Igniting a passion
Growing up, Anna was surrounded by food enthusiasts, as sharing meals was the way her family communicated. ‘I’m a vegetarian, my boyfriend is vegetarian, my mum, sister and brother are now all vegan, so we have become quite a veg-loving family – we are probably every restaurant’s nightmare if we go out as a group!’ she laughs.

‘It would be romantic to say I grew up standing next to my mum watching her stir jam pans and cook perfect cakes, but that wasn’t really the case. She was a busy mum of three and although the career of being a chef is given incredible gravitas and respect now, at that time it wasn’t seen as an option.’

For Anna, the moment of realisation struck after reading an article in The Times on the train to work. ‘It was all about being stuck in a rut and how to find out what career you should really be pursuing. It suggested mentally picking up the Sunday newspaper and thinking about which section you automatically turn to first, and for me it was always the restaurant reviews. That moment was an epiphany – I just thought “of course” and it seemed the most obvious thing in the world.’

Anna Jones trained as a chef on Jamie Oliver’s Fifteen programme and now uses her incredible passion for food to champion a fresh style of vegetarian cooking, which she shares in her new book, A Modern Way to Eat.

WORDS: LINDSEY HARRAD
ground-breaking Fifteen training programme, then in its second year back in 2004, which aims to help young people from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve their potential by training them for a career in the food industry. Although, as she admits, she could never say she had a difficult or underprivileged background, her raw talent and enthusiasm shone through at interview.

‘Once I’d read the article and realised what I wanted to do, all the signs told me I had made the right decision. A week later I had quit my job and was enrolled on the Fifteen course, spending all day working with food.’

So, what was it like to train with one of our most famous modern chefs? ‘It was very intense. We worked long hours, but we spent a fair amount of time with Jamie himself as it was the early days of the programme,’ she says. ‘We were paid a small amount, but it was definitely a labour of love. It was learning to cook on fast forward! We were sent away on sourcing trips to Italy, looking at amazing vineyards and going to see pressings of olive oil – it ignited an incredible passion in every single one of us. We had lots of opportunities to cook with Jamie for his friends or high-profile guests such as Prince Charles and Bill Clinton.

Jamie is absolutely as he is when he is on TV, that’s the secret of his success. Everything he does is with complete authenticity; he wears his heart on his sleeve and that’s why people connect with him.’

The Italian way
Anna has not been a life-long vegetarian, and still ate meat and fish while training at Fifteen. She made the transition around six years ago after going on a yoga course and making another life-changing discovery. ‘The instructor recommended not eating meat or fish for the duration of the course, and although I had always eaten a lot of veggie food, when I stopped eating meat and fish completely, almost instantaneously I felt mentally and physically lighter and happier, and without even trying I lost that annoying bit of weight that always seems to hang around,’ she says.

‘I think because food is what drives me and gets me up in the morning, becoming vegetarian made me look at cooking in a new and more creative way. All the building blocks of how I’d learnt to cook were suddenly taken away – that cheffy focus on the protein on the plate had to change – so my cooking just became much more open and fluid.’

Anna admits that, traditionally, vegetarians have had a tough challenge competing in commercial kitchens because, for many years, meat-free cooking just wasn’t taken seriously. ‘My chef training at Fifteen was rather unusual and very rich, so I was really lucky,’ she says. ‘Although I wasn’t veggie myself then, I was taught in an Italian tradition, and they are famously and fantastically brilliant at using vegetables and it’s ingrained in the Italian tradition that you don’t have to include meat to make a meal. But there can be an assumption in this industry that if you’re not interested in nose-to-tail eating or 28-day aged T-bone steaks then you’re not worth your salt as a chef, and I very much felt this prejudice when I first turned vegetarian. But I feel the tide has turned and now I would say that, with a very few exceptions, being vegetarian puts me at an advantage because I get hired for jobs where people want interesting veggie recipes, or jobs where there’s a focus on lighter, brighter eating.’

Leaving the professional kitchen
Although she’s worked in restaurants on and off over the last decade, going to work in a professional kitchen full time doesn’t appeal anymore. ‘I loved the adrenalin and the immediacy of cooking in that environment, but I’m not that good at being told what to do! I found that hierarchy very hard to deal with, and it’s quite a masculine environment too – although the Fifteen kitchen was a complete exception to this – so I just felt there was a more creative way for me to make a living through food. I now use my visual and creative sensibilities in my food styling work, and use my writing skills for developing recipes, so it’s the perfect combination for me.’

As a food stylist, consultant and recipe developer, Anna has worked with restaurants on planning vegetarian menus and also with commercial brands, including Innocent, the smoothie and juice company, which commissioned her to write Hungry?, a cookbook of healthy recipes for families. ‘It was all about getting more of your five-a-day into every single meal rather than just adding an apple or an orange on as an afterthought,’ she says. ‘It had ideas such as grating butternut squash into your carbonara sauce, getting you to be a bit more creative about incorporating vegetables into every meal.

Anna also works with other celebrity chefs such as Henry and Tom Herbert, The Fabulous Baker Brothers. ‘Recently I worked with Antonio Carluccio, the godfather of Italian cooking, and that was an
incredible experience. I had to pinch myself that I was being paid to spend two weeks in Antonio Carluccio’s kitchen and he was teaching me how to make pasta – I was completely star-struck! It’s great working with other chefs, as even though I’ve been cooking for 10 years now, every day I learn something new – a little shortcut, a different combination of flavours – and that’s what I love about working with different people. When you stop learning that’s when you should probably get out of the kitchen.’

A new way of cooking
Her latest project has been her first solo cookbook, A Modern Way to Eat, which explores natural, simple cooking with greens and grains through dishes that harness the flavours and textures of colourful produce to create mouth-watering results – and as you’d expect from a food stylist, the photography is gorgeous too.

‘When I started cooking vegetarian food, I didn’t really feel there was anything already out there that could be my go-to cook book,’ she says. ‘I probably have every vegetarian cookbook in current publication, but I just felt they were either very health-food focused, a bit too much mung beans and hemp trousers (with the greatest respect to anyone who wears hemp trousers and I do actually like eating mung beans!), while on the other hand the really cheffy books seemed too reliant on stodgy pastry or rich cheeses. I decided to carve out a new way of cooking for me, my boyfriend and my family, really focusing on vegetables and pulling back on the heavy carbs and loads of dairy. I started writing down all my recipes, making them for my friends and for people at supper clubs, and eventually put them all into the book.’

Anna spent the early years of her life living in San Francisco, and there’s clearly a Californian influence on her cooking. Inspired by the incredible fresh produce of the Santa Monica food market, she says she’s drawn to the light yet flavourful style of Californian cooking, which is often enhanced by Mexican spices and ingredients. You’ll also find influences from her favourite South Indian cuisine and even a hint of Morocco from the trips she takes over there with her surf-addicted boyfriend.

‘I think the layers of flavour you get from these international cuisines are really important in vegetarian cooking. However, I’m a professional cook and even I find my brain switches off if I open a cookbook and see a list of more than 10 or 15 ingredients – it just looks like too much hard work! So I’ve tried to keep things as simple as possible, while not compromising on building up the flavours.’

Having said that, Anna believes there’s a definite trend for a sophisticated simplicity in British cooking, inspired by a greater confidence in the quality of our local produce. ‘I do think there is a new British vegetarian cooking that’s coming through, which is really fantastic and uses our incredible homegrown produce, making the best of our beautiful cheeses and clean, British flavours.’

In the 10 years since Anna embarked on her new career in food at Fifteen, she says it’s amazing how much attitudes have changed towards vegetarian food. ‘These days when I’m working, while people are often surprised at first to discover that I’m vegetarian, then they can’t get the words out of their mouth fast enough to tell me they’ve cut down on meat lately. That certainly wasn’t people’s reaction even two or three years ago, so it does feel like things have really changed. They are often really excited about sharing their veggie recipes with me or they ask for advice on new things they can cook; there’s a huge interest in eating more veggie food.

‘I feel really excited and enthused that even if people haven’t made a one hundred per cent jump to being vegetarian yet, there is still a massive wave of enthusiasm for eating more vegetables.’

I loved the adrenalin and the immediacy of cooking in that restaurant environment, but I’m not that good at being told what to do!”

ANNA’S RECIPES

Lime and chipotle black bean tacos
I am yet to find anyone who doesn’t love these tacos, and I think that’s because they hit all the spots on flavour, texture and feelgood food. This is probably the supper I make the most – it’s quick and flavoursome, and most of the ingredients sit happily in my larder or can be grabbed from the local corner shop.

It may look as though there are a lot of ingredients and jobs, but this is super-quick, and the only real cooking is gently heating the beans. If I am feeling like eating something particularly virtuous, I swap the tortillas for sturdy leaves of spring greens to wrap everything up in. Sometimes I scatter the seeds of a pomegranate into the salad too, for extra crunch.
Black beans hold a secret, which I love: they are packed with a rare combination of protein and fibre. A cup of black beans can contain as much protein as a 100g serving of chicken, and they have three times more fibre than broccoli. It is a rare combination. Black beans are also packed with the antioxidants found in other dark purple and deep scarlet foods, like blueberries and grapes.

**Serves 4 | Prep 25 mins | Cook 15 mins**

For the beans:
- 2 cloves garlic, peeled and finely chopped
- olive oil
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 1 tsp ground cumin
- 1 tsp chipotle paste or 1 red chilli, finely chopped
- 2 x 400g cans black beans
- sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

For the salsa:
- 20 cherry tomatoes
- ½ red chilli, deseeded and finely chopped
- a few sprigs of fresh coriander, leaves picked
- juice of ½ lime
- extra-virgin olive oil

For the guacamole:
- 1 avocado
- juice of ½ lime

For the crunch salad:
- 1 small apple
- juice of ½ lime
- a few leaves of white cabbage or a little gem lettuce
- 4 radishes
- a few sprigs of fresh coriander

To serve:
- 6–8 wheat or corn tortillas
- handful of grated vegetarian Manchego-style cheese
- natural, soya or coconut milk yogurt (optional)

1 Heat a frying pan on a medium heat, then add the garlic and a splash of olive oil and cook for a minute or so, until the edges of the garlic begin to just brown. Add the cinnamon, cumin and chipotle paste or chilli and stir for another minute to gently toast the spices.

2 Add the beans and their liquid, bring to a simmer, then turn the heat down and cook for 10–15 minutes, until the liquid has thickened but the beans are
still holding their shape. If you need to, add a little hot water to loosen. Season with salt and pepper and keep warm.
3 While the beans are cooking you can get on with the other jobs. To make your salsa, chop the tomatoes roughly on a big board. Pile the chilli and coriander on top, season with salt and pepper and chop all this together. Scrape into a bowl, add the lime juice and a splash of olive oil and mix well. Set to one side.
4 To make the guacamole, peel the avocado, remove the stone, and mash in a bowl with a little salt and pepper and the lime juice. You can use a potato masher if you like.
5 Now for the salad. Chop the apple into little shards and put them into a bowl. Squeeze over the lime juice, add the shredded cabbage or lettuce, radishes and coriander, season with salt and pepper and drizzle over a little oil.
6 Once everything is ready, heat your tortillas. I do this by holding them with tongs over the flame of my gas hob – it’s super-quick and gives a delicious charred taste – but the oven will do just fine.
7 Put the beans, salad, guacamole and salsa in separate bowls on the table, along with the tortillas and grated cheese, and let everyone make their own. Don’t forget the chilli sauce, and sometimes a little yogurt works well too.

**The really hungry burger**

I had a little fight with myself over this recipe. Does a veggie burger have a place in a modern book about vegetarian food? Something about veggie burgers feels a bit ‘nut-roast-at-brightly-painted-café-wearing-hemp-trousers’. However, my love of eating tortillas is another favourite, but feel free to improvise and try it your own way.

Make sure that you are not the breaded sweetcorn and mushroom mush excuse that usually shows up between two white buns. This is a hearty health-packed wonder that makes no apology to anyone. I’ve played around with a lot of recipes before settling on this one, some full of bright herb freshness and grated veg, some packed with protein-rich tofu, and all were good, but what I look for in a burger is a deep moreish flavour, savoury and complex, so this is the one.

**Makes 8 burgers | Prep 20 mins + chilling**

**Cook 20 mins**

- 8 big portobello mushrooms, roughly chopped into little bits
- a few sprigs of fresh thyme, leaves picked
- sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 400g can white beans, haricot or cannellini, well drained
- 4 fat medjool dates, pitted
- 2 cloves of garlic, peeled and finely chopped
- 3 tbsp tahini
- 2 tbsp soy sauce or tamari
- 100g cooked and cooled brown rice
- grated zest of 1 unwaxed lemon

**To serve:**

- 1–2 avocados, peeled and sliced
- tomato relish or ketchup
- pickled cucumber (see opposite)
- a few handfuls of spinach leaves
- 8 seeded burger buns (I use wholemeal ones)

1 Get a large pan on a medium heat and add a splash of olive oil. Once the pan is good and hot, add the mushrooms and thyme and season with salt and pepper. Fry on a good heat until the mushrooms have dried out and are slightly browned, then set to one side and leave to cool.
2 Next, drain the white beans and put them into a food processor with the dates, garlic, parsley, tahini and soy sauce. Pulse until you have a smoothish mixture, then transfer to a bowl and add the rice, breadcrumbs, lemon zest and the cooled mushrooms. Mix well, then put into the fridge for 10 minutes or so to firm up.
3 Once cooled, divide the mixture into 8 portions and shape into 8 patties. Place them on a baking tray lined with baking paper and pop into the fridge until needed. (This can be done the day before – and the burgers freeze well at this point.)
4 Preheat the oven to 230C/fan 210C/gas 8 and bake the burgers for 15 minutes, until nicely brown. If you like cheese on your burger, pop a slice on top a couple of minutes before they come out of the oven.
5 While your burgers are cooking, get your tortillas ready. I go with avocado, tomato relish and a quick cucumber pickle, plus a few spinach leaves. Hummus, grated carrot and sprouts is another favourite, but feel free to improvise and try it your own way.
6 Once the burgers are golden, toast your buns and layer up your burgers. I like to serve them with sweet potato fries. You can’t beat a burger and chips, and these ones are as healthy as they are tasty.

**COOK’S TIP** I use brown rice here, but any cooked grain you have will do – quinoa, pearl barley and farro all work well.

**PER SERVING**

- 785 cals, fat 30g, sat fat 6.5g,
- carbs 96.5g, sugars 13.5g, protein 32.5g, salt 1.6g, fibre 12.5g

**If cheese is a must-have, choose a vegan cheese, or simply serve without. Pick one of Anna’s vegan yogurt substitutes if you’re going for yogurt as an optional serving ingredient.**
**QUICK PICKLED CUCUMBER**
Thinly slice a quarter of a cucumber and pop it into a bowl with a pinch of salt, a squeeze of honey and a good tablespoon of white wine vinegar, then scrunch together and leave to sit while you make your burgers. A homemade quick pickle that beats a gherkin any day!

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**Tomato and coconut cassoulet**

This delicious recipe brings together so many of my favourite things. Sticky roasted tomatoes, the soothing creaminess of coconut milk and sweet little white beans, topped with a crust of sourdough bread. Don’t be put off by the coconut milk – it adds a gentle creamy note and brings everything together (the rest can be frozen and used in a curry another day).

If fresh tomatoes are not at their best, a second tin of chopped tomatoes will do just fine. In the winter I swap the basil for some thyme too. I like to cook my own beans, but I sometimes use a decent jar of Spanish cooked beans – tinned will work too, but I find the jarred ones are cooked with more care.

**Serves 6 | Prep 10 mins | Cook 45 mins**

- olive oil
- 1 leek, washed, trimmed and roughly sliced
- 1 clove garlic, peeled and finely chopped
- 1 red chilli, deseeded and finely chopped
- 1cm-thick piece of fresh ginger, the size of a 50p piece, peeled and roughly chopped
- sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 400g can chopped tomatoes
- 4 tbsp coconut milk
- 400g jarred haricot beans, drained, or 400g can, drained
- 500g vine or cherry tomatoes, halved
- a bunch of fresh basil
- 4 slices of sourdough bread

1. Preheat the oven to 200C/fan 180C/gas 6.
2. Heat an ovenproof pan on a medium heat and add a slosh of oil. Throw in the leeks, garlic, chilli and ginger and a pinch of salt and pepper, then turn the heat down and cook for 10 minutes, until the leeks are soft and sweet.
3. Next, add the canned tomatoes, coconut milk and beans and simmer for a couple of minutes, then take off the heat. Check the seasoning, and add a little more salt and pepper if needed.
4. Scatter over the fresh tomatoes, followed by the basil, then tear the slices of bread into chunks and push them into the gaps between the tomatoes. You are looking for a covering of tomatoes and chunks of bread.
5. Drizzle the lot with olive oil and pop it into the oven for 30 minutes, until the tomatoes have shrunk and sweetened and the bread is crisp and golden. Allow to sit for a few minutes before piling on to plates with a lemony green salad.

| PER SERVING | 225 cals, fat 9g, sat fat 3.5g, carbs 26g, sugars 7.5g, protein 8g, salt 2g, fibre 7g |

Recipes adapted from *A Modern Way to Eat* by Anna Jones (Fourth Estate, £25).