

epicure
good food

THE AGE

SEPTEMBER 23, 2014



SPECIAL ISSUE

Cook like

Yotam

Ottolenghi

How to be
inspired by
the man who
makes food
smile Page 12

THE AGE
goodfoodMONTH | PRESENTED BY
citi

cover story

dani valent

Yotam Ottolenghi is in Australia from October 27-November 2 as a guest of

Cook

like

He is the culinary equivalent of Beyonce. He's an author, a TV host, and if you cook, you've tried one of his recipes.

Yotam Ottolenghi is in his test kitchen, a series of low-tech, spice-scented rooms under a railway arch in central London. I'm on the phone in Melbourne and this call is making me late for my kids' school concert but I've decided that soaking up kitchen wisdom is as honourable a pathway to good motherhood as watching my girls twirl.

Today Ottolenghi is puzzling over pilaf with his small team, creating recipes for his weekly newspaper column. "We're working on rice dishes from Turkey, Iran and south-west Asia," he says. He's especially excited by his adaptation of an Iranian dish, in which raw bread dough is placed in the bottom of a pan, covered with rice and liquid, and baked as the rice cooks. "I am surprised it worked so well," he says. "I thought the bread would be soggy but it was brilliant and it absorbs the flavour of the saffron."

Creating dishes with this element of surprise - bread concealed in rice! - is absolutely characteristic of Ottolenghi. His dishes aren't complex (so long as you have barberries and black garlic to hand), but there's always some little tweak to the method or the flavour combinations that elevate them from simply good to serious stroke of genius. So, how does he do it, and how can we do it too?

Make food smile

There's a story about Ottolenghi walking into one of his London food stores and whisking away food on display because it wasn't "smiling".

"It's not something you can describe," he says. "It's more of a feeling but it's about being super vibrant and rich. It's about creating something luxurious and abundant, creating contrasts within the dish, and between the dish and the plate it sits on, and the environment it's displayed in."

It makes me think of my visit to the Ottolenghi cafe in Islington. I was so sure we wouldn't get a table that I paced there with a mantra: "It's OK, at least you'll get to see it, at least you'll get to see it." And then we walked in and were seated immediately and graciously, and I went to look at the lavish displays of salads and bakes and those famous face-sized meringues, resplendent against a pure white background. The food was positively grinning.

I babble some of this to Ottolenghi, who keeps it together, and on message. "I'd like to think that all the dishes in *Plenty More* [his newest book] adhere to this principle," he says. "There's a tomato and roasted-lemon salad with pomegranate seeds that is pure colour. The ones I like in particular always have a lot of red in them."

Lesson: Go bountiful and use red.

Layer flavour

My friend Emily talks about Ottolenghi's vegetable paella with absolute awe. "At every step he adds flavour," she says. It's true, says the man himself. "I try to create as many outstanding moments as possible when eating a dish. I find an opportunity to add currants or sherry or something else that stands out."

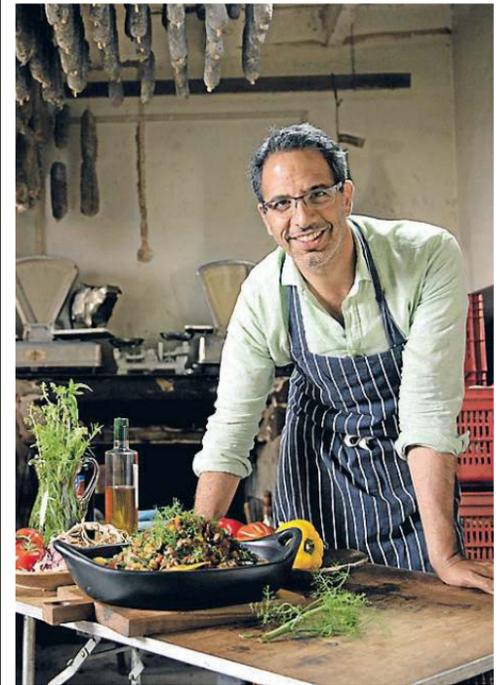
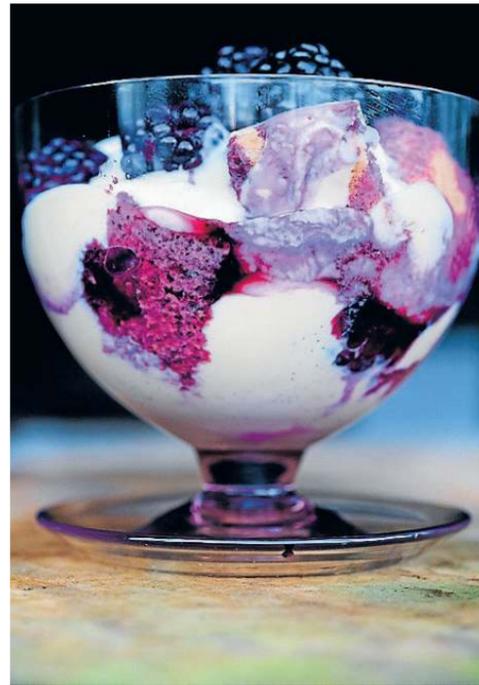
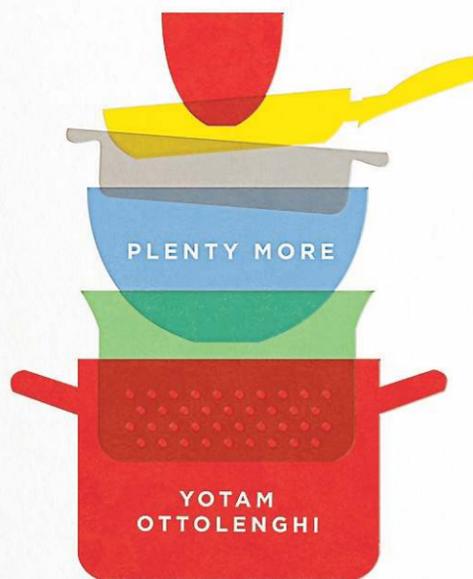


THE AGE
goodfoodMONTH PRESENTED BY citi

Plenty More by Yotam Ottolenghi (Ebury Press) is available from September 26 for \$49.99.



Ottolenghi



Colourful: (From left) Yotam Ottolenghi; sweet potato and fig salad from *Jerusalem*; cover of *Plenty More*; stewed blackberries, bay custard and gin (*Plenty More*); "the chickpea effect" has raised awareness of Middle Eastern ingredients; in his TV show *Mediterranean Feast*; and, a classic Ottolenghi spread at his London restaurant. Photos: Neale Haynes, Jonathan Lovekin, Jennifer Soo

Enjoy the praise

Ottolenghi has entered the strange realm of the celebrity chef where his parenting (of one-year-old Max, with his husband, via surrogacy) is a big story, he can make kashk (Iranian-style dried whey) an It ingredient, and his photo shoots may include hair and make-up credits. But he still sounds excited about the project of cooking and feeding people, albeit through his recipes. "It's just wonderful when a dish works," he says. "You tend to think there is a finite number of recipes and at some point you will say to yourself, 'Well, that's it, I don't have anything else to discover.' But then something new comes along and it affirms the idea the world is still out there to explore."

Ottolenghi ditched an academic career to train as a cook and it was while he was running a pastry section at a London restaurant that he really knew he was on the right path. "To create dishes, to serve them to the public and to have people saying 'Wow, that was delicious, the best thing I've had,' that's when I knew I was there to stay."

Has that paled at all? "No. Any cook would tell you that the most exciting thing about our job is the recognition," he says. "I get it in a different way now, but I still love it."

Lesson: When they tell you it's yummy, soak it up.

Feeding kids

You'd expect any baby of Ottolenghi would find rice cereal pretty boring. "I think Max's second bite was sweet potato with tahini and zaatar. He was pretty happy to have it." Now approaching two years old, Max loves cucumber, beans and peas, and he eats nori seaweed as a snack. "He's still quite willing to try things, and he does eat things I imagine some children would not tolerate," Ottolenghi says. "I am not at all smug about it though. I am sure soon he will only eat pasta and burgers."

Lesson: Babies eat zaatar!

Ottolenghi studied with the culinary establishment at Cordon Bleu but his recipes today are often about shrugging off the canon. "My approach can be the opposite to traditional French cooking, where everything is a little bit uniform and you work hard to process a sauce into the most fine and homogenous thing. I go the other way and use spices, herbs and other ingredients to create a sense of surprise."

Lesson: A pinch of this, a sprinkling of that, a dash of the other.

Keep it simple(ish)

Ottolenghi has 115,000 followers on Twitter so I was thrilled when he replied to a sheepish tweet of mine. One weekend, I surrounded myself with his books to choose a few things to make for a dinner party. So many recipes looked delicious that I somehow decided to cook 11 dishes. Stained with pomegranate, deep in tahini, I tweeted my remorse. His answer was along the lines of "11? Are you crazy? I would never." So what would he do? "I would pick four or five because 11 just sounds a lot," he says gently. "It might take you the whole day or a day and a half to prepare everything." (Yep, true that.)

He says the key to entertaining is to start with something light but memorable, then to offer a few dishes that people can serve themselves. "The interactive aspect of dining is very important," he says. "I don't do starter, main course, dessert and just leave people sitting there. Serving family-style from the centre of the table creates conversation, and people can appreciate the food in its entirety, and then help themselves."

But then Ottolenghi says he's prone to excessive menu planning too. "Look, I know the feeling," he says. "My partner always accuses me of spending way too much time in the kitchen and having lots of food left over, where actually we could have done much less. But I like to do quite a few things to give people a bigger, wider experience."

Lesson: Find the balance between bounty and being buried in burnt eggplant.

Stickler vs dolloper

The Middle Eastern food that is the basis for many Ottolenghi favourites is often cooked by



feel, rather than by exact recipe. His recipes, on the other hand, are often quite precise: "1½ teaspoons coriander powder," for example, or "20 olives, quartered lengthwise". Is that how he cooks? "It depends," he says. "If I embark on a cuisine I know nothing about - let's say a Korean dish - I really do follow the recipe to a T. But if I look at an Italian recipe that's more or less familiar then I will just look at the dish, get the idea, and then make it my own."

Lesson: When you feel confident, feel free.

Let ideas flow

In Britain, a lot of the excitement about Ottolenghi has focused on "the chickpea effect" where supermarket shoppers are suddenly au fait with Middle Eastern ingredients. In Australia, I feel like we already knew our hummus with popular chefs such as Karen Martini, Greg Malouf and Shane Delia, and thousands of immigrant cooks and eaters already beating a path.

For me, the exciting thing about Ottolenghi isn't so much the ingredients, but the punchy combinations of flavour and texture. Tamarind, chard and chickpeas. Apricot, walnut and lavender. Rhubarb, beetroot and blue cheese. Broad beans with hot yoghurt. So

how does Ottolenghi come up with ideas? "It's mostly association," he says. "One thought leads to another."

Sometimes it's prompted by a new location - the fava he's scooped up with flatbread on a Greek island a couple of weeks ago, for example. "When I travel, I always try to find ideas. Every meal is a potential recipe," he says. Sometimes it's just brainstorming. There's a brunch dish from *Plenty More*: grilled banana bread with tahini and honeycomb. "I was thinking about brunch and I wanted to do something rich, so I thought about a fruity loaf. Sure, people know about banana bread but then I try to create a slight surprise by using an ingredient I haven't used in that context. I came up with adding a bit of salt and tahini. People in the test kitchen were sceptical but then we ate it, and it just hit the spot."

Another *Plenty More* dish, an aubergine kataifi nest, sees blackened eggplant and cheese stuffed into the shredded pastry that's more commonly used for baklava. There's nothing too tricky about this dish but there's novelty and pleasure in both ingredient and technique.

Lesson: If you dream it, cook it.