

## the table

# Boris? My staff would walk out if he booked a table

The PM may not be welcome but Angela Hartnett has cooked for the Queen and a host of VIPs. And her new project is with a celebrity DJ. By **Nick Curtis**

It's 8am in San Francisco, where Angela Hartnett joins me on Zoom to discuss her new podcast *Dish*, co-presented with the former Radio 1 presenter Nick Grimshaw. I ask if she's in the States promoting it, or her new book, *The Weekend Cook*, and get a peal of sarcastic laughter.

"No, no, no, no, no," says Hartnett, the 53-year-old chef patron of Michelin-starred Murano and its Café Murano offshoots. "I'm not a name really in the States. There's Gordon, Nigella, Jamie... but there's no way I'm up there with those guys. They don't know me here, which is fine." She's visiting friends in California, then her financier brother in New York.

Hartnett worked gruelling shifts for and with Gordon Ramsay at restaurants including Aubergine and the Connaught, and on his TV shows, before setting up Murano in Mayfair in 2008. In a business full of egomaniacs, her USP is straightforwardness — reflected in a cooking style inherited from her Italian grandmother. Ramsay may be a fancier cook, but for my money Hartnett has a better feel for hospitality and conviviality.

She does media projects such as *Best Home Cook* or the new podcast only if she can be part of a team, and really likes the idea. (The times she

has taken a gig ill-advisedly, her discomfort has been plain to see on screen, she says.) "TV shows put bums on restaurant seats but you also open yourself up to people who say: 'I saw your show or listened to your podcast and came to your restaurant and had the WORST meal blah blah blah.'"

Ramsay was deluged by diners claiming to have had "nightmare" experiences in his restaurants after he did *Kitchen Nightmares*, Hartnett says. She's on good terms with her mentor and with Marcus Wareing, with whom she worked at Ramsay's Pétus, though the two men no longer speak. "I'm the one who's managed to stay in touch with them all." No mean feat, I say, given Ramsay's propensity for feuding. "I'm saying nothing," she smiles.

The podcast pairing with "Grimmy" was an inspired one. "We'd only met once before, when he deejayed at Lime Wood [the New Forest hotel where she jointly oversees a dining room]. He's met everyone in the world, so he's got the confidence and I just follow."

"From the start the idea was that I'd cook, he'd mix drinks and interview people and I'd join in. It's not challenging, just an easy listen."

They've recorded episodes with the former *Top Gear* presenter James May, the writer and actor Meera Syal, the *Strictly* professional Giovanni Pernice

**Subscribe to *Dish*, the new podcast from Waitrose & Partners, available on all podcast providers; *The Weekend Cook* by Angela Hartnett is published by Bloomsbury Absolute at £26**



(Hartnett "almost peed myself" when Grimshaw mocked her pronunciation of "Peru") and the *Bridesmaids* director Paul Feig (a fan of Mexican food — Hartnett made him tacos). The news anchor Clive Myrie and the singer Mabel are lined up.

The first episode, with Hannah Waddingham and Phil Dunster, stars of the food-hearted football comedy *Ted Lasso*, is packed with hilarity. "Hannah's partner [hotel food and beverage guru Gianluca Cugnetto] is Italian and she speaks better Italian than me. I think she's brilliant and really smart, so when she said she was a fan of my cooking it just floored me."

I can't believe she gets starstruck, having watched her tick off Hollywood star Stanley Tucci for overfilling

anolini in brodo in front of her mother, aunt and uncle, during an episode of his Italian food odyssey. "I get nervous, which is why it's good to have Grimmy there, and I was starstruck with them because I'm a *Ted Lasso* superfan."

A fair number of famous folk have passed through the high-end dining rooms in which she has worked. "We'd have people like Michael Caine [and] Paul McCartney in the Connaught, big A-listers who are actually the most amazing people. If you go to say hello they are very old school and stand up to greet you. I've cooked for Camilla quite a bit, but we try to keep it very low-key. People come to Murano because they know there's not going to be half a dozen paparazzi standing outside."

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Angela Hartnett, above left, cooked for the Queen and Paul McCartney, above, at the Connaught. Below: Tony Blair

**“I’m a big Blair fan so I sent over champagne**



Hartnett cooked for the Queen too at the Connaught, but since it was a private dinner she kept her distance. “You only go over to people if it feels right and natural. When Tony Blair brought his family to Murano I wasn’t actually working, but I’m a big Blair fan so I sent over champagne. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.”

Did she hear that Boris Johnson was booed in a Hackney restaurant over the jubilee weekend? “Did he?” she grins. “Which restaurant? What on earth was he doing in Morito?” Hartnett becomes reflective. “Would I have Boris in? That’s a question, isn’t it? Part of me thinks you should respect the office of the prime minister, but the way he is at the moment I don’t think I could. And I think my staff would all walk out and say, ‘We’re not serving him.’”

Hartnett seems to be in a good place. Her restaurants are “full and busy. London feels manic at the moment, packed. If you want to get a table you need to book weeks in advance.” Like all restaurants — “and hospitals, care homes, shops” — they’ve had staffing issues, and rising overheads. “But, day to day, the people who work for me probably have a better ride than we [the Nineties generation] had all those years ago.”

During lockdown she cooked thousands of meals for NHS staff, and only really cracked when it ended. “I had a meeting where I burst out crying, which has never happened to me before, because I just thought, ‘I can’t cope with this any more.’ We had no staff, couldn’t get hold of produce, landlord problems... it was just a bloody nightmare. But then you ride through it, if you’ve got good people around you to help and advise.”

Have restaurants made her rich? “F\*\*\* no! The only people I know who have made money out of restaurants aren’t in restaurants, they made it off TV. We’ve got a house but we still pay a mortgage, so I wouldn’t call that rich. But it’s a business I love. And you get to do lots of different things as a result of it, like podcasts or TV, and you get to travel. I don’t need five houses.”

She lives in Spitalfields, in a Georgian house with a notoriously tiny kitchen, with her husband, Neil Borthwick, formerly the head chef of Merchants Tavern in Shoreditch and now working at the French House in Soho. They met in 2002 when she was his boss at the Connaught, got together some years later and married in 2018 at Nicholas Hawksmoor’s Christ Church, near their home. Hartnett nursed Borthwick through a horrific cycling accident ten years ago that left him with a plate in his head.

“He’s fine, he’s just done a 100-mile ride out to Essex and he’s cycling to Paris in a couple of weeks,” she says. “Our ambition now, if I’m honest, is to move out of London. I don’t know whether that’s an exit strategy — I think I could still do that and run the restaurants. Everyone probably has come out of the pandemic thinking [about] what they want out of life and what’s important.”

“Neil and I would love to go and live by the sea, have a little place there, simple and easy, open three or four days a week. And just walk on the beach every day. I think that’s fair.”

Sounds as though some lucky seaside town is about to get a truly excellent fish restaurant.

# Fattoria La Vialla: the best-kept secret among Italophile foodies

It’s the finest Tuscan food, direct to your door. By **Giulia Crouch**

**W**hen I visit my nonna’s village in the south of Italy I like to pack light. This isn’t just because I think airline baggage fees are absolutely outrageous, but also because it’s essential I preserve room in my case.

I can distinctly remember the look of pride on my great-aunt’s face one year when I managed to squeeze an entire loaf of bread, two salamis and a wedge of parmesan into my already bulging bag to take home.

But alas: my desire for Italian produce is larger than my suitcase and more persistent than the frequency of my trips. Of course you can buy Italian ingredients in the supermarket, but are they really the same? My great-auntie certainly wouldn’t say so.

So what if I could shop like I was in Italy, but from the comfort of my own kitchen? *Veramente, la dolce vita.*

It turns out fellow Italophiles are in on a secret. Instead of going to delis or scouring specialist websites, these mega-foodies are going straight to the source.

Fattoria La Vialla is a second-generation, family-run, biodynamic farm in Tuscany comprising nearly 4,000 acres that, very unusually, sells its produce directly to the consumer — even to us, here in the UK — but its communications manager Annette Mueller, prefers the term “paradise”.

They make wine, not one but four types of extra virgin olive oil — from the peppery, typically Tuscan variety to the smoother, sweeter, more southern kind — traditional pecorino cheese using 100 per cent sheep’s milk (instead of the modern shortcut of combining it with cow’s milk), pasta from the durum wheat they grow and eggs from their chickens, sauces from the seasonal vegetables in the field, appetisers and sweet treats — all of which can be ordered online.

“It’s a very special place,” says Annette, who has worked there for eight years. “Everything is very much alive and you can taste that. It’s not us and nature, we’re a part of nature.”

At La Vialla, which was founded by Piero and Giuliana Lo Franco in 1978 and is now run by their three sons, they focus on the farm as a whole and on “giving back what they take out”. They concentrate on biodiversity, the fertility of the soil and creating a circular economy. For example, the sheep don’t just provide milk for the cheese but also meat for the restaurant and manure for the land. There’s a huge area of woodland and at least 65 species of birds living there.

It began life as an agriturismo — a farm that offers stays to tourists in search of some countryside air and home cooking — but visitors soon got a taste for the olive oil and began asking if they could have it sent to them in their home country. Now, La



## What the British customers love

**“La Vialla” Extra Virgin Olive Oil**  
2021 1 bottle (500ml), £13.40  
**Casa Conforto Chianti Superiore**  
**DOCG 2019** (red wine), box with six bottles (750ml each), £51  
**Pecorino Gran Riserva**  
**12 months** approximately 400g, £14.10  
**Pappardelle all’Uovo** (wide-ribbon egg pasta), box with six bags (250g each), £18  
**Sugo Pomarola** (Tuscan-style tomato sauce), box with six jars (280g each), £21.90

Vialla employs 150 people and ships to the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and Austria and relies mainly on word of mouth for advertising. “We do some publicity, but very little,” Annette says. Their customers love that they know exactly where their food is coming from and the novelty of being in direct contact with the producers. “We keep in touch with our customers. We send them a booklet each month with news from the farm. It’s more like a friendship.”

You might expect the prices to be astronomical and, while a bottle of olive oil will cost you about double what you’d find in the shops, it’s a question of quality, says Annette. “Because we cut out the middle man we have complete control,” she says. “If you use a distributor, you don’t know how they’re storing your olive oil, for example, and it’s your name on the bottle. If there are any problems our customers can let us know directly.” The prices are

inclusive of duty and import fees. The customer does not have to pay anything extra — and shipping to the UK is free for all orders over £75.

As well as being in contact with the farm, customers are also in contact with each other. A friend of a friend is part of a WhatsApp group set up specifically to bulk-buy products from there — I’m putting an order through, anyone want in?

Although La Vialla looks like a typically rustic countryside affair, some of it is actually very technical. They built a special mill to crush the olives that allows no oxygen to get in,

**“We keep in touch with customers — it’s more like a friendship**

which could spoil the quality, and which never gets over 27C, meaning the oil is classed as cold-pressed.

All the pasta sauces are cooked in small batches because they believe this results in a better flavour. This is done in pots that suck out the oxygen, meaning they can be cooked at a lower temperature for a shorter time. “Oxygen depreciates the nutritional value and taste,” Annette explains.

“There’s no point [in] us doing field-to-fork if we’re going to cook our sauce to death.” The team also runs weekly taste tests to ensure the sauce is up to their very exacting standards. “It’s a lot of work but we want to give people the best of the best. We want it to taste like mum just made it.”

Annette is coy about how many customers they have, but says the UK presents a big wedge. “The Brits really love our pasta sauces,” she says. [laviolla.com](http://laviolla.com)