



Eat with your eyes

Looking to sharpen up the look of your home cooking? According to these chefs, it could be simpler than you think, writes **LAURA PRICE**

JULY 4, 2020. I'm sitting at a cosy table at Dinings SW3 in Chelsea, nervous but excited, having just removed my mask. In front of me is a flickering candle, a pair of chopsticks on a porcelain rest and a row of rainbow-like Japanese snacks piled high with green avocado, white jalapeño aioli, pink fatty tuna tartare, green chives and orange roe. It's a burst of colour the likes of which I haven't seen since, well, the last time I went to a restaurant.

Like your first oyster or even your first kiss, I don't think you ever forget the first time you visited a restaurant after the initial coronavirus lockdown. It wasn't just the joy of seeing other humans, being greeted by excited staff and eating food that had been cooked by someone else, but also the way it all *looked*. In contrast to the beige plates of pasta I'd been eating during months of isolation, this artful arrangement of ingredients and tableware was everything.

If, like me, you love cooking but your artistic talent peaked at primary school, you may well have spent the last year working on ways to improve on that front. Trying out new dishes, yes, but also figuring out the plating – investing in new crockery, zhushing up your kitchen décor and ordering fancy meal kits to recreate the restaurant experience at home. While you may have found your home cooking never looks quite like that of your favourite chef, I can guarantee you've felt a sense of achievement for having made an effort. And if you've cooked for loved ones, you've no doubt made them feel good too.



☞ (Main) David Loftus; (Clare Smyth) Food Story Media Ltd

PLATE EXPECTATIONS: [(left) A delicate dish at Dinings SW3; (above) plating a dessert at Evelyn's Table; (right) Masaki Sugisaki, executive chef of Dinings SW3



CORE STRENGTH: Clare Smyth of Core, the Notting Hill restaurant that just claimed its third star in the Michelin Guide for 2021

"The first thing you notice about food is how it looks," says Clare Smyth, owner of Core by Clare Smyth, one of only five three-Michelin-starred restaurants in London, and which – like many other restaurants in the last nine months or so – has just launched its range of Core at Home tasting menu meal kits. "You eat with your eyes," she says. "Like most things in life, the package really shows the care that has gone into it."

Whether you're a novice or a seasoned home cook looking to achieve restaurant-level greatness, there's plenty you can learn from the professionals. Here's how.

Step 1: Preparation

It's obvious when you think about it, but the best way to make your food look good is to buy good food in the first place. That soggy, browning leaf of lettuce will never look appetising, no matter how much sauce you use to dress it up. "It's important to draw the natural elements out of food," says Luke Selby, chef of Evelyn's Table in Soho. "Something that's not ripe or visually correct will not taste as good as it could do. Ingredients will speak to you when they're ready to be eaten."

Patience is also key. Once the food is prepared and cooked, it's important not to rush into the plating – both meat and fish should be rested for around the same amount of time they are cooked for. "If you cut meat as soon as it's out of the oven, you'll get blood on the plate," says Adam Handling, chef-owner of Frog by Adam Handling and the new Hame by AH delivery service. ▶

It's important to draw out the natural elements out of food. Ingredients speak when they're ready





My 'Mother' dish uses a dark, textured plate. When I serve it on a white plate it looks terrible

chefs, it's important to guide people step-by-step, but also to make it simple, so that people can enjoy it and achieve a successful, restaurant-style meal," she says.

Tweezers are a contentious point among the chefs I talk to. While Smyth is in favour, Selby calls them "clinical" and Handling says they're "poncy," adding that a clean, cool pair of hands is all you need for plating. But Dinings chef Masaki Sugisaki says chopsticks - the Japanese equivalent of tweezers - are a plating tool he couldn't live without. "Once you get used to them, they're the best equipment you can have."

In his Hame by AH beef wellington kit, Handling also includes a temperature probe, as well as step-by-step video instructions for cooking and plating. The beauty of the new crop of home fine-dining options is that most of the heavy lifting has already been done, and any extra bits of kit serve simply to enhance the aesthetics.

Step 3: Tableware

There's no hard and fast rule on the style of crockery that will make your food look the best, but most cooks recommend investing in a handful of pieces to create a more special experience. For Selby and Smyth, there's no better canvas than a white plate to show off top-notch produce. The key here is to make sure there's colour in your food, and leave a nice border around it - but we'll come to that later.

In the other camp, Handling and Sugisaki favour crockery that reflects nature. "A perfect example is my 'Mother' dish, where the plate was designed for the dish," says Handling. "It's a very dark, earthy, muddy-looking, textured plate. When I serve the same dish on a white plate, it looks terrible. The ethos of the dish

has gone because it's about nature and it's on a white plate, which isn't natural."

When it comes to drinks, quality glassware is essential. Handling says you need three different types of glasses - a high-ball for water and long cocktails, a rock glass for spirits and shorts, and a coupe glass for martinis and cosmopolitans. "A nice crystal rock glass lasts forever and makes a negroni look a lot better," he says. "It's heavy, the texture is great on your fingers. It's very important for plates and glasses to look the part."

Step 4: Setting the table

While it may be tempting to sit with your feet up in front of *The Crown*, *Bridgerton*, *Tiger King*, [insert current obsession] while absentmindedly spooning your mushroom risotto, Handling says TV dinners are the ultimate no-no, especially in these times. "Never sit on a sofa and eat a meal," he says. "Use it as that one opportunity a day to talk to your friends, your family - talking is good for your mental health as well." (We'll gloss over the fact that I live alone and always eat my dinner on the sofa - sorry, Adam.)

Asma Khan, chef-owner of Darjeeling Express and its new Deli delivery service, discusses how in Indian cuisine, there is no plating - the table is laid out with bowls so that people can help themselves. "Our food is served family-style and it's to do with eastern spirituality," she says. "My mother would always say that on every grain of rice, your name is written. It is your destiny to eat that grain of rice." For that reason, she says, the table itself is particularly important, and Khan likes to use a woven silk runner for special occasions. "A perfect table would have something woven and handmade because it reflects the layering of spices in our food."

Step 5: Plating

Every chef agrees that a beautiful dish must have height. Enter Handling's 'Mother' creation, a veritable mountain of salt-baked celeriac, truffled cheese, confit yolk, lime and dates. Sugisaki recommends imagining your dish as a mountain with a spring flowing from it - create height in the centre of your dish then position the garnish and other bits coming towards you like water flowing down the mountain.

Building up a dish with fresh herbs is a good way to gain height while making the food look fresher. But Khan says the one thing you mustn't do is add garnishes that



FAMILY STYLE: [right] Acclaimed chef Asma Khan; [right] dishes at her restaurant Darjeeling Express are all served to share, so visually it's all about the spread



have no relation to the dish, as is often the case with Western interpretations of Indian food. "For me, plating is not about adding random things," she says. "Edible flowers and micro herbs might look pretty but they have no link with the dish or culture. We garnish with red and green chillies, lime and lemon and seasonal herbs like coriander and mint."

Next, create colour contrasts. Bring your beige risotto to life by laying brightly coloured vegetables against it and make sure your main ingredient isn't overpowered by a darker-coloured plate. In Japanese culture, no two colours should be placed next to each other, which is why you'll often see the white fish beside the fatty tuna. On his Valentine's delivery special, Sugisaki is serving a 'chirashi' sushi dish that resembles a beautiful, jumbled Rubik's Cube of colour.

As for where to put the food, the general consensus is the whole dish should sit in the centre of the plate, with a generous border surrounding it. In Japanese cuisine, the trick is to imagine a square in the centre of your round plate, then imagine a circle inside that, and place your food within the smaller circle. "If you use this golden combination, people tend to think of it as beautiful," Sugisaki says.

What of smears, dots, foams and quenelles, which some see as out-dated? ▸

A woven, handmade runner reflects the layering of spices in my food

MOTHER LODGE: [left] Adam Handling outside his restaurant Frog by Adam Handling; his longstanding 'Mother' dish is available in his Hame at-home kits

▸ "These little attentions to detail make food more attractive."

Step 2: Equipment

In every Core at Home kit, which features pre-prepared snacks and a main of Cornish seabass with coastal herbs, Smyth includes a pair of tweezers, some miniature squeeze bottles and a temperature probe, all of which can be used again. "As professional



FAMILY TIES: [above] Luke Selby recently took over the kitchen at Evelyn's Table with his brothers Nat and Theo; [right] a beautiful squid dish from the restaurant

“It’s up to the individual,” says Smyth. “If you feel confident, go for it. There are no rights and wrongs, just different styles. If you want ideas, find a chef who inspires you and try to recreate what they do.”

When it comes to plating sloppier foods like curries and casseroles, it’s all about the bowl, which Khan says should contrast with the colour of the sauce. Handling loves nothing better than a one-pot dish like Lancashire hotpot, plonked at the centre of the table for people to help themselves. Selby spruces up his one-pot meal with garnish, like picked basil on pasta, and uses parchment paper for finger foods. “It keeps it rustic but it’s also practical, like using newspaper for fish and chips.”

Ultimately, don’t try too hard – US chef David Chang produced the Netflix show *Ugly Delicious* on the premise that some food simply ain’t meant for Instagram.

Step 6: Enjoy

If you’re the sort who favours ‘photos first, eat later,’ then use natural light and play with textures on the table. In her book *The New Art of Cooking*, food stylist Frankie Unsworth has heaps of useful tips, like creating a ‘structured mess’ and observing the ‘rule of three,’ where a trio on the plate always trumps four.

“Remember that dinner shouldn’t look like a staged still life, but something delicious you want to dig into, so anything unnecessary and inedible shouldn’t be on the plate at all,” she writes.

Whatever you do, don’t take too long over the photoshoot – it’s important to eat the food before it wilts. “Plating is



Dinner shouldn’t look staged, it should be something you want to dig into

not just about what you put on top,” says Khan. “It’s also about serving it at the right temperature. Like a biryani, when you can inhale the beautiful aroma and the steam is coming from the rice.”

Finally, if you’ve tried everything but your meal still looks unworthy of serving to the dog, don’t despair – Selby says presentation should still come second to flavour. And it’s not necessarily the end result, but rather the thought – and the enjoyment – that counts.

“It’s a case of trial and error, playing with things and seeing what you enjoy,” says Smyth. “Embrace it, enjoy it, get on with it. Food should be fun.”