

“op!nion”

Our columnists share their thoughts on hot culinary topics



Wine has the power to transport us

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Why eggs should be hailed as a superfood

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Emma Freud talks to
Stanley Tucci

new series

In this brand-new series, our columnist chats with stars of film and TV about their love of food and cooking

photographs LOTTIE BIRMINGHAM



Stanley Tucci is one of Hollywood's most popular actors, and one of my heroes.

Star of *The Hunger Games* and *The Devil Wears Prada*, he was Oscar-nominated for *The Lovely Bones*, but also has a lifelong interest in culinary matters. He co-directed, co-wrote and co-starred in the restaurant movie *Big Night*, played Julia Child's husband in *Julie & Julia*, and has produced two great cookbooks. We planned for him to come to my house so I could cook his spaghetti vongole, but social distancing descended, so Stanley cooked the meal at his house, his assistant Lottie photographed him, his son Nicolo did the lighting, and we chatted on email.

Emma: How important was food in your family when you were growing up?

Stanley: Food was everything to my family. We sat down to a dinner together every night. We had a big meal every Sunday, either at home or at my grandparents' houses.



“I'd love to open a small restaurant – with someone else's money”



E: And always Italian food?

S: I'm Italian on both sides, so Italian food was a crucial part of my upbringing. Italians emigrated in waves – entire families and towns came to America and ended up creating Italian enclaves wherever they put down roots. They created a culinary support system of sorts, from the growing of fruit and veg, to the raising of animals for meat, as well as creating businesses to import ingredients from back home. Both my mum and dad's family brought over their family recipes when they emigrated to America – the first meal I ever cooked was probably pasta marinara.

E: You once said that, 'food has become an obsession with me, it's another limb or organ of who I am.' Would you ever stop acting and work in the food industry instead?

S: I will never stop acting – although at times I want to – but it's how I pay the bills. I'd like to study the basics of French cooking though, just for myself. I'd love to open a small restaurant – with someone else's money.

E: Who has been the biggest influence on your cooking?

S: Concetta, my maternal grandmother, was an amazing cook. To this day I long for her food, and luckily my mother inherited her talent and instinct. She wasn't physically affectionate – many Italians aren't – but she showed her love by cooking for you. Everything she made was delicious, from pizza to savoury pies to homemade pasta – everything. She and my grandfather used mostly homegrown

ingredients from a gorgeous garden in their backyard. They bottled their own tomatoes, pickled green tomatoes, made their own wine and sausages and raised rabbits. Although she only had a grade school education, like most Italian immigrants of that era, you could tell she was very bright, simply because she was so funny. You can't be funny and dumb, though you can be smart and not funny.

E: As a lover of Italian food, how do you feel about American and British cooking?

S: In America there are pockets of real food in mostly upscale urban areas – but the agricultural practices and the glut of fast food joints, particularly in rural and poorer areas, make it a sad culinary story. Whereas London is now a culinary mecca – what an extraordinary gustatory tapestry.

E: You've created two cookbooks. How did that happen?

S: The first book I curated for my parents and my friend Gianni Scappin – an Italian-American chef who I befriended during my research for the movie *Big Night*. I wanted to share my family's recipes, and show the contrast and similarities between his northern-Italian and our southern-Italian family recipes. The second book is a collaboration between me and my wife Felicity. The recipes are from my family, from my travels when filming, from Felicity's nanna, and some of the dishes we discovered together.

E: For such a private man, was it hard to open up your home and your family in these books?

S: I don't like my private life to be public so it was a bit tricky, but I felt that the book would be better for it, as long as it didn't go beyond a few photos of the kids and the recipes they liked.

E: There are some of Kate's recipes in the first book (Kate, Stanley's first wife, tragically died of breast cancer in 2009). Was she a good cook?

S: When I met her she was a single mum and always sat down to dinner with her children, which I loved. She cooked very well, but then took the time to learn from my mother as well as experimenting on her own, and she became a great cook. I remember her making my mum's recipe for lasagne bolognese, all from scratch, and my mother tasting it and saying, 'I have nothing left to teach you.' Felicity suggested we use some of her recipes in the book and I'm so glad we did. She was definitely a better cook than me. I think Felicity probably is, too.

E: The next TV show you're doing is a new food travel programme on CNN. What's the idea?

S: I wanted to make something that showed the differences between the cuisine of all the 20 regions of Italy. No one has done that on a large scale, as far as I know. Because of where Italy is situated, geographically, it has been influenced by Europe, Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East, making its cuisine incredibly diverse from the toe to the top of the boot. The one unifying factor amongst Italians is their palates.



E: How has the current crisis affected your life and work so far?

S: Well, I wasn't able to come and cook with you for one! I have the driest hands and I haven't left the house in ages. Every job I was going to do has been put on hold, all but one of my kids are back, my wife is working from home and I have bought another freezer. I will probably go broke soon.

E: We weren't able to eat your recipe together, but you've made my desert island dish – your spaghetti vongole. Why did you choose that one?

S: I cook a meal every day, really just making the same things over and over again. They're mostly dishes I grew up with, but when I have time, I experiment. I made this for you because I love its fresh simplicity.

7 quick-fire questions

One ingredient you couldn't live without?
Olive oil.

One ingredient you hate?
Coriander.

5 ingredients you always have? Olive oil, salt, tomato, basil and pasta.

The meal you make most often? Pasta with cannellini beans, tomatoes and cavolo nero.

The meal you find hardest to make? Anything that I have to bake.

What are your food bugbears?
Overcooked pasta, cutting spaghetti and lousy ingredients.

What would your last meal be?
I don't know, but it would be ***** great.

Make it yourself

Spaghetti vongole

SERVES 4 **PREP** 15 mins plus soaking
COOK 20 mins **EASY**

900g fresh clams (vongole)
1 tbsp cornflour
400g spaghetti
50ml extra virgin olive oil
3 garlic cloves, finely sliced
2-4 small pepperoncini
½ small bunch of parsley, chopped,
plus extra to serve (optional)

1 Clean the clams, discarding any that won't close when you tap them or that have broken shells. Put them in a large bowl of cold water with the cornflour for around 30 mins, then drain and rinse to wash away any grit and sand.

2 Bring a large pan of salted water to the boil. Cook the spaghetti following pack instructions. Meanwhile, in a heavy-bottomed sauté pan, heat the olive oil over a low heat. Add the garlic and the pepperoncini, and cook until the garlic is fragrant but not coloured. Raise the heat to medium and add the clams, shaking the pan and stirring to coat them in the oil and garlic.

3 Add a good amount of salt and pepper. Add the parsley and toss to coat the clams once more. Put the lid on and cook, shaking the pan every so often until the clams are open, about 3 mins. Check and discard any that don't open.

4 When the pasta and clams are done, drain the spaghetti and tip into the pan with the clams, then toss together. Scatter over a little extra parsley to serve, if you like.

GOOD TO KNOW healthy

PER SERVING 548 kcal • fat 15g • saturates 2g •
carbs 80g • sugars 3g • fibre 5g • protein 21g •
salt 0.9g



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Good Food contributing editor Emma Freud is a journalist and broadcaster, director of Red Nose Day and a co-presenter of Radio Four's Loose Ends.



Emma talks to actor,
writer and comedian
Meera Syal