

# USING NUTRITION TO FEED THE MIND



After a brain tumour halted his career, John Lawson, a chef who has worked with the likes of Raymond Blanc and Gordon Ramsay, now puts health at the heart of his food. **Louise Wates** found out how he mixes nutrition with high-end cuisine, and how he got Blanc on board for charity

In 2015, John Lawson had his own high-end restaurant at the Crown Plaza in Melbourne, Australia. Three years on, after being treated for a slow-growing, cancerous brain tumour, he is back home in Essex where he grew up, creating food concepts, cooking gluten- and dairy-free tasting menus, and planning *Brain Food* — an event to raise money and awareness for Brain Tumour Research Campaign — the star attraction for which is Raymond Blanc, a former boss who readily came on board to give his support.

Drinking coffee in a corner of the little restaurant (Lawson has one coffee a day and has waited for me to arrive to have it) I ask if he has a big kitchen, imagining what it might be like to work with someone like Blanc. “No,” he laughs. “Things will get quite spicy!”

As we sit and chat, Lawson apologises when he has to occasionally get up to receive a parcel or delivery of local produce. “I’ve always loved that whole idea,

after working for Raymond Blanc, of using produce that is grown as close as possible. It is so important for the environment,” he says.

Once or twice a local pops their head through the door to call out “Hello chef!”.

“People are friendly here,” he smiles.

It is hard to imagine that Lawson was so ill, and so recently. He looks fit and well, and his eyes sparkle with enthusiasm when he talks. Later when I ask him what he thinks when he looks in the mirror, he says: “I see that I’m the healthiest that I’ve ever been!”

**“... long hours, you’re working late nights, you don’t look after yourself. You just think ‘I’ll be fine’”**

Twice a month he consults a nutritionist who has been working with him on his diet. His tumour could come back at any time, so these days he is on a ketogenic diet (typically high-fat, medium-protein, low-carbohydrate) which is used to treat epilepsy in children and has been investigated as a means to improve outcomes in patients with brain tumours.

Returning to England and opening his restaurant in Leigh-on-Sea has meant a completely new start. In Australia, he says, he was the “luckiest man” there. “At the age of 28 I got offered a restaurant at the Crown Casino with my name on it.” Within a year it had been awarded a Chef Hat — the equivalent of a Michelin star. Nutrition, he says, wasn’t something that he thought of much. “Slightly” maybe.

“I’d never been interested in [nutrition], to be honest with you. I always enjoyed eating healthy food but I was quite big... I was doing what any chef does. I was working long hours, you’re working late

## INTERVIEW

nights, you don't look after yourself. You just think 'I'll be fine.'" But, he says, it caught up with him. "I got diagnosed, and when I was in recovery I got a lot of time to think."

Illness made Lawson realise that he didn't want to live as he had done before his diagnosis. "I worked out what I wanted to do and I started reading lots and lots of books on gut health and how the gut talks to the brain... I learnt so much during that time, I became obsessed with nutrition and kind of geeked out on the whole thing.

"And then I went back to my restaurant... I got back and was completely disinterested in what was going on there. I'd created a restaurant and, yes, we were using local produce... I've always been provenance based... but I'd been finding out about macro and micro nutrients and finding out what they do for us, what the benefits are."

Nutrition had become "a whole new mindset, and it was what I wanted to do".

With the food he was used to preparing, however, nutrition had never been a concern. "The idea with high-end food is essentially to make it taste good," he says. When he was at catering college, nutrition was only a small part of the syllabus. "When we're cooking we're not cooking

for nutrition to fuel our guests ... that is not the focal point. The focal point is to make it taste good.

"With tasting menus and Michelin stars you only get the best produce, so generally it is nutritious and healthy — but the focus is not nutrition. The focus is getting accolade, getting a Michelin star, how to be on trend with everyone else. I've worked in Michelin star restaurants, but I didn't want to do that anymore. I wanted to do it my way."

But incorporating nutrition into his cuisine and cutting out typical ingredients such as gluten, sugar and dairy meant a new approach and doing some research.

"If you take cream, for instance, a creamy sauce, how can I do that without dairy but with that same consistency? So we use cashews to make a cashew cream. It's not the same, but I actually prefer it. And we do a butter here — I actually think grass-fed butter is really good for us — but we have a lot of vegans and a lot of people with dietary requirements, so I wanted to create a butter that everyone is happy with."

The butter they make, he explains, has a fermented cashew cream as a base, which is created with a vegan starter. "It's been a work in progress," he says. "It's delicious and it has no dairy in it. We did make

our own butter but it was easier to make something that everyone could eat."

The restaurant's tasting menus are also low in carbohydrate. "It's above the ground carbs [i.e. vegetables], they're low carbs, there's no starches... we don't do that. Guests leave here not stuffed, they leave here happy. I believe that is how we should be eating when we are having a tasting menu. We should be fulfilled when we leave, not stuffed.

"I'm still learning so much. I just find that is so good for me... as far as me cooking and me personally, as far as my brain changing and learning, becoming strong, getting over what I went through, all that is so important."

But although this is his vision, he doesn't believe it is his place to tell the young chefs who work for him how to think about food. Yet he hopes that his approach inspires them.

"We sit down and eat dinner before we start service; it's always healthy, it's always got the right things in there to be fuelling our bodies." Much of the conversation over dinner, he says, is also about food and health. "They're not as obsessed as me — but I'm not asking them to be!" Saying that, he adds that none of his staff would bring something like a fizzy drink into the



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restaurant.

Despite his desire to create healthy food, however, Lawson says that this is not the focus of the restaurant. “People dine in here and don’t know it’s about health,” he says. “That’s what I love. I’m not telling everyone this is a healthy restaurant. I don’t want it to be in everyone’s face.”

But he does believe that the public should be able to eat healthily. “We should be feeding people the right food. Chefs should be educated on health and nutrition — they’re not, they should be. We should be taught [nutrition] because we are feeding the public.

“People are just getting sick, more autoimmune diseases, cancer...” Food, however, he believes, is part of the answer.

To spread awareness, Lawson holds ticketed talks and masterclasses aimed at the public. “We do this so we can help to educate people on this almost epidemic of bad food culture we have across the UK and generally across the world.”

So in addition to talks on what might be considered typically cheffy subjects such as fish or wine, talks have also included looking at sugar or fats, or using nutrition to support recovery from cancer.

“We get a lot of questions, so I have a nutritionist there as well. Sometimes we

have people there who might have cancer, or who have had a loved one pass away from cancer and they don’t want to go down the same road. So when it comes to the question and answer time I need a nutritionist to answer these questions.

“I’m not an expert, I don’t claim to be an expert — I’m a chef. But I love these kinds of environments because they breed education, questions and learning.”

Lawson hopes that *Brain Food*, at the end of October, which has now sold out, will raise awareness as well as money for charity.

For a price of £150 per person, diners will taste a four-course meal prepared by Blanc, Lawson, and Lawson’s chefs Robin Gill and Ollie Dabbous, with wine matched to each course.

To have Blanc on board, he says, “is just incredible”. He worked with Blanc for three and a half years a long time ago and hadn’t been in contact for 12 years. But when Lawson contacted his former boss, Blanc said he would be there.

As a fund-raising, it’s certainly a far cry from the typical cake-offs that most of us are used to when it comes to raising money for charity. As sugar is increasingly being associated with diseases such as type 2 diabetes and cancer, the irony of cake and

coffee mornings to raise money for health-related charities is not lost on Lawson.

“Most of the time it’s horrendous what’s being offered in these fund-raisers, because they’re not healthy at all!” he says. Yet, he adds, it isn’t impossible to do it more healthily.

“Coffee’s not bad, you can have tea... nice teas...” Using processed sugar and then flour which breaks down to sugar, he says, isn’t so good for us. “There’s plenty of things you can do to make it a little bit healthier.

“It’s quite nice — especially if it’s something like a celebration or charity — to have a cake; then let’s go down the route of having something like raw brownies or raw cacao cakes rather than a processed or refined sugar cake, which is raising our blood sugar horrendously and not doing anyone any good. There’s loads of options — just google it. There’s so many recipes for everything.”

He doesn’t think anyone needs to be a chef to eat well, because the information is out there. When it comes to health, he says he is hopeful for the future. And in the meantime, he hopes that he can also inspire others to eat well and for better health.

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