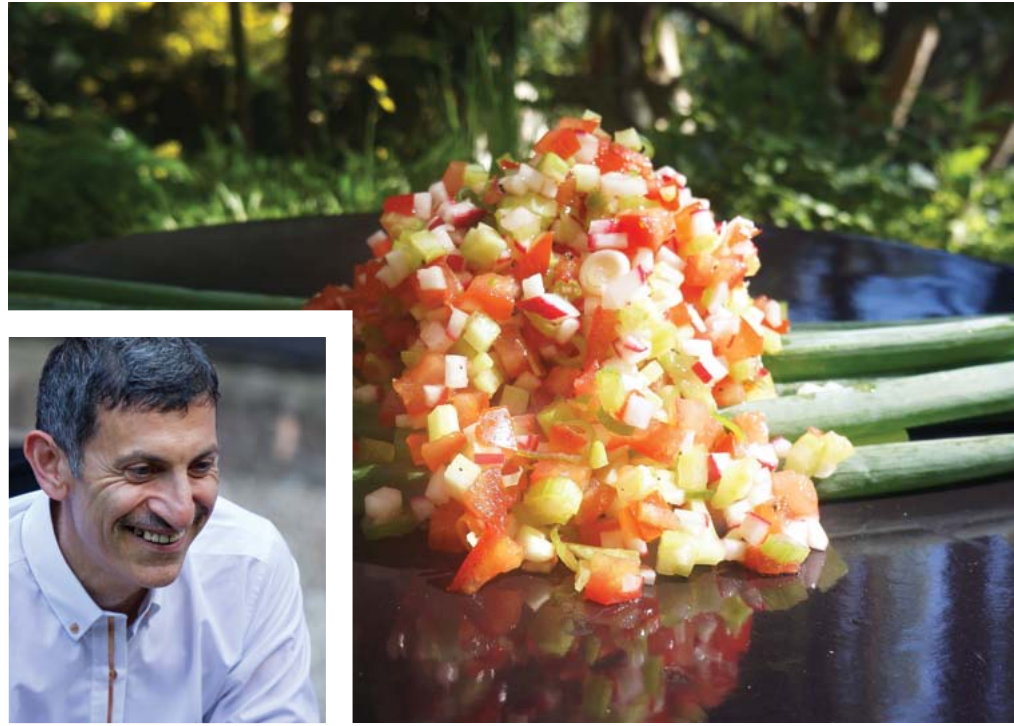


THE TASTE TAILORS

Chocolate swans, private jets and a lot of Beef Wellington: We look into the incredible lives of three of the world's most in-demand private chefs.



DAVID AND VICTORIA BECKHAM USE ONE THREE times a week. Gwyneth Paltrow employs two for her macrobiotic diet. Yet despite the idea of a private chef being seemingly the preserve of jet-set celebrities and royalty alone, the cache of employing one to cook in your home for parties or for entertaining colleagues in exotic locations has never been higher, or more popular. Even for those who aren't stadium sell-out pop stars.

"Some of my clients are very wealthy of course", says Hussein Bahsoun, a private chef based in Sydney who grew up in Senegal. "Having a personal chef is not as exclusive as people think. I cook everyday food for a couple of families, delivering to their home twice each week so that their fridge is always full of delicious food. This works out as about the same cost for them as two meals out and the babysitter's fee, but they can eat healthy food at home with the family every day."

The flexibility, the time-saving element and, of course, the appeal of eating restaurant-quality food in your own home is an obvious draw for clients. But what makes a chef want to leave the conventional confines of a restaurant kitchen for a life of moving from kitchen to kitchen on an almost daily basis?

"As a private chef I have a better work-life balance and I enjoy interacting with different people from all walks of life on a weekly basis. I have one-to-one contact with the majority of my clients, which I enjoy and I don't work 18 hour split shifts anymore which is absolute bliss."

So says Michael Fishpen, who worked in the kitchen of Rules (London's oldest restaurant, established in 1798), before becoming a full time private chef three years ago, cooking for the likes of Princess Anne, Richard Branson and numerous Russian billionaires and British members of parliament at private functions.

As Fishpen points out though, despite being based in London, the range of dishes he's expected to prepare has to be tailored to a truly international clientele.

"People's tastes are directly influenced by the part of the world in which they grew up. With international travel the scope of food that a chef must now master is immense. No longer can you only prepare food from your native country, but you must have a firm knowledge of different tastes from different cultures. You must also be aware of a client's needs due to religious or health grounds. People are generally eating healthier food that is freshly prepared these days. Though saying that, Beef Wellington is back in fashion and is one of the most popular main-course dishes that is chosen by my clients."

It's a sentiment echoed by Adam Myers, a private chef based in Los Angeles who worked at iconic City of Angels dining temple 25 Degrees at the Roosevelt Hotel before becoming a private chef nearly a decade ago.

"Obviously there has been a shift away from traditional white tablecloth, nine-course fine dining in restaurants, but I find in private dining that this is exactly what clients are looking for. More importantly though, people like to be reassured that the quality of the ingredients takes precedence, which is why I source the majority of my ingredients from farmers markets and trusted butchers and fish mongers," says Myers.

In Sydney though, Bahsoun has noticed that a trend towards informality is becoming increasingly apparent among many of his customers.

"People are becoming less focused on a piece of meat or fish as the centre of the food – they like to be able to have small tastes of lots of dishes. Living in Sydney is a great opportunity to get access to the best ingredients. We are spoiled with amazing markets like the fish or general markets. I do find it interesting that the TV cooking shows seem to be encouraging people to produce formal restaurant-style 'plated' food at home; but what I find people love most is big shared plates that encourage guests to interact at the table," he says.

Gossip pages in newspapers and magazines are rife with the stories of the bizarre and demanding culinary requests



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of the uber-rich. In the last couple of years, rumours have abounded of Simon Cowell needing a bowl of blueberries within hand's reach of wherever he should happen to be on his private yacht. And then there's the case of Jay-Z who allegedly orders his personal chef to make the same batch of fried chicken, with seasoning from one particular small Mexican spice maker, every day of the week.

However, for Bahsoun, these kind of requests from his customers allow for some challenging, yet sometimes hugely creative thrills.

"I had a client who believed herself to be allergic to any vegetable starting with B or P, so no beetroot, basil, potato or peas. I played the game to make my client happy but that was hard. Other moments can be magical. I catered for a birthday party near the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the woman whose birthday it was asked to have a cake made by me. She wanted a *Swan Lake*-themed cake to reflect her love of dance. I had to park under the Sydney Harbour Bridge in the evening where it was completely dark; I assembled my creation in the boot of the car and presented a round silver tray of 40 profiteroles shaped as swans filled with *crème madame* and one in dark chocolate in the middle surrounded by white chocolate to look like snowy mountains," Bahsoun recounts.

The rise in the number of individuals and families using personal chefs is staggering. In the United States, the Personal Chef Association reports that they estimate the number of people using personal chefs has risen to over 100,000 from a mere 1,000 a decade ago.

But for anyone hankering for the jet-set lifestyle associated with the job, training in a traditional restaurant kitchen is an essential part of the learning process.

"Conventional restaurant kitchens are essential to build up one's knowledge as a chef," confirms Fishpen. "You can't learn how to be a decent chef in a fast-food restaurant. Restaurant and hotel work is a very tough and very unforgiving

LEFT TO RIGHT: Sydney-based personal chef, Hussein Bahsoun; barley spring salad with broad beans and radish; a trio of desserts: mini vanilla crème brûlée, warm mini dark-chocolate fondant and a wild berry mousse served in a double walled glass with a raspberry coulis and summer berries; private chef Mike Fishpen; Wagyu beef lettuce wraps with ponzu ginger sauce; private chef Adam Myers.

environment and there's only so many years of doing 18 hours a day, six days a week a human being's body can take. Without a solid background though, don't even think of becoming a private chef."

How does the relationship between a chef and the customer alter when the cooking is done in a client's home on a regular, sometimes daily basis? Bahsoun is keen to point out that there needs to be a balance before both cook and consumer can reap the advantages of the arrangement.

"I love building a relationship with clients and also being able to move on if it is not working any more," he says. "I will only work with people who treat me like a professional. When I have a strong relationship with a client we can create amazing feasts and memorable events together. I just would not have that opportunity in a conventional restaurant."

As the appeal of having a chef who can cater for time-stretched, health-conscious, multi-career individuals and families continues to grow, the private chef increasingly appears to be less a needless indulgence and more a vital component. According to Fishpen, it's a lifestyle that, despite the challenges, is uniquely rewarding.

"To become a personal chef not only do you have to be a fantastic chef but your attitude has to be great as well," he says. "Screaming and shouting may still be tolerated in the top restaurants in the world, but when you are in the privacy of your client's home you must always be on your best behaviour. My clients always comment on how calm I look before their guests arrive. If they only knew!"

For more information on the chefs interviewed in this piece visit:
Michael Fishpen: www.personalchef.me.uk
Adam Myers: www.chefadammyers.com
Hussein Bahsoun: www.sydneypersonalchef.com

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