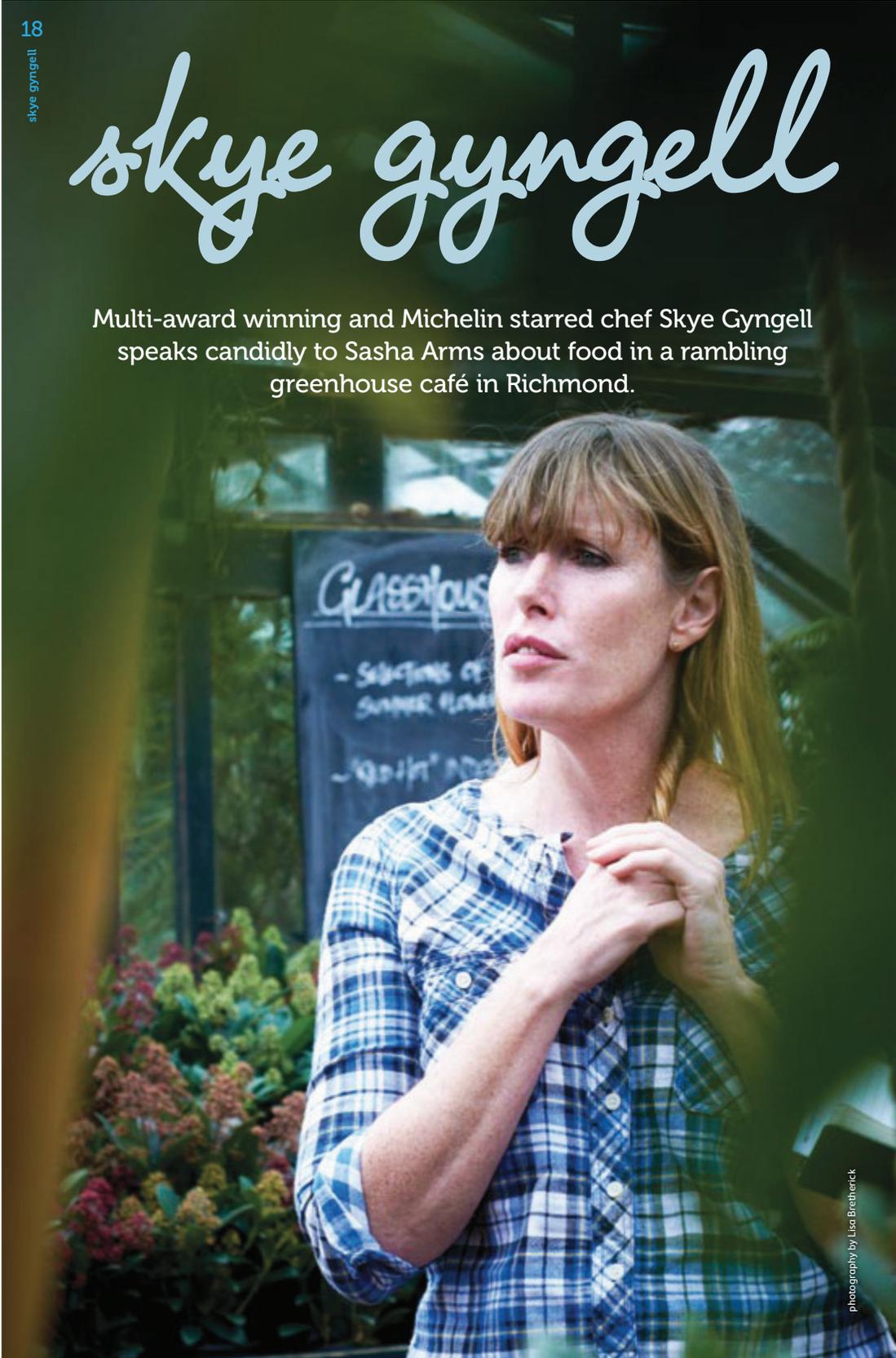


skye gyngell

Multi-award winning and Michelin starred chef Skye Gyngell speaks candidly to Sasha Arms about food in a rambling greenhouse café in Richmond.





"You should have seen the state of my kitchen this morning!" Skye Gyngell exclaims as we sit down to a coffee in Petersham Nurseries' greenhouse café. "I can't seem to keep my kitchen tidy, and I can't get my daughters to either." Such a ready admission of having a less than ordered culinary space at home is not the expected confession of a chef with a Michelin star. Candid, charismatic, and quietly magnificent at what she does, it's quickly apparent that this is Skye simply being herself. Forget the stuffy, starched and staunchly testosterone-filled restaurants that used to be the space of Michelin-worthy chefs: food snobbery is set to be a thing of the past, if Skye Gyngell has something to do with it anyway.

Despite being the daughter of media legend Bruce Gyngell, not once do you get the impression that Skye is putting on a show. Constantly eager to please, this character trait almost saw Skye sitting behind a desk in a legal practice rather than in a kitchen. "I studied law at university. Can you imagine that? Me? Practising law? I don't even know what 'practising law' means!" Clearly used to her self-deprecation, Skye's colleague reminds her that getting into law school is no mean feat. Skye nods begrudgingly. "The thing is, I did it for my parents. Neither my brother nor sister finished their studies - I would have felt bad if I'd done that to them too."

photography by Lisa Bretherick

It's pretty lucky for London's food scene that she ended up following her heart anyway. "While I was at university, I started working as a kitchen porter for some extra money. Then slowly they showed me how to make things like mayonnaise and pastries. I started feeling very comfortable

in the kitchen environment and confident for the first time ever." As a result, Skye found herself in La Varenne in Paris to complete her training before she was even twenty. Prior to moving to London, she worked for free in a Parisian restaurant. "I was frozen with fear for a year," Skye recounts, visibly shuddering. "Me and thirty Frenchmen in a kitchen in a foreign land..." In London, Skye went on to work at The French House and The Dorchester, before taking some time out of the kitchen. "I think a lot of chefs take some time out at some point. It's an overwhelming, high stress job and working 70 hour weeks isn't sustainable. I thought I would never return to the kitchen again at that point in time."

"I was frozen with fear for a year. Me and thirty Frenchmen in a kitchen in a foreign land..."

Those who see Skye as being serendipitously fortunate are misguided; she's battled addictions and brought up two daughters, sometimes as a single parent, all while carving out a successful career in the demanding arena of cuisine. For those who rate chefs by their celeb clientele, Skye can boast (not that she ever would) at having cooked for Madonna, Mick Jagger, Charles Saatchi, Stella McCartney and Mario Testino, to name but a few.

She was only coaxed back into the restaurant kitchen again when a too-good-to-be-true offer came along. For many chefs of Skye's



calibre, such an offer might come in the form of heading up a team of world class chefs at a multi-million pound restaurant in the centre of town. But Skye's too-good-to-true offer came in the form of saving Petersham Nurseries. Bought by socialites and next door neighbours Gael and Francesco Bogle, who wanted to save the nursery from developers and multinational garden centres, Skye was offered the opportunity to help them turn it into a viable business by taking on the teahouse.

"I personally think you either love Petersham for what it is, or you find it irritating."

"It wasn't even a café, just a blackboard menu with seating for a handful of people," Skye recalls. "More and more people started to respond to it and we bought more tables and cutlery as we went along." The unplanned growth is most certainly part of the charm of Petersham Nurseries. Rickety 'antique' garden furniture, most of which is for sale, litters unkempt, jungle-like greenhouses adorned with



bamboo shutters, battered folding screens and all manner of foliage and plant life. The recently renovated kitchen is in a shed-like structure and cost £28,000 to remodel. "West End kitchens cost £1.5 million!" Skye exclaims.

Indeed, it's clear that Skye is about as straightforward as you can get. Often commenting on the glitz and polish of central London restaurants, she's very clear about what defines Petersham Nurseries. "It's just food here. Home cooking, I like to call it," she says, ingloriously. "We just turn up the volume of food a notch,



photography by Lisa Bretherick



that's all." Skye is also adamant about supporting small producers and paying well at all times. "Farming can't be sustained in this country if everyone pays producers at the same rates as the big supermarkets. I'm not embarrassed by the price of our food and I won't apologise for it." Typically to the point, Skye is the first to say that the food is expensive (starters begin at around £12 each; mains can be more than £30), but that doesn't stop people coming in droves.

"Since we got the Michelin star, we've started to see a different kind of visitor come along too, the types who are used to eating in Michelin starred restaurants," Skye proclaims. "I personally think you either love Petersham for what it is, or you find it irritating. The floors are gravelly and uneven and the bathrooms are in sheds. It's not to everyone's taste. But we never set out to get a Michelin star; we just wanted to not lose money!"

photography by Lisa Bretherick



twitter.com/foodieuk // november 2011

Talking about her style of cooking, Skye customarily makes it sound low key. "I used to love helping out in the kitchen when I was growing up in Australia, but we ate simply. I think that's why I cook simply now." She's reluctant to pay herself any more credit than that, but Skye is widely hailed for the depth of flavour involved in her dishes and her 'tool box' approach that she introduced in her first book. She describes her cooking as having layer upon layer of different 'notes' that make a whole. But she's quick to point out that "your palate is your palate – you're not wrong if you don't like a certain food or flavour."

"Food's our life
and we'd be pretty
screwed at Petersham
if it wasn't."

Humble and homely, Skye Gyngell and Petersham Nurseries are an absolutely intertwined entity. Not only are they helping to steer the Michelin guide away from only fine and formal dining, they are staying true to good food, local roots and their own way of doing things. Skye also sees a stark difference between her role at Petersham and those who come along to enjoy the food. "I think a foodie is someone who is on



a quest for knowledge about food – the recipient of good food." So would Skye call herself a foodie? "No, of course not! Food's our life and we'd be pretty screwed at Petersham if it wasn't, but I'm not a foodie." That's Skye - truly our forthright Australian chef, who just happens to have a Michelin star - right to the end. "I mean, my food gets a whole lot simpler when I'm home. It's like if you're a bank manager...you don't want to go home at the end of the day and count money, do you?" 

Petersham Nurseries
www.petershamnurseries.com





Recipe

A recipe by Skye Gungell for Foodie London readers.

pickled pumpkin with burrata

This recipe makes a large batch of pickled pumpkin which can be served with other dishes later, such as slow cooked veal, or tossed through a warm salad of lentils and warm chorizo.

SERVES  x 4

PREPARATION TIME 35 minutes

COOKING TIME 1 hour

INGREDIENTS

- + 2kg small pumpkin, sliced in fine wedges (skin on)
- + 220g caster sugar
- + 200ml red wine vinegar
- + 750ml verjuice or white wine
- + 3 bay leaves
- + 2 tsp coriander seeds
- + 1 tsp fennel seeds
- + small bunch lemon thyme
- + 1 red chilli, chopped into chunks

SALAD

- + small bunch of marjoram (leaves only)
- + few drops of lemon juice
- + 50ml extra virgin olive oil
- + 8 slow roasted tomato halves
- + 1 burrata
- + 4 tsp aged balsamic vinegar
- + sea salt and black pepper

METHOD

- 1** Put all the ingredients for the pickled pumpkin, except the pumpkin itself, into a heavy wide based pan. Place over a low heat to allow the sugar to dissolve, stirring once or twice, then turn up the heat slightly to encourage the flavours to merge and get to know each other.
- 2** Place the pumpkin slices in the simmering pickling liquid. Turn the heat down as low as possible and poach very gently for 45 minutes until the pumpkin is tender to the bite – it should taste sweet and sour. Allow to cool in the syrup, then lift out the pumpkin into sterilised jars. Strain the pickling liquor and pour over the pumpkin. Seal and store in a cool dark place or the fridge. It will last a good few weeks.
- 3** For the salad, using a pestle and mortar, gently pound the marjoram with a small pinch of salt to a rough paste. Sprinkle over the lemon juice, add the extra virgin olive oil and stir well to combine. Taste the dressing for seasoning, adding a little pepper.
- 4** Arrange the pumpkin slices and slow roasted tomatoes on serving plates and spoon over the burrata. Drizzle the herb dressing over the salad and trickle over the balsamic vinegar. Serve. 

Visit Foodie London's blog for Skye Gungell's slow cooked belly of pork recipe: www.foodie-magazine.com/london