



Chef Life After Cancer



Chef John Lawson shares his personal journey on his recovery after being diagnosed with a brain tumour

When it happened, it was a shock. Waking up in hospital and being told I had a brain tumour wasn't what I'd expected to hear. The day before I had been living my life; at the height of my career, working in a prestigious restaurant it the largest hotel in Australia, I had my first chef hat (Michelin Star) and was working towards my second. I was an ambassador for Moët Chandon and so much more. I, very quickly, became a brain tumour victim. What I didn't realise then was how my life would change.

After the biopsy and then the removal of the tumour, I spent three months in rehab. Following discharge, I initially felt free, no longer an inmate in hospital, I was able to walk and talk and I was grateful. But really my recovery had only just begun.

It was or rather it is a slow

growing tumour, so it can come back at any time. This, I found hard to deal with. People kept on saying how good I looked, and I did. I was eating super healthy food to aid my recovery, I had lost weight, exercising daily and the staples in my head from the operation has been removed - I looked amazing!

When someone breaks a leg and is walking around with a limp we have sympathy, we make allowance for them being slower, we offer them our chair, we understand they cannot walk as far as us. We can see they are not the same. No one could see my injury, all they saw was this healthy, fit version of me. I looked better and so everyone assumed that I was.

I suffered brain damage because of a bleed on the brain during the biopsy, coupled with the removal

of the mass. I was far from recovered. At one point I could not even make a cup of tea, chop a carrot or fry an egg. Being a chef who couldn't cook was hard for me to deal with. Luckily the cooking part of my memory came back. I have been left with long term brain damage and it's been the hardest part of my recovery, trying to learn to live with it.

Like others who've experienced what I have, I've developed new strategies and tactics to help me function. The mass was located in the front left area of the brain, which is responsible for problem solving, meaning I find it hard now to solve problems. I'm not as sharp as I used to be, I have to sound out my reasoning and take my time to think around situations. My memory is damaged, meaning that I have to write everything down so as not

to forget. I can only do one thing at a time and listen to one person talking to me about one subject, any more than that and I feel lost.

To begin with, I was confused and frustrated by my injuries. I was annoyed with myself, always wondering "why can't I do it?? Why can't I rise to that challenge and execute it like before?"

Time healed and helped me to understand. I became more understanding on my own capabilities and forgiving of myself if I made a mistake. I started to learn to live with it and adapt. I would not be beaten by this but equally I was not the same anymore. I could not handle the same stressful kitchen environment, so working as hard as I had been previously was no longer an option.

I read lots of books to help overcome my injuries and understand my condition, I researched and studied. That would be my one piece of advice to anyone living life after cancer, really try to understand it. There are other people out there going through something similar and talking about your experience

really does help. I accepted support, the support and love from my family and friends. I needed them to help me and they wanted to help. With their support I was able to take time to think and find my path.

Running a large kitchen for a large corporate company was not good for my health and simply wasn't going to work for the new me. From my research, I understood how much stress had played its part in my brain tumours development. I had to reduce the stress in my life to ensure that the growth didn't continue.

Cheffing is a huge passion of mine and I wasn't willing to let that go. I was a chef before my injury and I wanted to stay that way, but I wanted to be a different type of chef. I wanted to be a chef who cooked and served beautifully plated dishes of healthy food, not churn out dishes rich in sugar and bad fats. I decided that I had to try and help other people understand the importance of health and food as well as the connection between what we eat and how we feel.

As soon as I made that decision, I knew I was on the right path. It

was no longer about the money and the prestige, I wanted to do something more fulfilling. I opened a small, 26 cover restaurant in my home town of Leigh-on-Sea so I could be near the support of my family. We open four days a week, so that I get the right work / life balance needed to continue on my path to recovery, and my staff enjoy a richer balance also. We only cook and serve healthy food, we educate our guests and provide talks and workshops which focus upon healthy living and living well balanced lifestyle.

My restaurant became my recovery. It's a dream come true really. From something terrible, I've taken away a huge positive. I've designed a working life which suits me and the needs of my health, and I love sharing and educating people through my food.

John's recommended books: Living Low Grade by Gideon Burrows; The Mind Gut Connection by Emeran Mayer

Learn more about John Lawson at www.chefjohnlawson.com

