

In Search of Perfection

British chef Heston Blumenthal talks about the importance of making meaningful connections, surmounting our fears and perfecting that most fundamental of ingredients, water.

Words: Heleri Rande

By common consent, Heston Blumenthal is one of the best and most influential chefs of his generation. Known first and foremost for his triple-Michelin-starred flagship, The Fat Duck in Bray, his impressive empire also includes double-Michelin-starred Dinner by Heston Blumenthal at Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park in London, another Dinner at Crown Melbourne, Michelin-starred The Hinds Head in Bray, and The Perfectionists' Café in Terminal 2 of Heathrow Airport. If the above list does not sufficiently dazzle, there are countless more achievements to mention, such as his multiple TV series, doctorates from UK universities, and an OBE, from the Queen for his services to gastronomy, awarded in 2006.

But despite all of his accomplishments, Blumenthal's ego is far from that of a typical celebrity, or what I presume a celebrity to possess. Having spent a few days travelling with him in Estonia, I was amazed by how approachable, compassionate and down-to-earth he was. At times, I had to remind myself who I was with, as it seemed we were just

two old friends catching up, talking about the human mind, connection, imagination, shared belief systems and, above all else, water; the latter subject well on the way to becoming the next part of his extraordinary culinary legacy.

"We are working on water, prebiotics, nutrigenomics, and plasma to activate water, which is used to make a drink, or soup, or another food that can then activate the water inside the body," he reveals. What this means for the future is that, alongside a team of collaborators and chefs, Blumenthal will focus on ways to activate water and change its structure with electromagnetic energy. His interest lies in seeing how this affects the human body, and how the body receives it in the first place.

"People's relationship with food and drink is deteriorating," the chef warns. "In order to improve it, we need to have a better relationship with ourselves through a better understanding of the science of water." Highlighting the fact that breathing is a crucial element to life, after which comes the relationship with the food we eat and water we drink, he is adamant that people do not pay enough attention to these





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essentials, and this in turn has created an imbalance in society. “In order to understand how this works, it is important to understand how the human body has evolved to where it is today,” he adds.

Currently residing in the picturesque Alpilles region of Provence, Blumenthal is on a mission to study water in exhaustive detail. Surrounded by clear air, bauxite-filled limestone hills and gamma rays in the south of France, he is just about to complete work on a combined kitchen and lab, where chefs from his multiple ventures will be flying out to experiment, challenge each other and study the topic. “When asked what is the most important ingredient in the kitchen, I say water,” he explains. “People do look at me funny. But what many of us take for granted and think is the simplest thing is in fact one of the most complex molecules in the universe, and we are just beginning to find out how and why it behaves like it does.”

The decision to move to southern France did not come about by accident – one suspects no aspect of Blumenthal’s life is left entirely to chance. Provence was famously the home of celebrated French authors Frédéric Mistral and Alphonse Daudet, and a major source of inspiration for Dutch Post-Impressionist painter Vincent Van Gogh; plus, the chef’s house is only a short drive from L’Oustau de Baumanière, a Michelin-starred restaurant that sparked his curiosity for food at the tender age of 16. It could even be argued that the smell of lavender and chirping of crickets he encountered there represented his first foray into nostalgic multisensory dining experiences, laying the early groundwork for the success of The Fat Duck.

“Our emotional state affects our relationship with food,” says Blumenthal. “I learnt this through discoveries in multisensory research, and could see the impact the dishes at The Fat Duck were having on people’s emotions.” After

the restaurant was refurbished in 2015, during which Melbourne provided a temporary home for the concept, the team was retrained, and a new era of sensory dining began in Bray. “At The Fat Duck, we now focus on personalisation, with the aim of giving each diner a unique emotional trigger in the dining room,” continues Blumenthal. “New science is emerging on the structure of water being affected by emotion, and also on its health benefits in other areas, which is the next big adventure for the team.”

Back in 2015, when The Fat Duck relaunched in its original home after receiving a facelift, Australia was not forgotten. Instead, an outpost of Dinner opened shortly after at Crown Melbourne, a casino and resort complex in Southbank. Later this year, Dinner will also be making its Middle Eastern debut at Royal Atlantis Resort & Residences in Dubai; all three Dinners are overseen by Blumenthal’s long-time co-contributor, Chef Director Ashley Palmer-Watts, with whom he opened the original site in 2011.

While the nostalgic and playful multisensory experiences at The Fat Duck have taken a new direction towards hyper-personalisation, the menus at Dinner have consistently focused on the tastes and flavours of Britain and its food history. Renowned for such iconic creations as the meat fruit dish from Tudor times, which is actually chicken liver parfait disguised as a mandarin, and tipsy cake with spit roast pineapple, a popular Victorian dessert, London’s Dinner has held two Michelin stars since 2013.

The fire that broke out at Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park shortly after an extensive and expensive restoration in June 2018 forced the restaurant to temporarily close as a safety precaution; however, it also gave the team time to work in the development kitchen in Bray on several exciting additions to the menu. Notable newcomers include dishes such as roast marrowbone royale with smoked anchovy,

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Many of The Fat Duck’s dishes have been created to make a strong impression visually, as well as on the palate

snails, radish, mace and lovage; salmon dressed in champagne; and almond rice and flesh with veal sweetbreads, smoked eel and crispy chicken feet.

There is perhaps a common philosophy running across all of Blumenthal’s creative endeavours – namely, the desire to make meaningful connections and produce genuine emotions. “As human beings, we have an innate need to connect with something,” he ponders. “In order to give people a positive experience, we have researched and explored many areas, and found that a person’s emotional state changes the way they taste food and water.” On our four-day trip together, the chef encouraged those around him to try a simple wine experiment again and again. This involved Blumenthal inviting acquaintances to take a sip while thinking of a loved one, before repeating the test at the same time as recalling someone who provokes feelings of irritation or anger. The result? Wine tastes sweeter, rounder and oftentimes more floral when drinkers focus on

someone they love, while the flavour profile becomes more bitter when concentrating on someone with negative associations.

When the multi-award-winning chef started experimenting with savoury ices in the late 1990s, this sort of mind game really came into its own. The idea of contrast, and what that means for guest experience, is probably best characterised in one of his other famous dishes at The Fat Duck, the bacon and egg ice cream. “The vibration of an emotion is reflected into the food we eat and water we drink,” he says. “I believe that cooking with love is not simply a metaphor, but it is a science.”

Of course, Blumenthal is also known for blurring the lines between food and history, and so in many ways it is only fitting to find that he is now collaborating with the Ashmolean in Oxford. Launching at London’s Dinner in January and running until the end of March 2020, Blumenthal and Palmer-Watts have created a unique culinary event inspired by Last Supper in Pompeii, a major exhibition



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Bohemian cake at London's Dinner features chocolate, yuzu mousse and honey ice cream

held at the University of Oxford's museum of art and archaeology. Appropriately titled Taste History – Last Supper in Pompeii, the experience looks at what role food played in ancient times, and celebrates this rich culture. Some of the dishes being served include authentic Pompeian bread, using flour from ancient grain varieties grown in the region of Naples, and a modern take on Libum, a dessert based on baked fresh cheese curds.

Blumenthal's collaborative work does not end with museums either. As a curious mind that constantly yearns to be developed and challenged, he has taken a deep interest in the education sector, building upon his work on the evolution of our bodies and minds. In the UK, for example, he is currently contributing to OCR's GCSE in Food Preparation and Nutrition, the Activate Learning qualifications in Professional Cooking and Hospitality, and the Reading University course A History of Royal Food and Feasting.

As the evenings in the pre-winter Nordic hemisphere turned darker and darker, our conversations delved into more existentialist questions, looking at his

career over the last 20 years, and discussing issues far bigger than ourselves. A self-taught chef, relaying on his meticulous work ethic, a perpetual sense of curiosity and a relentless need to perfect and please, Blumenthal has achieved a level in gastronomy that most others in the industry can only dream of. What, one wonders, is the secret of his success? "Most people are driven by fear, and usually fear is surpassed by belief," he ponders. "But when belief becomes stronger than fear, we will be pulled by belief, and that is a game-changer."

Serendipitously, at The Hinds Head, his gastropub operating out of a lovingly restored 15th-century building in Bray, there is a fireplace above which sits a proverb in gold leaf: "Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. And lo, no-one was there." A sign that Blumenthal has passed by probably a thousand times, but did not notice until about a year ago. In a subconscious way, perhaps, it has always been his guiding principle, hiding itself from the limelight, but being constantly present in everything that this supremely talented chef does.