

## INFLUENCES

# ‘Good food will *always make me happy*’

We start a new series this issue looking at what influences some of the key personalities in the sandwich industry. First under the spotlight is Nellie Nichols, food consultant and a regular contributor to the magazine

I’m frequently asked what have been the biggest influences in my years of working with food. To be honest, I can’t believe anyone is really that interested, but if they are I am more than happy to share and hope that some of what I come up with will be of some value – who knows, you’ll have to make of it what you will.

Some years ago, I recognised there was a genuine necessity to curb my ridiculous hankering for books on food – I think we’ve all been there and bought the latest from Gordon, Delia and Gary. God knows why, because I’m sure we all just have a flick through, then assuage our guilt by traipsing round the supermarket, looking for obscure ingredients to cook at least one or two of the recipes before we stick it on the shelf with the others and move on to something else.

### Hortons

Then I had the good fortune to come across the wonderful Hortons, who trade second hand food books. For many years, until ill health slowed them down, they had a massive book stall at all the major food exhibitions, where they sold everything from the collectable and rare to the quirkiest and weirdest, to the just totally impossible to get hold of.

They have, without a doubt, enabled me to create a cookery book library, which forms the very backbone of my business, in so far as I am able to research practically any ingredient or food simply by walking over to the bookshelf.

I’m a bookworm you see, not a ‘let’s find out about it on the internet’ person. Nothing can quite beat getting a pile of relevant books and a cup of tea (of course, in my case Earl Grey not Builder’s) and sitting down to look at photographs and recipes for raw inspiration.

When they publish their sale list of books, which are sold on a first come basis, – the moment I receive it I drop everything. How else would I ever have secured such rarities as Last Dinner on the Titanic, which offers an in depth look at Edwardian food or Cabbages & Kings which explores the historical origins of fruit and vegetables?

If I’m going to be book specific and I honestly had to choose only a few to take on my desert island, that would be a very difficult, but not impossible, choice:

### Thai Food by David Thompson

Firstly, I would pack Thai Food by David Thompson who is, without doubt, an authority on this ancient cuisine, and he captures all aspects of a very diverse culinary culture, from its history and farming practises to its diverse ingredients and cooking methods.

There is a custom, probably unique to Thailand, of publishing and distributing memorial books at the cremation of the deceased. This tradition dates back to a time when there were few books in the country and it was therefore encouraged to record a person’s life and achievements, habits and interests.

When books were published for women, particularly ones who had lived in palaces they often included a wealth of recipes. Thompson has avidly researched and read many of these, which enabled him to gain a more solid understanding of Thailand’s cuisine. His restaurant Nahm in the Halkin Hotel in London is where you’ll eat the best food outside of Thailand.

### Elizabeth David

Secondly comes An Omelette and a Glass of Wine, by Elizabeth David. Not published until 1984, it is an important compilation of her short pieces on food and wine, written for, amongst others, the Spectator. Here is a book with an extraordinary power to enthuse and innovate its reader, who will be swept along from North Cornwall and “its leafy lanes dripping, the walk in a dressing gown and gum boots through long squelching grass to the stream at the end of the field to fetch water for the breakfast coffee” to the vibrant markets of France; “the scent of sweet basil coming from the far end of the market where a solitary wrinkled old man sits on an upturned basket, scores and scores of basil plants





## INFLUENCES

“

‘As often as I can, I visit Marrakesh – to see the Spice Market and the olive shops and drink the fresh orange juice squeezed for you from the carts in the streets’

”

ringed around him... if I've read it once I've read it fifty times. Its recipes are also invaluable; from her Tomato Honey to her French Welsh Rabbit. They are fun to make and totally delicious.

I've always adored Anthony Bourdain, partly because he is a tremendously talented chef who concentrates on producing plates of fantastic food that don't look as if ten different people have fiddled with them and partly because he is debauched and very charming at the same time.

His Les Halles restaurant in New York is a must if you're going there. His book *Kitchen Confidential* is described as 'adventures in the culinary underbelly' and 'Elizabeth David written by Quentin Tarantino' – a fantastic read that reminds me not to take food or life too seriously and that being shocking is perfectly okay. I've always thought he makes Ramsey look quite like Peter Pan.

It's vital to keep my food feet firmly planted on the ground. To do this I calibrate myself on a regular basis to remind myself what genuine and proper food is all about. It's very easy in the world of retail and manufacture just to concentrate on what is most commercially viable and this can, like eating too many sweets as a child, lead to unnecessary erosion, in this case of my imagination.

### Wholefoods in London

So visiting certain places are hugely important and influential to me – Wholefoods in London because it represents freshness and choice; putting aside what ghastly waste they must sustain, it's good for the soul to be able to see and smell twenty different varieties of tomatoes and individually loose hand dated eggs, not in boxes, just looking fabulous on top of each other in a vast number.

When I look at food I want it to make me feel good to be alive and happy. Good food will always make me happy.

I have to constantly go to Borough Market in London Bridge because even though it tries ridiculously hard to be, it's gloriously uncommercial and full of the most fantastically authentic and delicious ingredients.

As often as I can, I visit Marrakesh – to see the Spice Market and the olive shops and drink

the fresh orange juice squeezed for you from the carts in the streets which is like nothing on earth, it's so good; to eat at the night food stalls in the market square Jemaa El Fna; smokey grilled baby sausages with chopped raw tomato and flatbread, to mop it up, served on little plastic plates.

And if I lived there, I would visit Rungis market in Paris regularly, instead of only occasionally when I can - so large it is its own city, with a bank and hospital. It's the largest in the world and a true food inspiration to those who go there, remembering it's not for the faint hearted as it starts in the middle of the night.

And inspiring restaurants? Well there's one of those in nearly every town and city I've ever been to over the years, each one marked by one of the dishes I've eaten there. The *crudités* in Le Colombe D'Or in St Paul de Vence in France, sitting surrounded by the genuine Picassos he gave them to pay for his supper; the fragrant *Crepes Suzette* in Julien in Paris, eaten often sitting beside a poodle having dinner with its owner at the next table; the *Violet Ice Cream* at Racine, and the *Shepherds Pie* made with shredded duck at the Electric Brasserie, both in London.

### Reindeer Stew with Mashed Potato

Then there's the Reindeer Stew with Mashed Potato I ate with the staff in a small hotel I stayed in when I was caught in a snowstorm in Tromso in Norway - all special places memorable for good food.

My rule of thumb has always, and will always be, to eat where and what the locals do when abroad, then I find I simply can't go wrong. Special ingredients and dishes will appear that don't get a look in on the main menu if you just ask the right questions – local snails cooked in fresh garlic and butter; new season's kale from the fields. And then there was the freshly caught sweet local crayfish and lemon sole the boat just brought in for my supper on the Scottish coast in the remotest pub I was staying in when I was researching for a project on scallops. My taste memory logs them all.

And people? Well I would need a small book to cover that one and it would only bore you. There are masses I've worked with over the years and I'd hate to be embarrassing warbling on about them. Several have been major influences in what I've learnt, teaching me the importance of quality, attention to detail, never to compromise, and the other values I now so fiercely upkeep. So I just may save that one for another day.

Nellie Nichols is a food consultant contactable on W: [www.nellienichols.com](http://www.nellienichols.com)

E: [nellie@nellienichols.com](mailto:nellie@nellienichols.com)

The above is based on her independent views