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Food & drink

Table Talk: Philip Lowery

The director of the Real Food Festival on supporting small producers, his disappointment with Delia - and why he used to be known as the Potato King

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Rachel Dixon
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Small producers will find a voice at the Real Food Festival, the brainchild of Philip Lowery. Photograph: PR

What's your favourite table?

▶ In London, if it wasn't my money, I would go to [Locanda Locatelli](#) - the quality of food, the service and the atmosphere are fantastic. But I find it hard to justify spending £200 on a meal, so if I was paying, I would go to [Roast](#). It's not too formal and stuffy.

▶ My absolute favourite table is [Boccondivino](#) in Bra, the home of [Slow Food](#) in Italy. It is incredibly cheap, and their panna cotta is famous. Other chefs come in to eat it so they can try to steal the recipe. I've never tasted anything like it - I'm not a dessert person so I wasn't expecting it, but it was stunning. I think it's the raw, unpasteurised milk that they use.

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What would you have for your last supper?

I wouldn't have to worry about the health aspect, so it would be a pretty major blow-out. I think it would be a rare chateaubriand with french fries and mayonnaise, followed by the panna cotta from Boccondivino.

What's your poison?

Wine - specifically the combination of food and wine: it's a match made in heaven. At the moment, I particularly like albariño, a Spanish white wine made by small producers. I'm not a big drinker, though, and I have two alcohol-free days a week.

Name your three desert island ingredients

I'll assume it is a paradise island, with wild pigs running around, where I can fish and grow my own food. In that case, it would be risotto rice, chocolate - I would grow wheat and make chocolate brownies - and very good albariño.

What would you put in Room 101?

Peanuts. I will eat almost anything, but I just can't do peanuts. I'm not allergic to them, I just hate the taste, the smell, peanut butter ... In the past it would have been oysters - I had a very bad experience with some off oysters - but I was recently persuaded to give them another try, and they were very nice.

Which book gets you cooking?

I love the [Irish Farmers' Market Cookbook](#) by Clodagh McKenna. I'm also reading a new book by Glynn Christian, [How to Cook Without Recipes](#), which will be out in May. It's a fantastic idea: he teaches you about flavour trails - which ingredients go together - so you can go shopping and cook a meal without referring to a recipe.

What's your dream dinner party line-up?

Raquel Welch, Jack Dee, Clodagh McKenna, my wife, Jeremy Clarkson, and Trinny and Susannah. That's a bit of a strange line-up, isn't it?

What was your childhood teatime treat?

I was known as the Potato King, because I just wanted to eat potatoes. I especially loved mash and gravy.

What was your most memorable meal?

A family dinner I was invited to while attending Slow Food's Cheese festival in Bra. It was out on the veranda, exactly how you'd imagine a stereotypical Italian family dinner. We had four courses, including a kind of raw sausage meat, homemade bread, a pork stew, and some excellent cheese. So it was very simple, homecooked food, but wonderful.

Great food is about atmosphere and sharing - it's a social occasion. You could eat fantastic food on your own in front of the TV, but that would be missing the point. Many of the family members couldn't speak English, and I can't speak Italian, but we managed to communicate and they made me feel so welcome.

What was your biggest food disaster?

I had just bought a Japanese [Kin knife](#) - I had always wanted a really good, really sharp knife. Unfortunately, the knife slipped and I nearly took my finger off. It didn't even hurt at first, but I looked down and saw my finger pumping blood. It was a bit scary.

What's the worst meal you've ever had?

It was at McDonald's, the morning after a heavy night. My body was craving carbohydrates but this was disgusting. The meat tasted like reconstituted garbage - you couldn't really describe it as food. I ate one bite, and I've never set foot in a McDonald's again. This was 15 or 20 years ago, though - I have heard they're much better now.

Who's your food hero/food villain?

My food hero is Rick Stein - he was ahead of the game by focusing on his producers, which is what we're doing at the [Real Food Festival](#). It's so important to support them if we don't want to lose them.

My food villain is Sir Terry Leahy [the chief executive of Tesco], as a supermarket figurehead. I absolutely do believe there's a place for supermarkets but the dominance and domination they now have is extremely dangerous. Their drive for cheap food means that we know the cost of everything and the value of nothing.

Nigella or Delia?

I'm disappointed with Nigella - I think she's bought in to her own PR - but I'm even more disappointed with Delia. I put my head in my hands when I saw her latest TV programme. I'm not unsympathetic to her message, but she's taken it to extremes. Surely we don't need a recipe for oven chips? So Nigella just scrapes it.

Vegetarians: genius or madness?

Madness. There's so much great food out there, it's a shame to cut off a whole food group.

Fast food or fresh food?

Fresh food - but fresh can be fast as well. The [Leon](#) chain has proved that, and Gordon Ramsay has done a good [Fast Food book](#). We're all busy, but I still cook every day.

Who would you most like to cook for?

Giorgio Locatelli, although cooking for a chef might seem a bit stupid. I'm only an amateur, but I think I'm quite good, especially my risotto. I never order it in restaurants any more, because it's never as good. That sounds arrogant, doesn't it?

What would you cook to impress a date?

Risotto is not seen as very special, because it's so easy to make, so I would do sea bass and potatoes with a salsa. It's based on a Jamie Oliver dish but I have tweaked it a bit. Clearly I don't need to impress women any more, because I'm happily married - but I'm always trying to impress my wife, of course.

Make a wish

I'd love to get rid of intensive, industrialised, mechanised agricultural food production, and go back to a more

natural and sustainable approach to producing our food. It might sound naive and stupid, but we waste a third of our food because it's so cheap. What we produce could go a lot further.

· *Philip Lowery is the director of the [Real Food Festival](#), a celebration of sustainable food taking place at London's Earl's Court from April 24-27. The Real Food Festival showcases the best produce in Britain and Europe by subsidising small, independent producers who would otherwise be unable to attend. Tickets cost £15 in advance and £18 on the door; click [here](#) to book*

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