

"I lost my heart to a beautiful old manor house"

TV Chef Raymond Blanc talks inspirations, dreams and his greatest achievement



What inspired you to first want to get into cooking?

Maman Blanc has always been a wonderful inspiration to me. From my earliest years, I remember her being as diligent and industrious in our little kitchen as inspired and inspiring. She was a true mentor to me – unconsciously so. I use to watch whatever she did and marvel at how inventive she was in the kitchen and how well she knew the produce in her garden.

How has your cooking style grown and adapted over the years since you opened your first restaurant in 1977?

I have been living in a multicultural society for many years – back in the 70's, it wasn't so multicultural but we all know today that there are so many different, wonderful cultures and as a result we have become a melting pot. With that melting pot comes new ideas, new theories, the chance to learn and keep learning. There is no doubt that the number of different ethnic groups in our society has enriched me professionally. My food is still French but it's been influenced so much by so many different cultures and that is something I truly love. The more we talk and mix with a variety of people, the more we understand about our own place in the world.

You've had a succession of very successful TV series. What do you enjoy most about presenting?

After 6 years of television appearances (of course, I was involved in TV in the past but left it when I became disillusioned) I can see we are now addressing and talking about the real thing when it comes to food. TV programmes now have the possibility of reinventing food culture, understanding it more deeply and making it possible to reconnect with history, geography, provenance and climate as well as culture. TV shows are far more informative and knowledge orientated today but they are also entertaining – once again proving that education and fun allow us to remember more. It's like the Raymond Blanc Cookery School – a chance to connect with insight, craft, techniques, ethics, responsibility whilst keeping it light. TV shows with chefs are now all inclusive – not entertainment at the expense of knowledge.

You grow your own vegetables and herbs to use in your restaurants. How important is this

to the quality of your food and what other factors do you feel set your recipes apart?

At Le Manoir we have some wonderful home-grown produce and I am incredibly careful about our suppliers: I want all my suppliers to have full traceability but it's an absolute nightmare to get. My dream one day is to have a little card on each table which tells the guest all about where the food has come from. A lovely little story to accompany the meal.

I am vocal, very vocal – because it is so important. I was astonished that so much of our food is imported – where is the local produce – and our interest and knowledge of provenance? I am president of the Sustainable Restaurant Association as well as working closely with organisations like the MSC (Marine Stewardship Council) and MCS (Marine Conservation Society) to ensure that food industry issues and sustainability are always on everyone's agenda – whether you're a politician or consumer.

We are at the moment creating a medicinal herb garden, an organic garden working with heritage seeds and these will help to form the basis of a new gardening school, which will represent all that is good in Great Britain.

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There will be hundreds of the rarest British varieties which will re-introduce some of the most wonderfully British vegetables. My inspiration was that I was absolutely transfixed by the British love for gardens – the functionality of their gardens is key to them whereas the French are more interested in how their garden looks.

Oxford was the starting point for several of your restaurants. What is it you like most about this city?

I did not arrive in England with dreams of conquest, but very humbly, quietly. Mind you, it took 3 days to reach my destination because I was asking for 'HOXXFORRDD' and not Oxford. No wonder I was being sent in a hundred different directions. It is in

Oxfordshire that I first touched a frying pan and as soon as I held it, I knew it would change my life. This frying pan became a *raison d'être* and gave me an opportunity which I took with both hands. From this my first restaurant was created and many other ventures would follow among them, Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons and Brasserie Blanc.

What do you feel has been your greatest accomplishment to date?

Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons would be of course! My own dream hotel and restaurant, Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons – just one hour's drive away and a haven of tranquility for anyone wishing to see the real countryside and also for today's tired and stressed busy Londoner, simply overwhelmed and exhausted by the pace of London life. Whilst my dream was for a small restaurant, with maybe one or two rooms to accommodate my friends after an evening enjoying the best food and wine, I lost my heart to a beautiful old manor house, full of charm and character. And so my dream changed into one where I could create a hotel and restaurant in harmony, where my guests would find perfection in food, comfort and service.

What do you like to do when you're not working?

I love to go back to my native France, and my beloved town of Besançon. Visiting my parents with my sons and catching up with old friends is the best past time. And fishing, I love fishing.

What do you tend to cook when you are at home?

A simple omelette is my favourite thing, and so tasty!

What other projects are you currently working on?

My new TV series *How To Cook Well* has just launched on BBC 2 and I am very excited to hear what the public think! Also, it is my dream to establish a garden where we are once again re-introduce forgotten fruits like the wonderful varieties of apples, peaches and pears.

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