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May 5, 2022 -

As told to Elle Nash, 3007 words.

Tags: Food, Business, Success, Process, Beginnings, Money, Creative anxiety.

# On finding the thing that gets you out of bed in the morning

Chef Graeme Cheevers discusses finding the thing you love, dealing with bad reviews, and why even after being awarded multiple Michelin Stars he's still not satisfied.

**What did you do when you were a teenager and what was your career path toward being a chef?**

I got to a point in high school when I was like 13, 14 where I didn't want to be there anymore. I wasn't a bad child; I just couldn't apply myself to it, I didn't like it. So I decided to go to college when I was 15, and that's when I chose to do cooking.

I started working in restaurants around Glasgow, from a young age, not having any weekends or social life or friends. Then I started working in high-end restaurants, a bit of traveling to the States and Europe, came back to Scotland. Recently I was working in a hotel in Oban, up the west coast, so I was there for a year and then came back to being here.

**It's different in the UK with schooling, right? You choose quite early what kind of vocation that you want to start on.**

I think when you're about 13 you get to decide what studies you want to take and drop the other ones out. So not everybody has to do the exact same thing. I tried to choose cooking in school, but there wasn't enough people in my year group that wanted to do it, so they didn't have a class. That's when they said, "Why wouldn't you just go to college and do it?"

**When did you know for sure you wanted to get into fine dining?**

I was always interested in the finer details than just throwing out food in a pub. So I worked in an Italian restaurant first. It was one of my first jobs. I also just thought about the bigger picture of life and why be one of a hundred restaurants in Glasgow or Scotland when you could be one of your own and be a lot better. If I was going to do something, I wanted apply myself to it properly.

**When did you know that you wanted to specifically own your own restaurant?**

I've been in the industry for 18 years now, so I think after 10, 15 years you get to the point where you don't want to work for someone else anymore. My friend used to own [the space] before me and I'd been looking at it for a few years, but never had the guts to do it.

**What stopped you when you had been looking at it for a while?**

The financials part of it. And being scared. Just having a fear of failure. I wasn't that confident a person when I was younger. I'm more confident when I'm in the kitchen, when I'm cooking. That's where I find my home.

**That's how I feel with writing, too. Where sometimes I'm just like, "I'm not good at anything else." It's a part of me. I just don't try other things because I think, "I know I'm good at this."**

If you know you're bad at it, don't try. I think I was more creative in the mind. Another fear was doing the business side of things. I just wanted to cook at that point and create dishes and create food and not have to sit and do stuff on a computer, or paperwork or running the money side of things. That put me off

as well. And then the pandemic came along and that was my little spark up.

**Can you talk a little bit about the process of working under other people? Did you ever deal with difficult personalities?**

Kitchens are like a babysitter. Most of the people in the kitchen aren't quite right, they've got some problems or they've had a hard life or they're in it because they just fell into it, they didn't choose to be in it. So most of them have, I don't know, mental health problems, physical problems, some of have got a lot of family or financial problems, from broken backgrounds.

I was given a head chef job when I was quite young and I was running a Michelin Star restaurant when I was 23. So I had a lot of people around me that were a lot older, but kind of less mature, less focused, and had more problems. I was only cooking maybe for eight or nine years as a lower level chef and then I was kind of forced into a management job.

You always find challenging people in the kitchen. Everyone's a challenge. But generally when you enter the higher level of cooking it encourages more positivity and people to be more mature and more focused.

**Did you work with the goal in mind of gaining a Michelin Star?**

When I was younger, I was more money-oriented. A lot of that was driven by when I looked at that industry I thought, "Why would you want to be in a minimum wage for the rest of your life? An average chef working in an average restaurant, that's not the life I want." So that encouraged me to go for Michelin Star style food. Not that you'll ever make any more money from doing it, but just at least you'll get more recognition. And it'll be something to get you out of bed in the morning.

**\*\*What are some things you've done to really push yourself to gain the kind of reputation and recognition that you want? \*\***

I've just worked hard. It's the truth. I've just worked too much and sacrificed too much. Not too much. Just sacrificed a lot of things, but it's because my happiest place is in the kitchen. It's not a case of I've done anything extreme or special, I've just cooked what I thought was good food and made nice dishes and sourced the ingredients.

**How did you develop your taste?**

Because of my mom's bad taste. I think when I was younger, I didn't entirely enjoy food, when I was maybe in primary school. And then when I got older, I just developed that palate and I remember tasting something in a restaurant and thinking, "I want to be able to do that." And that motivated me to do it. I think, it sounds really stupid, but it's more natural for me. It's like other people, I think, really struggle to get something tasty whereas I think about the whole process. And then when it's on the plate, it tastes a lot better than maybe somebody next to me, without being arrogant or cocky. I'm just obsessed by what I'm doing.

**Do you ever struggle with having that feeling?**

No, I quite enjoy it. I think I've got an addictive personality, when I like something, I really like it and I can't stop doing it. Or I just don't do it at all. So it's all or nothing.

**When you are thinking about a specific dish, do you have a foundation that you go off of?**

I think the creative part is more about what's in season. What's the best thing I can get my hands on. And how can I make it nice, but not scare the customer?

**How so?**

Don't have too many flavor combinations that are a bit wild or crazy, which I quite like sometimes. But I think, especially in Scotland right now, the palate's a little bit simpler. If I cook something a bit wild or I cook something really simple, I think the simple thing always has better feedback. Less is more. It's really hard to make it simple. So what I usually do is design the dish, and I probably take away quite a lot of it and just leave what's left, if that makes sense. Try not to over-complicate it.

**Do you ever get burnt out?**

Every Sunday night I'm burnt out. I suppose there's always times when you work too much. I think opening here, the time after Christmas, when we had a holiday was something I really needed because I'd worked for about a year solid. Because we built the place over the course of maybe eight months and we were open for six months. I was constantly working seven days a week, coming in on my days off, sorting things.

It's really easy to get burned out in this industry, 18 hour days, five days a week. But the industry's moving away from it now, people are going four day weeks. And a lot of chefs now want a more work life balance, which is understandable. But I think that's why I've been successful because I actually enjoy working the amount of hours and having not much life outside of work apart from the two hours when you go home.

**How do you recharge when you're like, "I need to rest," but you know that you can't because you're like,**

**"I have to keep working"?**

Just trying to eat healthy and sleep as much as you can but obviously it's limited in this industry. I think it's easier at this end of the scale because you need to stay motivated, especially with what I've presented here, the whole kitchen's on show. If you're run down you've got to put on a brave face if you're not feeling up for it.

**What do you think is the hardest part about the work that you do?**

The hardest part about cooking is probably the hours and the lack of time for anything else in your life.

**How do you overcome your fears when you have them? Like, for example, just deciding to actually take the plunge with your own restaurant.**

I think it gets to a stage where you worry about how long you've got left in life. So you start thinking, "Well, it's now or never." There's a lot of fear doing this, but then I thought, "You know what? If it doesn't work, it doesn't work." You just got to do it. Got to try it. At that point, like I say, I was sick of working for someone else. There's two options, do you go and work for someone else and be unhappy or do you do this and be happy—if it works? And if it doesn't, you're still going to be unhappy, but at least you're not working for someone else. And you can always go away and get another job. There was fear of if I didn't do this particular restaurant, where was the next one? When was it going to be? Would it be a good site? Would it be as good? Would it be what I wanted? So I was forced in the corner of going, "Well, yeah, that is the right thing."

**Do you think about your career in the long term? You specifically, your name as a chef, not just your restaurant, decades from now, do you ever think about the progression of that?**

Sometimes you get the fear that that's the end. That you've reached the end of it. You're not going to progress anymore. And a lot of people don't, a lot of people get one Michelin Star and that's it. Or they don't go on to be any more successful and they just fall by the way. So I think that's why you keep creative because you have a fear of being left behind when other restaurants open or when people change things and you don't change.

**I think all last year during the pandemic, I was watching the *Great British Menu*. I remember them putting sea buckthorn on the menu and the judges just being like, "What is this?" And then also one of them being like, "This is going to be the next big thing." And I remember seeing on your Instagram, a picture of it, so it must've gone off. How do you handle trends when they happen?**

If you look at Glasgow, for instance, if you mentioned herbs 15 years ago, people would be like, "I'm not eating that." So everything used in the right way is nice. I try not to follow too many trends. Sea buckthorn I have used, but not in your face. Each ingredient, as well, if you're using it the right way can be nice regardless of what it is. I prefer classic cooking more, but putting a little twist on it. I think trends just come and go. Whereas I have a particular style which I try and stick along with and it doesn't really veer away too much from that. I don't use too much wild food. I don't do too much fermentation. I'm trying to do more kind of classic French food with slight Japanese influences because that's what I like to eat.

**You are in a profession where what you do is like consistently critiqued as part of the culture. What is it like having food critics come to your restaurant and talk about it?**

We had one recently, which wasn't good at all. Jay Rayner from *Great British Menu* came for dinner one time and just absolutely destroyed us. He had said after the pandemic he wouldn't give bad reviews or bad write ups, but actually we were the first. I knew he didn't like this sort of restaurant or this sort of food. From his plates, it looked like he enjoyed it, but when he posted a review, it was very negative. We actually benefited from the negative review because we had so many customers coming because he wrote a bad review and they came because it was so bad. They just came to see. And actually what they thought was the total opposite. But, that kind of broke my heart. I'm not scared to admit, I had a good cry for two hours.

**That's rough. It's hard to put yourself out there.**

Probably one of the most difficult parts of the job, apart from the business side of it, is making sure every single guest leaves happy. There is always going to be someone that doesn't particularly like something, whether it's the service, the glassware, the crockery, a dish...trying to keep them won over is quite difficult.

**When you're in the process of creating a dish, how do you know when you're successful in it?**

I don't think you do until the customer has it. Some things that I think are really nice, are going to go down really well, go down the complete opposite. You need to wait for feedback because what I think is good might not be 99% of people's perception of good. But usually when I create something, I kind of know how it's going to go down in my head or I know how it's going to taste before I put it on the plate. I just find it generally not too hard, if that makes sense, without being cocky. I think you've done something for so long it becomes a little bit easier.

**Can you talk a little bit about your day to day? What is a day in a life for you, on average?**

On an average day I usually wake up around seven, eight o'clock. We close Monday, Tuesday. So on a Wednesday I try and start before nine. Most of the guys are here before seven. We work all day, we get prepared for lunch, and then at 11 o'clock we try and sit down for some breakfast.

**So does your whole staff eat breakfast together?**

Yeah. And then we work through the day and serve all the customers. Sometimes customers stay all day. I've had guests before that came in for lunch at two o'clock and they were still there at 11 o'clock at night. We try and finish up after lunch at like three, four o'clock. Sometimes that rolls onto five or sometimes there is no break. Then we'll sit down and have some dinner. And we cook dinner for the guests until maybe 11 o'clock. Then we clean the whole place and probably finish around midnight, one o'clock most days. Every day's different. That's another thing I love about this kind of job and industry: it's not going to office every day and just typing the same shit. Every day's a new challenge.

**Let's say there are people out there who are doing something like working in an office right now, but what they want is to start a life more in cooking, what kind of advice could you give for someone attempting to switch careers?**

If you want to work hard and you enjoy being creative and a little bit crazy, make sure you can handle the hours, make sure you can sacrifice things, then you would be okay. I think the type of person that works in an office would never really work in a kitchen unless they are really hating the office. But I think if you've ever went in and done an office job, I think you're a different type of person maybe. I'm not sure, I've never done it.

**I watched something recently, where this chef was profiled and I think he had gotten two or three Michelin Stars or something. And he was like, "I still feel like I'm at the beginning," even when he got his first Star.**

I'm the same. I still feel like I need to get somewhere still. Whereas some people look at me and go, "You should be so happy. You should be..." I think it's just your personality. I've got an addictive personality so you'd always be addicted to it. It's like a drug. Especially if you're driven by something, you'll never be completely happy.

Graeme Cheevers Recommends:

Visiting Unalome (of course)

Listening to a Biffy Clyro track

A cocktail at Kelvingrove cafe

Drive the North coast 500

Eat at Per Se, New York

Name

Graeme Cheevers

Vocation


chef

Fact

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