From plate to page: Peter Gordon's generous recipe for life



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Chef Peter Gordon credits his grandmother Molly with not only teaching him to cook, but instilling in him the importance of helping others.
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Peter Gordon made his first cookbook when he was four. While his mother cooked in their Whanganui kitchen, he sat on the floor and cut recipes from her magazines, carefully sticking each one into the pages of a scrapbook.

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Three years later, he was cooking alone. He remembers climbing onto a wobbly stool to reach the pot of bubbling fish and chips, then falling and pulling it all over himself.

He remembers his father sliding across the fat-covered lino. He remembers being loaded into the V8 Chevy Impala and nearly hitting the ambulance as it came through the hospital gate.

He remembers the long stretches spent in three hospitals and how his intermediate school principal advised him to grow his hair long so kids wouldn't make fun of the scars.

Gordon did, though also had another way of fending off any potential bullies.

"The skin-graft on my neck is from my right bum cheek so I used to tell people to kiss my arse."

The accident didn't end his interest in cooking. He made another cookbook when he was eight, its cut-out recipes including one for a sweet soufflé marmalade omelette.

About 10 years ago, he finally got around to making the dish. By then he was an internationally renowned chef and restaurateur, widely credited as the "godfather" of fusion cuisine, with a string of actual cookbooks to his name.

"I couldn't get that recipe out of my head so made these sort of soufflé, crepe things. They were quite nice actually."

Gordon, meanwhile, is extremely nice. In our hour-long chat there's no hint of those celebrity chef tropes, no sign of ego or swagger, no talk of his "craft" or claims of culinary genius.

"I just really like food," he says from his Auckland apartment, where he's shut himself in the bedroom and away from pet basenjis Fiver and Pixie for this phone interview.

“I actually like it a hell of a lot.”



Gordon has been cooking professionally since he was 18.
Photo: Corey Schweikert / Supplied

Whanganui boy, Melbourne-trained chef, fusion pioneer: here’s a bit of potted history.

Despite originally wanting to become a winemaker, Gordon studied cooking in Australia before immersing himself in the food cultures of Malaysia, Indonesia and Japan.

He was 23 when he set up the kitchen at Wellington’s famed Sugar Club in 1986, then three years later he moved to London where he launched Sugar Clubs in Notting Hill and West Soho.

Awards, accolades and fame followed. He opened London’s The Providores & Tapa Room in 2001, appeared on innumerable television shows, and cooked for the likes of Barack Obama and Elton John.

And the Queen, too. In 2009, he served Elizabeth II a lunch of Scottish salmon two ways, followed by Welsh Black beef with celeriac gratin. Later that year he met her for the second time

when, at Windsor Castle, she made him an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit.

Powerful donation

Yet none of that compares with Gordon's proudest moment: donating bone marrow to his sister in 1994.

He was living in London when Tracey was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukaemia and, as soon as he heard the news, flew straight to her side in Melbourne.

"The family had all been tested but no one was even close. When I was there they said I was a really good match.

"If anyone reading this gets the opportunity to donate, it's such little effort and such great potential reward."

Gordon tells a great story of the time. There was a "bone marrow wedding" with a big group of guests, a "Fred Flintstone bone from the butchers painted gold", and the siblings wearing silken robes.

"The next day Trace had the transplant, got really sick as expected, then got really well. I went back to London, opened the Sugar Club, and we all went on with our lives."

But Gordon's life was about to change. Having seen the life-saving effects of donating bone marrow, a few years later he was asked to donate something else.

"I got a letter from the secretary to the head of oncology at London's Hammersmith Hospital.

"It said 'we have a charity here at the hospital, I love your cookbook and was wondering if you could donate a copy to the Christmas raffle'.

“I said ‘well, have I got an idea for you’.”



Peter Gordon at Homeland, the Auckland restaurant he opened in 2020. Photo: Supplied

The idea eventually became Leukaemia UK’s major fundraising event. Co-founded with Chris Corbin in 1999, “Who’s Cooking Dinner?” sees diners served a four-course meal from some of the most famous chefs in London – including Gordon Ramsay, Rick Stein and Jamie Oliver.

The annual event has raised about NZ$18 million for leukaemia research.

Gordon, who returned to NZ in 2020, has continued to use the success and connections he’s built through food to raise money for more good causes.

The list is long: Auckland City Mission’s Cook Off, a KiwiHarvest fundraising dinner and a gala for the Christchurch Art Gallery Foundation, among others.

“My career, my whole life – starting from being a 4-year-old making a funny little cookbook to being a 7-year-old with those burns – has revolved around food.

“I’ve made my money through diners coming into my restaurants and I need to put some of that back into the community.”

Other times he’s not even cooking, like in March when he took part in the celebrity section of the Manu World Champs, which sees competitors jumping from platforms in a bid to make the biggest splash.

Gordon, who was fundraising for water safety education, while dressed in chef whites and holding a rubber chicken, didn’t quite cut the mustard.

“In my mind I was going to be doing this big potato move but there was hardly any splash at all. In fact I just went into the water like a spear – hardly a ripple.

“A few weeks later I met a couple of young guys doing manus and they recognised me from the competition: ‘Were you the chef guy? You were really shit’.”

Sense of charity

Manu prowess aside, Gordon credits his paternal grandmother, Molly, with shaping his strong sense of charity. After his parents divorced, his two eldest siblings stayed with their mum while Gordon and Tracey lived for a time with Molly.

It was at her side that Gordon learnt not only to cook but the importance of helping others.

“Gran always instilled that in us. She used to say, ”If you can do it, you must.”’

Gordon’s aunt Mary was born with an intellectual disability, and Molly was heavily involved with the Wellington After-Care Association, a service provider for people with disabilities.

“Gran believed young people should live independently, with support. She’d always be in the kitchen making jams and preserves to fundraise.

“She also made sure Mary and her mates could knit beanies and gloves. They’d go to building sites where Gran would hand out warm things to the workers – she was always doing incredible things.”

Molly’s extensive community service was recognised with a Queen’s Service Medal, bestowed by the monarch herself in 1981. When Gordon cooked for the Queen 29 years later he included Molly’s shortbread on the menu so she could be there in spirit.

“Gran was a huge part of my life. She was such a generous, charitable person.”

But so is her grandson. These days, Gordon is especially interested in highlighting and supporting the next generation of Māori chefs, while championing indigenous ingredients and exploring his own whakapapa: Ngāti Kahungunu and Ngāi Tahu.

Even so, Gordon always seems to find the space for yet another good deed, and next weekend he’s appearing as the guest speaker for the annual fundraising event at Katherine Mansfield House & Garden in Wellington.

“I haven’t read Katherine Mansfield for about 400 years,” he says. “But yesterday I raced out to the Women’s Bookshop and bought *The Garden Party and Other Stories*.

“She’s such a good writer. She talks about eating pāua, but spells it ‘pawa’.”

Mansfield’s writing has sent Gordon back to her letters, too.

“She writes to Ida Baker – her lover maybe – in February 1914: ”I’m tired of this disgusting atmosphere and of eating hard-boiled eggs out of my hand and drinking milk out of a bottle.“



Gordon popped out to buy Katherine Mansfield's The Garden Party and Other Stories ahead of his fundraising speech next week.
Photo: BRUCE MACKAY / The Post

"She talks a lot about food, and I think there were moments when the money from her father hadn't arrived and her thoughts of food were slightly obsessive."

Gordon can relate to the obsession with food. After all, he says, his is a life defined by the stuff: from the pot of fish and chips that burned him so badly as a child, to the award-winning fusion cuisine that both gave him his name and a way to help others.

And as for all that helping, Gordon wants us to know it's not entirely selfless.

"I get a hell of a lot out of it too - it actually makes me feel really good in my heart and soul. But as Gran said, "if you can do it, you must."

From Plate to Page: An Evening with Peter Gordon, is being held at Samuel Marsden Collegiate School on November 11. Tickets available via the Katherine Mansfield House & Garden website.

- The Post