

CHAPTER 34

A GLOBAL REVOLUTION

So where will Jamie go next? The smart money is on America. Jamie and Jools said they were planning to leave Britain in 2005 for the USA, where he hoped to repeat the success of his Fifteen restaurant. 'It's my wife's idea,' Jamie told the press. 'She wants to move there for at least six months. So we are – just outside of New York.' He added: 'If I meet the right people and get the funding, I'd love to franchise the charity there.' Certainly, switching allegiance from PR company The Outside Organisation to Public Eye in early 2006 signalled his intentions. Public Eye doesn't hang out with lowly TV presenters, but prefers to spend its energies on Hollywood A-listers such as Jude Law, Sienna Miller and Ewan McGregor.

Oliver's Twist, the American version of *Naked Chef*, had the second highest ratings on The Food Network, and Jamie was a part of the British craze that had hit New York since Nigella Lawson's heyday. 'It could be the influence of BBC America, which gained big audiences during the Iraq war; or of British magazine editors such as Anna Wintour and Tina Brown; or of Madonna's transformation into a welly-wearing, gun-totin', rambler-baiting member of the country set,' wrote Jemima Lewis in the *Telegraph*. 'Whatever the explanation, we are almost embarrassingly fashionable. Nike is about to bring out a range of trainers in Harris tweed. British restaurants and gastro-pubs are springing up all over New York. Nigella Lawson and Jamie Oliver

are daring to teach the Americans how to cook. Most startling of all, Americans are copying our speech patterns.’

Barbara Fairchild, editor in chief of *Bon Appetit* magazine, told the Biography Channel that Jamie had dispelled the myths around British food. ‘He was running all over the stage, flambéeing this and whipping that. We got caught up in the speed of it all.’ Unlike any of the other TV chefs in America, Jamie was so popular he would be booked for five days running on the *Today* programme. ‘He was unique,’ said Louise Holland. ‘He was an entertainer as well as a chef – I think it upset a lot of the other chefs.’ Bruce Seidel, whose Food Network transmitted *Oliver’s Twist* from 2000, loved his energy. ‘He was infectious and engaging. He had real passion, but he was a real person with family and friends. He made us think that real people could do it too.’

By 2005 Jamie’s presence had waned, with The Food Network pushing his old shows to the graveyard slot as they waited for new ones to be filmed. Meanwhile, Jamie was changing the face of British food culture with *Jamie’s Kitchen* and *School Dinners*. ‘I don’t think that he can ever be a celebrity chef again,’ said Seidel. ‘He’s just too passionate for that now.’

Food writer and food editor for *Martha Stewart Living* Susan Spungen says she misses him. ‘I think he’s very entertaining and a great cook. When he first launched here, he was huge, but he’s not really visible on TV any more. Having the persona as The Naked Chef and such a great accent helped.’

Jamie’s combination of creativity and charm made an enormous impression on the savvy Americans, whose foodie pedigree has had them looking down their noses at British food culture of the last century. But they are also suckers for a British accent. ‘Jamie’s isn’t like the haughty Britishness of Nigella. It’s more the lad on the street,’ said Spungen. When she met Jamie at a food editors’ lunch, she was charmed. ‘He sat down next to me and he called me “darling”. I thought “darling? I’m old enough to be your mother”. But he really gave us the impression that he was the real deal.’ The charm has lasted longer than the shows. ‘He’s

unusual in that nobody has anything bad to say about him. If they do, they're probably just jealous. You could find fault with his recipes; I gave my brother his books and he got stymied a couple of times because there were just too many ingredients, but everyone agrees that the heart is there and the creativity is there.'

While TV cooks like Nigella were offering a package of flirty aspiration, and in a nation obsessed with weight demonstrated how it was possible to be glamorous *and* cook with butter, Jamie showed Americans new ideas. It was something that impressed the cynical press pack. 'He got it all so young, too,' said Spungen. 'It didn't seem possible that someone so young could have worked it all out.'

But Jamie's new plan is more revolutionary than teaching Americans to stuff the neck instead of the cavity of their Thanksgiving turkeys. Alice Waters believes that Jamie Oliver the missionary has more mileage than Jamie Oliver the brand, and she has a plan. With the American public school system charging \$1.50 per child for appalling school meals, she hopes Jamie will use his mix of 'radical politics and compassion' to bring the same kind of change in American schools. 'There's no one like Jamie,' she said. 'We're trying to tie together this movement. A picture is emerging. Slow food is coming into the USA and we're all in this together.'

The aim may be the same: feed school children well and they will concentrate better, achieve more and respect themselves as well as each other. But the impact on a society with as much power as the United States really could change the world. 'We're trying to persuade people that you either pay upfront, or you pay on the way out,' said Alice. For the last 10 years she has been running the School Yard project in Berkeley, California, which treats childhood obesity, nutrition-related illness, the quality of school lunches and children's ability to learn as related issues. Her experience with prisoners has shown that good food really does make a difference to behaviour and she wants to ensure that it starts at the very beginning.

‘It’s not just about training school cooks and not paying people properly,’ she explained. ‘If food became part of the curriculum, people would think differently about it. A new generation would grow up looking after the country in a different way. We’re talking about food as a core curriculum in school, where they would get grades and it would be part of academia. Every child needs to be involved and food should become an academic subject so that kids learn to participate. Gardens should become labs. The eco-gastro scene should be something that they should study. It opens up people’s minds.’

It says a great deal about the effect that Jamie Oliver has had on the food industry that someone as established and well respected as Alice Waters thinks she needs him to help her make a difference. ‘We can say something together,’ she said. ‘He’s very strong and persuasive.’ Alice has friends in high places, and already Hillary Clinton is on side. ‘When we have a voice in Washington, we can really move on,’ she said. ‘Hillary Clinton is someone who really gets this. She’s bringing local food into schools already. I have many friends who are influencing her policies. Jamie is unpretentious so he can get to these leaders. I’m just hoping that I can help him situate it – it’s all about the time and the place.’ They are also talking to Oprah Winfrey, far away the most influential person in the United States at the moment. ‘We have lots of access to her but we have to make a strategy. We can raise lots of money for the project because I have lots of influence here.’

But even with Oprah, America is a tricky challenge. Without a national press and no real national TV, it’s hard to mount a campaign that can not only reach into the sitting rooms of 52 states, but change the habits of the most multi-cultural – and, it has to be said, obese – society in the world. Bariatric surgery, with its gastric bypasses and bands, is the latest trend to create the perfect body without dealing with the issue of what Americans eat and is on the increase with personalities like Carnie Wilson, Roseanne Barr and Sharon Osbourne living proof of what can

happen. The one in 50 people dying and many more suing their surgeons has little impact on the numbers queuing up for the op, and when America discovers a weight-loss miracle, it's only a matter of time before it crosses the pond.

Alice Waters says Britain is unusually able to make a food revolution work. 'Things have happened in food in England to give you wake-up calls,' she said, referring to BSE, Foot and Mouth, E Coli and Avian Flu, which have all contributed enormously to the interest in the alternatives to cheap packaged supermarket meat. 'We also had Sudan 1,' said David Lewis of Green Core Foods, referring to the food dye which had been found illegally in some convenience foods. 'It all dovetailed together. It scared people and made people look more closely at what they were eating.' 'But,' says Alice Waters, 'you're prepared and you're small enough to do something about it. You even have a prince supporting the environmental movement – we don't have a united movement here.'

When he visited the USA in 2005, Alice showed the Prince of Wales her vision: 'He's a very important part of this, too. He is so exciting. We convinced him to come to see what the slow food movement is about, and I talked to him and encouraged him to see the Edible School Yard in Berkeley, which is the kids' programme which I've been part of for the last 10 years. He was very impressed.'

She and Jamie are already hatching a plan. 'We had such a great time in New York recently. We spoke on the same panel to journalists in a conference on nutrition and childhood obesity organised by the Rudd Institute at Yale. We represent two pieces of a puzzle that fit perfectly together – I'm involved in education around food and he can talk about his personal experience. I can put educational pieces together.'

Alice says they are looking for the right location, just as Jamie did with *School Dinners* in the UK, before they can get a prime time series on TV. 'It has to be somewhere that's already wounded, somewhere like New Orleans,' said Alice. 'There are

schools there that are so segregated and he could show what goes on inside there and how to change it.' She thinks Jamie Oliver is uniquely gifted to take on the job. 'He has that rare quality; his compassion shows through however angry he is. It's never destructive. He's always someone who cares. And Americans really value that – everyone values that. It touches everyone.' I suggested that she made him sound like Martin Luther King. 'Yes,' she said, 'I'm thinking of people like him who have that rare combination of radical politics and compassion.'

What they could achieve on a national level is already working successfully on a local level in Marin County, just north of San Francisco. 'We are working to create the first all-organic county in the nation, a county in which residents and eaters recognise their mutual interdependence,' said Helge Hellberg, executive director of Marin Organic. There, farmers work with Marin Organic's distribution service to make use of every vegetable grown in organic soil, with 90% of it going to the local schools. Farmers across the world have to deal with enormous waste as fruit and vegetables of the wrong colour and shape are rejected by the buyers, but the Marin County scheme picks up the leftovers and gives them away to those who most need them. The rest are sold in vegetable boxes. 'For eggs to make it to the supermarket, they have to be less than two days old,' said Hellberg at the Soil Association's 60th anniversary conference in 2006. 'But eggs can be used for up to six weeks, so we take those that the farmers can't sell and give them to 70 schools and the prisons in the area for free.'

Kitchen staff join students from the county's schools on trips to the farms to see where their food comes from. 'Everything comes back to the soil,' said Hellberg. 'A one-hour trip can be a life-changing experience for many of them, and they come back to school in love with food.' The initiative runs across the county, but it was only when Prince Charles visited last year that it made the national news in America. 'We did 350 TV appearances and 800 newspaper articles. They even sent a limo to collect me for an

appearance on Breakfast TV,' said Hellberg. 'It shows how interest has shifted from the colour of Camilla's skirt.'

Susan Spungen is thrilled at the thought of a TV chef using his success to make real change in her country. 'I feel right now that everyone who's interested in food is really interested in themselves; there's no kind of public service. It's all about how many books I can sell. Jamie is different.' Although she says he is not well known outside the food community for his food campaigns and that The Naked Chef persona is still the one most viewers associate with him, he would do well with this. 'He's young enough to speak to children and teenagers, and that's where everything starts. Even though he's 30, he's very youthful.' And she says that Alice Waters could do with some help. 'Some of her projects haven't made it to the public consciousness. The way that our Government is set up, it's quite difficult to campaign nationally – it's more about grass roots.' She agrees that Jamie's talent is in exploding issues onto the national agenda, something she says Alice Waters could not do by herself. 'I don't think people think of Alice Waters as fun and easy to talk to – she's like the queen. It would be great to have someone like Jamie teaming up with her to get the message out.'

As we went to press, Jamie Oliver had just been awarded Channel 4 TV's award for the most inspirational political figure in 2005, beating Tony Blair, David Cameron and George Galloway – as well as Sir Bob Geldof and Shami Chakrabarti, director of Liberty. Chakrabarti pipped Galloway to second place, scooping up 40% of the 15,000 *Channel 4 News* viewer's votes.

'He represents the power of the individual, even in a global age when everything is dominated by mega corporations,' said Gill Hudson. 'He shows that an individual can have an effect. I think that's genuinely thrilling.' She said that Jamie had shown us the power of TV democracy. 'He bypassed all those Government committees, review boards and Green papers. In the space of eight weeks, he galvanised the entire nation and made Government change its policy. That is phenomenal. It means that

if you really want to make a change, you can bypass the things that put people off politics – it politicises people again.’

If it is the big political issues that seem such a monster, Jamie brought it down to a single issue. ‘Single issue politics is very powerful,’ said Hudson. ‘Forget the party politics; it’s about “is this right or not?” It doesn’t matter which party you belong to, he cut right through all of that entrenched politicisation and just got on with it. That is hugely powerful.’