rural Perthshire open the door to a South Asian feast of a Tuesday night. But Kim, who is Australian, had the foresight to marry John Ramsay. He was a hotel chef when they met. It was her brilliant idea to get him out off the shift rota and into private kitchens.

It was the start of the 1990s. John, who grew up in Carnoustie, had already prepped veg across the US and Australia. Having decided he wanted to make cheffing his career, he'd headed homewards in search of a proper job. "I was applying for jobs where I would be working under a good chef. The Killiecrankie Hotel had two AA Rosettes, which was well above the average back then, before we had any of the highly awarded restaurants that you find in Scotland nowadays. I started off as commis chef, right at bottom, stayed for five years and ended up head chef."

And while he liked the three months off in the winter – and jetted off to Indonesia ►



[Clockwise from above] John has a network of trusted suppliers across Perthshire from whom he buys top-quality produce. He has been buying from butchers Macdonald Bros in Pitlochry for the past 25 years, who in turn get their meat from local farmers. “One of the great things about being a private chef is that I can buy the best of Scottish produce without thinking about it,” says John



WHAT JOHN LOVES...

Favourite food market? Klong Toey Fresh Market in Bangkok. You'll find all kinds of meat, fish, seafood, fruit, vegetables and herbs. It's hot, sticky, stuffy and cramped but a dream come true for anyone mad about food.

Favourite cook book? *Larousse Gastronomique* – it's an indispensable point of reference for me.

Favourite smell? Any south-east Asian city – everything is concentrated into one warm, sweet and spicy smell.

Best place to unwind? Out on the hills with my terrier Jed.

Best place to feel inspired and creative? In any kitchen.

Dream destination? Any remote Pacific Island – paradise.

Sweet or sour? Sour.

How do you boil an egg? Start with the egg in cold salted water. Begin timing as soon as bubbles start leaving the base of the pan. Leave in water for 15 secs after turning off heat.

Favourite comfort food? A great curry.

Top cooking tip? If you can prepare it in advance, do so.

Absolute necessity? A good work-life balance – there's so much more to life than working.

Ultimate adrenalin rush? Going downhill as fast as I dare on a snowboard or mountain bike.

or Malaysia as soon as the doors were locked for the season – he began to find the hours a slog. As did Kim. “When we been together for a few years, she said to me, ‘I’m a bit fed up looking like I’m a single person.’ Anything that was on at weekends, she was always there on her own because I was at work.”

It was Kim who suggested that he go freelance, cooking for small weddings, shooting parties and private dinners – which was great until she needed to return to Australia to finish her teaching qualifications. The northern area of New South Wales has no hunting lodges requiring an expert to roast venison for the guests. John was back in the kitchen.

“I felt I was back to where I was trying to get away from. It was a subtropical area. I was going through three litres of water a shift and still feeling dehydrated.

“Australia has a great reputation for fantastic food, but if you’re outside Sydney or Melbourne it’s absolutely terrible. Steak and chips or deep-frozen stuff. I was back to square one.”

It was time to move again. Friends who ran the Strath-tummel Inn were struggling with their business. John and Kim moved to the village to help out. And while he describes this as “great experience”, it also showed John that running a country hotel was not for him.

“I half-thought of buying the place at one point, but seeing the figures I realised it was a lifestyle business. You are not going to be driving a new car every few years or going on foreign holidays. It’s all-consuming.”

Private work was slow to pick up at first. But there were lucky breaks. Forter Castle in Glenisla was taking off as a wedding venue and John became the chef on speed-dial. “There is a lot of build-up and then one really intense day – I quite enjoyed that,” he explains. “Then, after two years, someone said that doing weddings must be really nerve-racking.”

Puzzled, John asked why. “It’s one of the most important days of people’s lives,” his friend replied. “If anything goes wrong with the food, the day will be ruined for them forever.”

He laughs. “I’d never really thought about that before. But my friend was right.”

Happily for him, nothing has yet gone disastrously wrong. One wedding was called off just as he arrived at the gates – he passed the groom’s family speeding off in the opposite direction. John had all the food in the back of his 4x4. There are, he told the mother of the bride, no refunds at this stage. This was not an issue: the bride’s family wanted to sit down and have a meal anyway. “It turned into a party,” John recalls. “The bride didn’t even seem too upset.”

Other private work – dinner parties, shooting groups – built up. Then Port an Eilean House Hotel was bought and restored as a country pile. John watched the renovation progress from his cottage, on the other side of the road. “Whenever anything like that happens in the area, I pop in with my business card and introduce myself.”

The housekeeper was delighted to meet him. The owner had been bringing up chefs from Edinburgh. “She couldn’t believe there was one based half a kilometre away. They’re on the lochside, and I’m across the road and up the hill a bit.”

Cooking for Ian and his family and friends has become one of John’s most regular gigs. Like many of his clients, they want something delicious and familiar. A jolly gathering of 30-odd old chums is not the place to be going all Noma and serving moss and weeds. “Lamb, beef, venison – nothing too controversial. When you’re sitting down at a wedding or a special occasion, you want something that everyone likes.”

Being able to produce a repertoire of greatest hits, with options for those with a gluten intolerance, is the essence ►



[This page and opposite] John at work in the kitchens of Port an Eilean, a beautifully renovated country house on the shores of Loch Tummel. It is here that he concocts dinner for up to 30 guests at a time, using the best of Scotland's larder





[Clockwise from above] The elegant dining room at Port an Eilean, where groups of friends and family gatherings tuck into the chef's repertoire of Scottish classics. There will often be John's take on Cullen Skink, Perthshire lamb and Atholl Brose (or Cranachan) on the menu – the recipes for which are given opposite



of successful private cheffing. The first time John cooks for new clients, there will be coming, going and menu-tweaking. After that, they are pretty much happy to let him off the leash. “After I’ve worked with them once, I know their likes and dislikes.”

There are generational differences. When a large family gather at a Highland estate, the oldies expect to sit down to plenty of game, pies and hot puddings. Their sons and daughters, living a more cosmopolitan city life, demand lighter and more modish meals. They are also more likely to be macrobiotic, or eating like a caveperson.

The one thing all his clients have in common is that they want the very best of everything. John relies on suppliers he has known since his Killiecrankie days to provide the meat and fish that showcases Scotland’s larder. “I’ve been with the same butcher, Macdonald Bros in Pitlochry, for 25 years. It was the father originally and Rory was the apprentice in the shop. Now Rory’s dad has retired and he has taken over.”

Rory supplies John’s beef and lamb – “all Perthshire stuff” – as well as bacon and sausages for breakfast. The black pudding is from Stornoway, while the game and poultry come from a dealer in Auchterarder, another old chum from hotel days.

“Some cooks and chefs go to the nearest supermarket, stock up and get their Clubcard points. I have four or five different suppliers. It would be embarrassing if a client asked me about the beef and I said, ‘Oh, I’m not sure, I got it from the cash-and-carry, I think it’s from Guyana.’ I can say, ‘It’s from the ▶

RECIPES

CULLEN SKINK

1 medium **onion**, finely diced; 4 medium **potatoes**, diced; 2 fillets **smoked haddock**, cut into small chunks; 2 pints **fish or vegetable stock**; 1tbsp chopped **parsley**
Sauté the onion in a little butter until soft, but do not colour. Add the potato and the stock and simmer until the potato is just undercooked. Remove from the heat. Add the fish and set aside to cool and infuse. Gently reheat when required. Add the parsley, check the seasoning and serve.

ROAST FILLET OF LAMB WITH RATATOUILLE AND SWEET-POTATO MASH

For the ratatouille: 2 **courgettes**; 1 **aubergine**; 1 **yellow pepper**; 2 **tomatoes**, seeds and skin removed; chopped **basil**
Dice all the vegetables separately to your desired size. Sauté each separately in some cold pressed rapeseed oil and spread out in a roasting dish to cool.

For the mash: 2 medium **sweet potatoes**; 4 medium **potatoes**; **butter**
Roughly chop the sweet potato and toss in some melted butter. Place in a covered roasting tin and roast in a medium oven. Make regular mash with the potatoes. Process the roasted sweet potato and mix with the mash. Season to taste and add more melted butter as required.

For the lamb: 1 pint **lamb stock**; 100ml **Marsala**; 100-150g **lamb fillet** per person; **Dijon mustard**; chopped **mint**
Reduce the lamb stock by 50% then add the Marsala and reduce by a further 50% – this is your sauce. Put the ratatouille in the oven to reheat, and start to gently reheat the mash. Seal the lamb fillets then place in a very hot oven for about 10 mins. Remove from the oven and smear each fillet with a little mustard and sprinkle over mint. Cover in foil and allow to rest for about 8 mins. Add the basil to the reheated ratatouille and serve.

ATHOLL BROSE

1 punnet fresh **raspberries**; 200ml **whipping cream**; 1 tbsp toasted **fine oatmeal**; 1 tbsp **honey**; 1 tbsp **whisky** (or more, to taste)
Chop the raspberries into serving bowls. Start to whisk the cream. When it is slightly thickened, add the oatmeal and the honey while whisking. When quite thick, add the whisky. Taste and add any more of the honey and whisky to suit your tastes. Spoon over the berries and serve immediately.



butcher 30 miles from here. You might even have passed the cows in the field.’

“One of the great things about being a private chef is that I can buy best of Scottish without thinking about it. In hotels and restaurants, if I want to put scallops on the menu, it’s a starter with three scallops and I have to charge £18. But for the people I work for, cost isn’t an issue. They just want the best of everything for their guests.”

Home is a cottage in Strathummel, renovated by John between cooking gigs. During the autumn stalking season he might be away for five weeks at a time. But when he is in residence, he takes charge of the kitchen. Game pies, however, are off the menu. “I like cooking and I do 95% of it at home. But it’s a big myth that chefs eat really well. Most chefs have a terrible diet. I do make an effort, but if I’m doing a wedding

I won’t have anything to eat all day. At the end I give the leftovers to the staff. An hour later, after I’ve driven home, I’ll be having cheese on toast and a bag of crisps at 2am.”

Come tea time, he turns to what he calls “all the usual culprits. I like Japanese, I do a lot of Asian food, I cook everything from fresh – something like a nice curry or a good stir-fry. I’m not going to spend all afternoon in the kitchen. It’s more like *Ready Steady Cook* half an hour before dinner.”

Even after all their years together, Kim is still in awe of her husband’s ability to magic up an instant feast from some unpromising bits and pieces. “My wife says, ‘You open the fridge and within half an hour you’ve got something that’s great. I would have to be making a shopping list, getting all the ingredients and following a recipe.’”

Who needs recipes when you have a private chef? ■

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YOU WANT SOMETHING THAT EVERYONE LIKES”



The view of Loch Tummel from
John and Kim's cottage