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'There were times we despaired of him ever finding a proper career'

Hugh Fearnley-Whittinghall's mum spills the beans

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...and how to keep your brain young

Words **Tiffany Daneff**

Take one devoted granny, add a food-fanatic son, mix together with books and TV programmes and add a large dash of politics. Serve with a thick slice of River Cottage pie. **That's the recipe for the Fearnley-Whittingstall family success story**



Outdoor types
Jane and Hugh
in the garden
of her home in
Gloucestershire

JAY BROOKS/CAMERA PRESS; NICK HARRER

'There were times,' Jane Fearnley-Whittingstall admits, 'when we despaired of Hugh ever finding a proper career.'

It's a comforting thought for dejected parents everywhere to know that, even now, that flaky, stick-at-nothing youth ensconced on the sofa could yet emerge from its grungy cocoon into a glittering TV celebrity chef, film producer and real-food campaigner who seems not only to have it all but is trying to make the world a better place.

Hugh and his mother Jane are checking the stock in the kitchen. They are very much at ease together, both savvy in dealing with the



◀ media while, at the same time, you know that what you see is what you get.

Jane, 73, may be less famous than her son, but she's equally dynamic. She has combined work as a garden designer (the gardens at Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire and the cottage garden at RHS Rosemoor, Devon being just two of her commissions) with writing, most recently the *Good Granny* series (four books and a website goodgranny.com so far). She also used to be a Liberal councillor.

FROM TALKING TO THE PAIR – MOTHER living in Gloucestershire, the son not a million miles away in Dorset where the River Cottage empire is based – it's clear that food and politics were very much part of family life when Hugh was growing up.

'Mum was always quite politicised,' says Hugh. 'She used to make speeches at party conferences. She's got that confidence – and, like me, there's an assumption that you are that confident. But I'm always terrified of public speaking, though I do enjoy it – it's a buzz.'

'He had touching faith in me,' adds Jane. "'Mum," he said once, "You might be Prime Minister one day".'

Jane's career went on hold when she found herself pregnant with daughter Sophy just eight months after marrying husband Robert in 1962 (Hugh arrived in 1965). It took off again when the two children were at boarding school in their early teens. She took a course in landscape design at what was then the Gloucester College of Art and Design, which meant she would have the same holidays as the children. From then on she worked freelance from home as did her husband Robert, who was in advertising. 'He was a good pitcher of ideas so there was that on both sides,' says Hugh.

The family had left London for Gloucestershire when Hugh was six. It sounds a typical middle-class family upbringing. When Hugh couldn't play outdoors, Jane would stand him on a chair at the kitchen table with an apron round his middle, a bowl of icing sugar and some green colouring, and they would

make peppermint creams. 'Then I got on to dipping them in chocolate,' he says. 'I had a very sweet tooth.'

'You've got to not mind them making a mess,' says Jane, who continues the baking tradition with her six grandchildren.

'She's a top-drawer granny.' Hugh is emphatic about this. 'Both grannies are very generous with their time and have exactly that right combination between being a little more spoiling and at the same time a little stricter than us – they're old school.'

As yet none of the grandchildren has started experimenting with food as Hugh had. 'He created a fudge ice cream a friend of mine liked so much that she commissioned him to make it for her dinner parties.'

'Then it was profiteroles and chocolate rum gateaux,' says Hugh. Any roadkill? (The speciality of his first TV series, *A Cook on the Wild Side*.) 'No,' says Jane. 'The nearest we got to that was when some squirrels arrived in our deep freeze.' She's not entirely sure where they came from. 'But I'm glad to say they were skinned and gutted and oven-ready.'

Did they eat them? 'Certainly – and I didn't think they tasted too bad – but then we had holidays in France and had eaten snails. It's a cultural thing. If frogs are OK then squirrels are not that different.'

There were some culinary disasters. 'Occasionally he would make pretty revolting dishes –



'Hugh's career has three threads: food, communication and righting things he feels are wrong'

Jane

I remember one involving mashed tuna.' Nevertheless his first real break was a job at The River Café in London (which he more or less lost for being too messy). 'I feel a bit guilty I hadn't trained him properly.'

Referring to her current flush of trainee cooks, she says, 'I sometimes



feel I should train them to wash up.

'There are,' she continues, 'three threads to Hugh's career: The first is to do with food. The second is about communication. When he was a very small boy at a Christmas panto, and Captain Hook or Buttons asked for a volunteer from the audience to go up on stage, he shot out of his seat and was right there.'

'The other thing Hugh has is a wish to change things; to put right things he feels are wrong. I don't know how much influence his upbringing had on this, but my parents always made me think you could do anything if you really want to and are prepared to work at it.'

Hugh describes it as a process of osmosis, and his mother agrees: 'All we did was to encourage the children's natural interests and they chose their own direction... That's the way families work: having confidence in each other gives you confidence in the outside world.'

All three strands are linked to his back-to-basics philosophy (a subject he studied at St Peter's, Oxford). He says there was no eureka moment.

'I was brought up in a house that embraced modern convenience foods such as fish fingers and Angel Delight, but there was also lots of real cooking: Sunday roasts, proper spaghetti Bolognese. Mum would pull down her copy of Elizabeth David and we'd make things together. For most families that's a fair balance.'



'We had fish fingers and Angel Delight... but real cooking too – Sunday roasts and proper Bolognese'

Hugh

Hugh sums up the River Cottage message: 'Be more self-reliant, tap into what's going on locally, be less dependent on industrially produced food. The change in poultry conditions and the Fish Fight are all part of the same argument I've been plugging away at over the years.'

Now, Hugh's campaign against fish discards – on TV and online – is coming good. Signatories to his Fish Fight website are flooding in. He checks his laptop: they jump 140 in just five minutes. The campaign, launched with a three-part TV series last year, is a good example of his campaigning style. Rather than attack the whole EU fisheries policy it focuses on 'discards', the notorious practice of throwing perfectly good fish back into the sea, dead, because the boat has exceeded its quota.

'We needed a simple rallying point; we didn't want to get embroiled in labyrinthine policy-making decisions in Brussels.' For Hugh, the key fact is that half the fish caught is thrown away. With the extra push from the campaign, the EU is finally including the issue in the draft of a new fisheries policy.

'I'm feeling upbeat. But even with the change in legislation, we won't know for two years whether this will work. I'm not going into the politics of whether we should be in Europe. The fact is that we are in Europe and European countries

Everything stops for tea

The dynamic duo Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and his mother Jane – a garden designer and writer – take a well-earned break in her kitchen

need to make a whole better job of managing fish stocks... This is the moment for wrangling behind closed doors; that's why we're getting people to email their MEPs.'

It's a punishing schedule yet he seems to keep sane. That's partly thanks to being given time off with his wife Marie while one or other of the two sets of grandparents look after the children. And both, he says, are fantastic in that respect. What keeps him going on the work front is the feedback through the River Cottage forum of people saying, 'We've got our first chickens and we've got our first egg' or 'I've got my first patch of ground and am planting my first beans.'

'The online world is very big in gardening,' he says. 'People love to come indoors with their grubby fingers and prod at the keyboard. They're happy bedfellows.'

THE BACK-TO-BASICS PHILOSOPHY permeates River Cottage. It's not just about making TV programmes, installing a rocket composter, then using the profits to live the high life. Everyone at Park Farm (River Cottage HQ) acts as if they have a stake in making the place work. Ingredients for the cookery courses are bought locally. The chefs use seasonal produce and demonstrate how to utilise almost every part of an animal and avoid waste.

As I leave Hugh's home, the taxi driver tells me how popular Hugh is locally. Not so much TV celebrity, more a generous volunteer. 'He does what he can. He gets involved.' ♦

For more about the cookery courses, and the *Saga River Cottage Experience*, see page 79. Hugh's Fish Fight will be on Channel 4 later in the year. Also, see fishfight.net. The Pocket Book of Good Grannies is published by Short Books, £9.99; visit janefearnley-whittingstall.co.uk