

# PRIMA DONNA

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I was in a supermarket checkout queue and overheard these two girls talking. "I'm doing a Donna tonight," said one. "Oh yeah, which Donna you doin'?" "The chicken Donna," replied her friend. Donna Hay shrieks in amusement. "And here I am in my jogging pants hoping they don't notice me."

Donna Hay is Australia's most popular cookbook author with close to seven million people - that's a third of the population - reading her weekly newspaper food columns. Her clutch of award-winning books have sold over two million copies worldwide and her eponymous bi-monthly magazine sells 97,000 copies an issue. She is a mate of Jamie Oliver and was offered a job by Martha Stewart. Yet, curiously, in Hay's latest book, *The Instant Cook*, there are no photographs of her. Nor is there a television series.

"I just don't have a gimmick. It's 'sexy Nigella', it's 'knockabout Jamie', and I realised a couple of years ago, 'Oh, my God, I'm gimmickless,'" says Hay in her sugary Australian lilt.

We are sitting in a glaring white studio in the Donna Hay Magazine's office-cum-kitchen in Sydney. Natural light pours in through large windows; drapes of material, bone-china cups and props are stacked in a corner. Three food stylists chop, whizz and stir ingredients which Hay occasionally tastes - "The peanuts need more chopping, too much soy." She seems remarkably laid-back but you sense, glinting under the toffee-brown eyes, a will of steel.

It's 2 November, Melbourne Cup Day, when most Australian offices grind to a halt for champagne lunches and it's traditional for the women to wear posh frocks and hats to work. I had expected Hay to be dolled up, but she's dressed in baggy trousers, a limp black sweatshirt and white sandals. Her hair is pulled back roughly in a ponytail; a single large diamond ring and matching earrings are the only nod to vanity, and wealth.

Since Donna Hay, the brand - a "synergy" of newspaper columns, the magazine and a new range of home-wares - was launched three years ago, Hay's become a publishing phenomenon. Her name is synonymous with a style of New World cuisine that looks like a work of art but is quick and easy to prepare - and tastes delicious. Hay's approach to food has influenced cooks including Delia Smith, and has been copied by rival magazines. As early as 2001, the *New York Times* published a story - "Look Out, Martha Stewart: A Rival From Down Under".

Nonetheless, Hay's ascent has not been without a few tears in the pavlova. The "food Nazis" (her rivals in the food industry), according to Hay, criticise her for being "all style and no substance". Then there's the backlash from former colleagues, in particular from Vanessa Holden. Her former best friend, who jointly launched the magazine with Hay, tells me, "Donna at her core is a control freak."

Hay herself admits she can be "tough" and is a "perfectionist" but says, "In food publishing, if you aren't a perfectionist, then you'll have a short life span. If you're writing recipes, God help you..."

And it's precisely for this reason that Hay, Queen of Simple Cuisine, has made her mark in such a crowded market. The Donna Hay Magazine has subscribers around the globe. In Britain, foodies who can't wait until the latest issue hits the shelves of Harvey Nichols, Harrods or WH Smith, get their copies air-mailed express. And you can understand why. On a cold winter's day, Hay seduces with recipes infused with sun and surf, not to mention fresh tuna and a kilo of prawns.

The jacket of her latest book, *The Instant Cook*, is the colour of pistachio ice cream and feels like a breath of tropical Australia. Filled with classic Mediterranean and British dishes, fused with Asian flavours and then pared down to the essentials, it is, Hay tells me, "about cooking at home, getting a meal on the table for you and your family, or you and your partner, and enjoying time together."

Hay insists on short cuts. She offers a "cheat's Bearnaise sauce" and doesn't bother making pastry (buy puff, she insists). She loves variations on a theme - so tomato pan sauce with veal cutlets can also be whipped up with haloumi and fennel for a vegetarian guest. It's an approach she believes encourages people to be more adventurous.

"As Australians we have created a new way of looking at ingredients, food and cooking in one little bundle. The introduction of all the Asian flavours into that traditional British cuisine is what set everyone alight - that food can have so many levels of flavours - so you can mix lime with chilli and lemongrass," Hay says. "People in the UK get so excited when the sun shines; and Australian food is like sunshine."

The British love-affair with Australian food began as early as 1992 when Sir Terence Conran hired Australian chef John Torode to work at his *Le Pont de La Tour* restaurant (Torode now runs *Smith's of Smithfield*) and fellow Antipodean Martin Webb, who became head chef at *Quaglino's*.

Since then, the wave of Australian chefs heading to Britain has become a tsunami. There's Shane Osborne at *Pied a Terre*, David Thompson at *Nahm* and Christopher Behr who opened *Mju*. Last year, Christine Manfield opened *East@West*. And the duo Ben O'Donoghue, head chef from the *Atlantic Bar & Grill*, and Curtis Stone, now at Sir Terence Conran's *Bluebird Club*, have had a

successful BBC television series, *Surfing the Menu*. But in the 1980s, when Hay started her career, cooking was, "Daggy. So not in."

Hay had grown up by the beach and "playing in dough and cake mix" while her mother, who never liked cooking, cleaned up after her. When her parents retired and took off in a little van around Australia, Hay, by now a teenager, cooked for her two older sisters. Home was the middle-class Sydney suburb of Sutherland Shire, "A freaky place where people don't leave."

Hay escaped to study home economics at college before becoming a freelance food stylist for magazines, books and television, and learning the discipline of perfection - "Sorting through 5,000 ice-cream cones to find 10 perfect ones."

Back then food styling was fussy but Hay took an almost Zen approach. "Most people didn't know how to cook. They'd grown up with working parents, so how on earth were they going to chop the chilli unless you showed them?" she says. "So the style was instructional but also clean and modern."

Hay's break came when she was 24 and began work as food director on *Marie Claire Australia*, when the magazine was launched. She fetches some cuttings of her early *Marie Claire* recipes. The style's evolved but Hay's signature is obvious from the beginning. There's the same simplicity you see in *The Instant Cook*.

By the late 1990s, Hay was travelling backwards and forwards between Australia and the UK working for *Food and Wine* magazine, *Marks and Spencer*, as well as *Marie Claire*, under whose name she wrote four cookbooks. "There was real excitement in the way Australian food was photographed and styled," she recalls.

In 1998, at the launch of her second book to be published in the UK, *Entertaining*, Hay met Jamie Oliver for a drink and realised that she didn't have what it takes to live the life of a celebrity cook. "Everyone gawped. People were listening to our conversation, whispering so they could hear us," she recalls.

In early 2001, she received a call from the producers of Martha Stewart's television show. They invited Hay on to the domestic diva's programme. Hay's eyes blaze as she recounts the story of being taken to Connecticut and meeting Stewart who had, "Everything just the way she wanted it, and the money and the power to do it." (She dismisses Stewart's fall from grace - she is currently in jail after she was prosecuted for insider dealing - as "ludicrous, all about the knives turning".)

While preparing for the show, says Hay, "I was a bit nervous... And then I just felt like someone had

opened a door, but no breeze." Hay arches her back. "I just felt this peculiar presence in the room and I'm not joking, I've never felt it before or since, and as I turned around, she was there. She just has this amazing presence... She's very driven and knows what she wants."

As does Hay. "She's always had a thing about Martha," says Vanessa Holden, who is now creative director for Real Simple magazine in New York. "Donna wants to be her, absolutely. Donna is one of the best food stylists, incredibly hard working, but she doesn't have what Martha Stewart has."

Hay declined a subsequent offer to work for Stewart - "too many rules", and besides, her partner Bill Wilson, "is a farmer, so it wasn't as if he could move and find a new farming job in Manhattan".

Back in Australia, she and Holden negotiated with News Corp to launch Donna Hay, the magazine. By November 2001 the first issue was on the newsstands.

In the vein of Hay's successful cookbooks, *Off the Shelf* and *Modern Classics Book 1 and Book 2*, Donna Hay was an exquisitely photographed publication that looked more like a book than a magazine. "It was unlike any other food magazine because there were only recipes, no restaurant reviews or brand names," says editor, Jana Frawley.

What began as a dynamic team with a family atmosphere in the office, says Holden, ended in a divorce when, after a blazing row between the two women, Holden resigned in July 2003. "Donna was never my boss and that's what drives me crazy. It is a perpetual re-invention of who she is," says Holden. "There is a list of people at least as long as my arm who she has burnt her bridges with."

"I'd like to see the list," replies Hay. "I get busy, I lose contact with people. Vanessa and I worked really well together, but I couldn't change that this was the Donna Hay Magazine, and not the Donna and Vanessa magazine," she adds.

After Holden's departure, says former copy editor, Lucy Tumanov-West (who also left), "The magazine became bigger than Ben Hur [as] did Donna's ego." Amidst all this Hay gave birth to her first son Angus, cutting short her maternity leave and returning to work after eight weeks with her son, and the nanny, expressing milk behind a board in the studio.

Now, Hay hopes those day of working such "horrendous hours" are over, and says that she plans to have more "time for me".

And the fame she has worked so hard to avoid is dogging her every step. Her name is a brand. Does that ever freak her out? "I don't think about it. Sometimes it hits me, usually when I am on my

own."

Hay's voice softens again to caramel. "I'm just your average girl who had a big dream. And when you have a dream you've just got to work out what's stopping you. Is it you that's stopping you? Is it finance? You can get there in the end if you try."