

## **Jay Rayner**

**Writer, broadcaster and restaurant critic**

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**Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today, I'm joined by the award-winning writer, journalist and broadcaster Jay Rayner. Best known as restaurant critic for the Observer, he's written on everything from crime and politics, to cinema, theatre, and the visual arts. His television credits include MasterChef, Countdown, and The One Show, and Jay also present food panel show, The Kitchen Cabinet on Radio 4. Jay also presents his own podcast, *Out to Lunch*, in which he interviews stars in a fabulous restaurant setting. The author of four novels and seven works on nonfiction, his latest book, *My Last Supper: One Meal a Lifetime in the Making*, became a sell-out tour. He's also an accomplished jazz musician, and tours regularly with his band, the Jay Rayner Quartet.**

**Jay, thank you for joining me.**

Pleasure to be here. God, it makes me sound very busy, doesn't it?

**I think you're a bit lazy.**

Yes, yes, yes. I've got a very low boredom threshold, is what it is.

**I can tell!**

And people sort of say, "How do you fit all that in?" I say, "Well, I'm not doing all of it at the same time." So if you just work your diary, you can get quite a lot done.

**Didn't you ever just fancy standing at a lathe and doing a regular job?**

I sometimes think of that. In the old days, before I became a restaurant critic, I was a deadline-orientated old hack. I wrote about everything apart from sports, and the deadlines would pile up. And sometimes it could get exhausting, and I'd think, "Why don't I just have a nice, regular job?" There was some experiment, it was particularly in foreign correspondence, and they found that the deadline schedule was the kind of process that would induce psychosis in rats. So, yes, occasionally, but, no, I'm very lucky in what I get to do.

**Did you always want to be a journalist, then? Was that what you started out at?**

Until the age of 14, I thought I was going to be an actor. My father had been an actor. He was sort of okay at the time, he was in Anthony Quayle's company at Stratford in the 1950s, and worked in TV and stuff, but eventually got bored of being hungry. So I thought I was going to be an actor, and then I realised that an ability to remember lines and show off was not the same as being an actor. And so from that age, pretty much, I concluded journalism was going to be the thing, partly because I think you probably know my mother was a journalist. Very well-known one. And lots of newspapers came into the house, and I met lots of rackety old hacks, and they all seemed to be having fun. I thought, "Well, this looks like fun." I hadn't quite clocked necessarily the literary – and by that I mean the smallest "l" side of it, as in to be a writer, which is what I now am – but it all came together quite neatly in my head as, "This looks like a fun thing to do for a living."

**I'm an evangelical fundamentalist atheist and a raving secularist...**

Oh, hello, friend!

**Yes! I was trustee of Humanist UK, as they're now known, for many, many years. So I first knew your mum as a kind of secular activist...**

Well, she was president of the Humanist...

**She was, indeed.**

Oh, yes, yes, yes.

**And then I realised she was also quite famous.**

Ha! Yes. Well, by the time she was doing those sort of things, being president of the Humanists and all of that, she was into her 'good works' phase.

**Absolutely.**

There was something she said. Maybe we should just sort of say. I always think it's important. We assume people of a certain age that people know. Claire Rayner was an agony aunt, broadcaster, journalist. She was on TV at the time when there were mostly only three channels, and then four. She was very, very famous.

**She was also very, very awesome, frankly.**

Oh, yes. She did some extraordinary things. Been dead 10 years, and if you're under the age of about 35, you probably don't know who she was. But I'm always struck by something, which is that she had a problem page, first in the Sun, the Sunday Mirror, and Today, as far as I was concerned, forever. That was what she did. I now know that it stretched from 1971-72 to about 1996. 24-ish years. I've been a restaurant critic for 20.

**Wow.**

She always said that if she stepped down from being an agony aunt, everything else in her life would sort of tumble out. And she was absolutely right. So I remain a restaurant critic after 20 years.

**Yes. I've got a friend that literally views food as fuel, who takes no pleasure in it at all. And we'll go out to a restaurant only for sociable reasons.**

Well, okay... I'm not sure if I could ever be friends with your friend, if I'm absolutely honest. I would find it very, very tricky.

**I just find that really odd, how he could not take pleasure in an absolutely delicious meal.**

Yes, but as far as I'm concerned, it's about so much *more* as well. It's about aesthetics, and taste, and sensuality. And somebody who doesn't indulge that sense, or think that sense is very important, seems to be an un-sensuous person. I'm not casting aspersions on your dear, dear, dear friend, but I would find that complicated.

**I've got another friend, a separate friend, who owns a very high class eatery, and he says that he eats so much rich food when he's at work that when he's at home, he just wants egg, chips and beans, and a slice of toast.**

Well, that may be the case if you're actually running a restaurant. People think I must be in and out of restaurants all the time, and practically I only review one a week. Maybe I fall into another one by accident.

**But you can't review anonymously now. This is the thing. Because people recognise you. If I was a restaurateur, and you walked in, you wouldn't need to identify yourself. I'd say, "Oh, shit, we need to get the A-team out here now."**

Yes, but what A-team do they have? So I book under a pseudonym. They don't know I'm coming. We pay our own bills. I never accept comps. And there was a very famous line, I can't remember who it was who said it. The line is famous, I can't remember who the person is. He said, "I'm yet to find a bad restaurant that becomes a good one, just because I walk through the door." What can they do? As in almost all pursuits in life, it's all down to the preparation. If your dishes are what they are, if your staff are trained as they are, if your décor is what it is, you can't suddenly magic something better than you actually are just because I arrive. Now, some people say, "Well, they can up the quality of the service." I watch what's going on around me. I can see it. And if they try to send me freebies, they're all going back. There's very, very little they can do. And the other thing to be said is America – I've just written a piece actually for Guardian US, as I'm launching a book over there – and it's about the difference between UK and US restaurant critics. And one of the US things is anonymity, but what they'll all quietly admit is that they know that their cover is blown within about a year. Chefs, restaurateurs, they triangulate. There's very little true anonymity in this business.

**But can you also go to a Nando's Milton Keynes and just order a super-hot chicken and relax?**

Why would I not be able to?

**Well, this might be my prejudice, I fear.**

But I do. I do. I went for a Nando's in Leeds about six weeks ago. There you go! It was fine. I really like their chicken livers.

**So basically, you say you're a normal person as well, and it was a ridiculous question. It probably was, actually, in fairness.**

Well, I'm just a normal person, full stop. I don't even think it's an "as well." I have a job.

**Yes.**

And people call me a food critic. I'm not. I write about restaurants. I'm writing about how much pleasure your money will get you.

**Is it subjective? I suppose it's the same problem with music or film criticism, isn't it? I've seen this before. You write for the Observer. Phillip French was a fantastic film reviewer, may he rest in peace, but I didn't actually enjoy his reviews. A bit like Leonard Maltin, they seemed to be a bit miserable. I liked Roger Ebert, where you could share a sense of enjoyment.**

I won't comment on those, but what I will say is for something that's meant to be so subjective, it's remarkable how similar the views of the rickety old crowd of us who do this job in London are. I don't read my colleagues' reviews. I do read the roundups. There are a couple of places. Hardin's does one, London Eater does one, and The Caterer does one. So you can get a quick snapshot, and it's amazing. We all say very similar things. "The room is drop dead gorgeous." "The food is overpriced." "The staff are great." These things that are apparently subjective turn out not to be.

**In season eight of the Simpsons, Homer Simpson becomes a food critic...**

Becomes a restaurant critic. Yes, yes.

**And the editor hires him because he said he doesn't want a food critic that immediately poo-poo's everything that he eats, of course prompting joke that Homer says normally takes a few hours. And at the end of it, all the restaurateurs of Springfield attack him in a mob and want to kill him. Do you ever get restaurateurs that take it a little too personally, or is it all strictly business for them?**

I imagine that some of them take it very personally, but while I'm still in the job, they're not going to say so. They take it personally in both directions. Let's be clear. My negative reviews are fewer than a fifth in any one year. I'm overwhelmingly positive. In fact, if you've been following me... we're talking towards late February in 2020. If you look back over the previous six months, the readers below the line were getting a bit restless. They were saying, "He seems to like everything," because my job is not to go and find something negative. I don't want to sit through a bad meal. I don't go looking for them. Sometimes there are big openings, which are like West End openings, you have to go to. But I don't go looking for the bad ones. I often, after a good one, get an email from a restaurateur or a chef saying "Thank you," to which I reply, "You do not need to thank me. You did your job, and I did mine," and it's as simple as that. The late A.A. Gill put it very well. He said, "I absolutely have no interest in what you think of my review." And I don't really. I'm not writing for the restaurateurs. I'm not writing for the chefs. I'm not selling restaurants, I'm selling *newspapers*. I care about the readers more than anything else.

**If it was a double blind, randomized, placebo-controlled trial, then you should order maybe the same dish in every restaurant.**

Don't know if that actually exists.

**Well, exactly. So how do you go about doing that? Do you think one day, "I'll have the fish," or do you have whatever takes your fancy?**

No. I don't have whatever takes my fancy. I'm looking at what is there to write about. It is a job of journalism. I teach a class from time to time, and the key point I make is, if you cut it down to its bare bones, it's about a table, a plate, a chair, a bit of food, some staff. How in god's name are you going to get 1,100 words out of that, week-in, week-out? Well, the only way you can do that is by working out what the story is. What I'm looking for with a restaurant review, I'm saying, "What is this review going to be about?" I've just written one which is about social anthropology through restaurants, where you're examining groups from different ethnic communities. Or you can write one which is about price, or you can write one about shoddy service. But you need to know what the subject is. And then, by the same token, when I'm looking at a list of dishes, most restaurants, if they've got an omnivorous menu, will have steak and chips in there somewhere. They may dress it up, but they'll have it, and I won't order it unless it's a steak restaurant. I'll be looking for something a bit more evolved, which perhaps shows what the chef is trying to get across. If they put something that sounds ludicrous on the menu, I'm definitely ordering it. The stupider the thing is, the more chance I will order the dish. Because if you put something that sounds ridiculous on there, I need to find out whether you can actually cook it.

**Do you have any old favourites?**

Oh, loads!

**You go back there?**

Oh, do you mean restaurants or dishes?

**Well, both actually. I used to commute to London from York, where I lived many, many years ago. I've been down here for well over a decade, but there's an Italian restaurant near King's Cross Station that I still go to occasionally, even though it's completely out of my way now, because they recognise me. I know their dish. It's nice.**

My favourites are rather dull, as in I go to Richard Corrigan's restaurant, Bentley's, on Swallow Street an awful lot. There's a Chinese restaurant, which, as we're speaking, is about to be reviewed on Sunday as an act of solidarity with the Chinese community, because they're being shunned because of coronavirus. But there's one, the Four Seasons on Gerrard Street, which I go to all the time. They don't tend to be massively exciting or cutting edge. God save me from dramatic gastronomic experiences – that is not what I'm about on my own diet. It's not really what I'm about when I'm reviewing for the Observer either. There was a time when I was, "Tasting menu, fantastic!" but not anymore. It's a bit... my diamond pumps are pinching on that. I think I've been through enough tasting menus to never want to have one ever again.

**Do you have a lot of entrepreneurs that own lots of restaurants, chains of restaurants, that want to befriend you? Is there a tension there?**

It's not really a tension, because I am absolutely aware that my reputation, which is what my whole career is based on, is worth an awful lot more than the blandishments of a few businessmen. I am not in the business. Absolutely not in the business. I get repeated emails from small restaurants, big restaurants, saying "We'd love you to come in and try and give us your feedback." "That's not my job, and you're worth £100 million, and I'm not coming in to give you advice for free; who the hell do you think you are?" Plus I won't even do consultancy for them. There are a couple of critics who actually have interest in restaurants, and I'm not sure how that works or why, but I don't. So it's not a tension.

**So you have old school, unshakable integrity really that you can't be bought. I can be bought.**

I don't think it's unshakable integrity. I think it's a cost-benefit analysis. The classic example of this, and this is on a small scale, is I go to a local restaurant, my local chippy – there's a Chinese-Beijing street food place I like in Brixton Village – and I order whatever I order, and then they say, "No bill." And I say, "No, I have to pay," and they go, "You're really good for our business." So I say, "How much is the bill?" And they go, "It's £11." I say, "Well, I have to tell you, my reputation is worth an awful lot more than £11!" Once, at a local chippy, they tried to waive the bill, and I said I had to pay. I turned to the guy behind me, I said, "This is going to sound like a terrible, wanky question – but do you know who I am?" He said, "Yes, I know exactly who you are." I said, "If you saw me taking a freebie off of here, what would you think?" He said, "I would think you were a bit of a freeloader." I went, "Right. Can I now pay, please?" It's not worth it!

**You're right. It's your reputation.**

It's my reputation, and my reputation has a value. If I want to carry on doing this job, if I want people to think well of me... you know, last February, I was approached to be the face of a supermarket advert in Finland. This was...

**We've all done that.**

We've all done it. And I thought very long and hard about that one. I took it, because it was playing in character. The script was funny. The idea of the script was we got Europe's scariest food critic to come and have a look at our food offering, and it ends with me saying, "I'm not entirely disappointed." I thought it was hilarious, and I thought it was out of country, and therefore not covering something I would ever write about, and therefore it's fine. And the money was good.

**So were you playing yourself, or were you playing a character?**

I was playing a caricature version. In fact, they came back to me, because it was successful, and said, "Right. We'd now like to extend this campaign, and what we'd like you to do is to go into the houses of some of our customers, and judge their food. And then we'd like you to give some interviews about why the supermarket is great to the local press." I said, "Hang on a second. One, if you get me to go into people's houses, I'll stop being the character you hired. I'll be me, and that means I will not humiliate members of the public just for your wiles. And re the newspaper interviews, I'm not going to stand and pimp your product, because that's actually *not* what you hired me to do. You hired me to play a character. If you wanted me to start being myself, you can't imagine how expensive that would be."

**How does it work when friends invite you over to dinner? Because obviously...**

They don't much.

**Well, I was going to say, because obviously you're a nice guy. You're not going to say, "That was very bland."**

No, I don't.

**But on the other hand, you are Jay Rayner, for goodness sake. If I had you at my house, I'd be on tenterhooks.**

There are, let me think, three or four friends who invite us round for dinner, but it's not really inviting us around for dinner. It's just kind of "We're making supper. Do you want to come?" They're very close friends.

**Do you go and just do an anonymous review on TripAdvisor afterwards? Is that how it works?**

No, exactly. No. That's all it is. The set piece dinner party, I don't get invited to very much.

**My mum used to do them in the 70s, but I haven't seen them since.**

Actually, fair enough, I sometimes throw them. We had people over for lunch on Sunday, and I'm working on something now, but that's an Observer story, so I'll obviously have to kill you if I told you. But I will be holding a formal dinner party. It'll be fun.

**Now, I know you're not "industry", as you said, but what's new in restaurants? When is the last time you went into any restaurant, and genuinely raised an eyebrow and thought, "Wow, this is a new concept"? Or are there no new concepts?**

I hate the use of the word 'concept'. The main thing that has changed is, as rents and wages and all of that have risen exponentially in the centre of cities, young chefs have concluded that they do not need to aim at that age-old goal of "I'm going to open the big, shiny restaurant in the centre of town." So you're seeing a "donut effect" in London, and also I think in other cities, whereby the really interesting restaurants are being opened by young chefs who have decided they don't have to wait 10 years before doing so, in the suburbs or even perhaps out of the suburbs. The menus are shorter. It's a much more relaxed, laid back, bare-bones restaurant, and that seems to be a really good thing. It's had one knock-on effect, though. It's very, very specific. Because these young chefs have decided that they don't need to wait, like the generation before them, for 10 years, very few of them have had proper experience on pastry. So have you noticed how a lot of restaurant menu dessert menus are basically creamy things in a bowl?

**That's because they're bought in, aren't they, and they're frozen?**

No, it's not that. It's just they're simple to make. There's not actually baking... they're not making tarts. They're not making rum babas. It's a skill set they don't have, because they haven't spent long enough working through a classical kitchen. So that aside, there's an awful lot of creamy things in a bowl.

**But not enough fiddly pastry things, which are delicious.**

Yes. Well, proper dessert menus, where it's a tart, or it's a fondant, or it's a full-on pavlova. Nobody *needs* dessert. Let's be absolutely clear. If you ran into a restaurant going, "I am starving," you don't go, "Hand me the dessert menu." You want a main course, or something like that. Dessert is always an added extra. It's something you allow yourself.

**But obviously other than being co-opted by the Fins to market their places, have the government ever approached you to do some patronising "Eat less sugar," "Eat less salt," that kind of thing?**

Yes, I think they have, on a couple of... if not directly the government, various campaigns, but I won't be co-opted in those either. I am an independent. I'm still a reporter. There is still, as I sit here, I lean forward, there's still a notebook in my back pocket.

**You won't be using it today, I can assure you. I've got nothing of interest to say.**

No, I'm sure. During the past three years, my reporting on Brexit, old school reporting, has been detailed, and I'm still not off that agenda. You cannot be both inside and outside journalism. Who knows what will happen when I'm finally kicked off, and then I might decide I have some skills I can flog somewhere. At one point, I was asked onto the vaccine committee because of something I'd written.

**Presumably they're in favour of vaccines.**

Yes, yes, yes, and I was very in favour as well.

**I remain in favour.**

That's a really good idea, in that sense. But, I declined that, even though obviously I was very pro it. Famously – I only say 'famously' because it became a bit of a thing – Michael Gove invited me to come and join a food round table that he was holding. Now, Gove and I – he's a supercilious little shit – Gove and I had had a set-to, when he was in the wilderness in late 2016. I think he was drunk, if I'm honest. It was Christmas, and I think he'd been at the Bailey's. And we had this kind of contretemps. I'd also had some run-ins with his wife. So, when he became DEFRA secretary, he decided to invite a whole bunch of people into his food round table. And I had a long, hard think about whether I was grown-up enough to be able to sit in the room with the man, decided I wasn't. So, instead I wrote him a 3,500-word position paper on food and Brexit, and food security in Britain.

**As an open letter, or did you send it to him directly?**

Well, I sent it to him directly. I posted it to my website. And what was intriguing to me was the thirst for real information, because it's a subject I know inside out. I wrote a book about food sustainability and the state of food security in the UK, which is a lot funnier than it sounds. That thing that I posted to my website has been downloaded about 200,000 times. Eventually, we did run an edited version in the Observer, because it had become such a thing. But it was also a way of me stepping back, and not being co-opted by Gove. I wrote this thing, but it was for public consumption. You can still find it on my website, [jayrayner.co.uk](http://jayrayner.co.uk).

**But, you've got a real positive sense of mystery, and it's hugely admirable. If you told me to eat less salt, or eat less sugar, I'd probably do the opposite, really. Wouldn't you do the opposite?**

I mean, look at me.

**If you were told?**

Actually, I'll tell you... can I invade my privacy for a moment?

**Of course, you can.**

So, I'm 53...

**You look good for 53.**

Thank you very much. I'm in the gym, literally, four or five times a week.

**Yes.**

I have a massive gym habit to try and keep this...

**You've got a lot of restaurants to review.**

So, I went to see the GP this week. In fact, it was a nurse practitioner. She decided... it was actually for a blocked ear, but you don't need to know that. She said, "Should we send you for some bloods?" So we did the whole blood workout on me, and she called me, literally, only four hours ago, before I came in here. I said, "Uh oh, what's wrong?" She said, "Well, I have to call you on this. Your cholesterol should be between one and five, that's normal." Mine is at 5.5. "Your blood sugar should be at 0.5 to two," and mine's at 2.2.

**Does that mean you're pre-Type 2 diabetic?**

No, absolutely not. I said, "So, are we talking statins?" She said, "No, you're way off that. You are just *marginally* over the top. Everything else is absolutely fine." She said, "You're literally marginally..." In fact, I'm below every measure to even go on statins. She said, "But, I am required to tell you that you're marginally over."

**You look fit as a butcher's dog.**

I listened to this, and I said, "Do you know what? Given everything I do for a living, and given that I am carrying weight," which my whole family's always been like, "given what I do for a living, those figures are astounding, don't you think?" She said, "Yes I do, actually."

**Well done.**

So I'm here for a while yet, and back to the gym I go.

**Well, I know. Aren't restaurant critics supposed to suffer from gout, and obesity, and morbid hypertension, and alcoholism?**

Yes, I suppose they are. At certain times, if I'm honest, there have been a few who would tick those boxes. Though now, dear old Grace Dent, Giles, skinny Giles, I don't know what his secret is. Tom Parker-Bowles. No, we're all a pretty clean cut lot, actually.

### **Do you ever hang out in some secret monthly club?**

No.

### **Where you all get together and compare notes?**

No. The one thing I will say, actually, is that the people – this is speaking entirely out of turn, I'll get shouted at for it – the restaurant critics tend to be pretty measured, because we are having to control what we're doing all the time. There's another category of so-called "food writer", and they swan around from every launch to every launch. You're not quite clear who they're writing for, or maybe they've got a byline a month, somewhere.

### **So, they're "influencers" as they would say?**

Well, a bit more than that, but a bit less. The casualties, the ones who drink too much, the ones who you think are burning it all, they tend to be in that category. I can't think of any of the critics doing the main job who are a problem.

### **You take it seriously, then? Whereas they're actually just playing at it, really.**

I don't know what they're doing. I often wonder... I've been a freelance journalist, I know how difficult it is to get the commissions, and to get paid properly, and all of that. There is a circuit for people who are writing freelance about food; an awful of PRs have to get the column inches. If you're getting just enough coverage somewhere, you know, we are moving into influencer territory, you can get invited to endless launches. Endless, honestly. You should see my email inbox. They're all slightly surprised, I don't go to any openings. I rarely go to a party. They're of no use to me, they're not of good use of my time.

### **I mean, I work in PR, but because I present this podcast, I am on all the various media databases as a journalist as well, and I get bombarded with at least 200 absolutely shit emails a day, inviting me to things that are utterly irrelevant.**

No, I know, same here. I know what they're doing, I walk both sides of the line now because, obviously, A, I write books and they require PR. My live shows, when you're selling tickets to members of the public, that requires a lot of PR.

### **You need bums on seats.**

Also, the podcast, so I use PR. We have to be very careful about how it's put out there. It's also made me very wary. In a very competitive market, PRs need to show that they've got some sort of coverage, and if that means it's *that* blog, or *that* Instagram or something, it means that they can fill the paper. There's a lot of that that goes on, and it's not very useful. One of the things – this is a broader point, less to do with my restaurant writing – one of the mistakes we make is overemphasising the differences between old and new media, and therefore deciding that old media is less valuable than it used to be. The one thing I can tell you, from doing PR for my own

events, is I want to be in national newspapers, regional newspapers, and on terrestrial radio as much as possible when I'm trying to flog tickets and books. That's where the important stuff lies.

**It also helps boost the other, the online stuff as well, because if they see it "legitimised" by traditional media then they think, "Wow, it must be good." Because every arsehole's got a blog and a podcast, and all that.**

Yes. The distinction is, there are some professional blogs... well, professional websites, which are important to be a part of, you want to be. If you get a call from Vice or whatever...

**Or Digital Spy, for example, is fantastic on the media front.**

Yes, you're going to pay attention. But it is about numbers. I use social media a lot personally, but that's about personal following. That can be effective, but you've got to know what you're doing.

**I mean, my next question was, why bother being a journalist in this day and age? Because there's no money in it, newsrooms are empty.**

I get paid quite nicely!

**Well, you do.**

Yes!

**I employ a lot of former journalists who've had to turn to the dark side to earn a living. But the other point I was going to make, and you're no stranger to controversy, is you just get abused left, right, and centre. What's the point in getting out of bed?**

Firstly, yes, there has been a change in the industry, in the media, in the availability of jobs, and the amount being paid. The staggering days of the '70s and '80s are gone. But there are still lots of jobs for journalists, and there is still money to be made. I believe you call them 'legacy media', but are still posting some very nice numbers. I saw the New York Times digital subscription numbers recently, I think they were pulling something like \$800 million a year in digital subscriptions. That's pretty damn impressive. So, there is still money, you just have to look at it in the round. The question about what used to be the very hard wall between journalist and reader, which is now extremely porous, yes, it's a fact of life. You just have to learn how to deal with it.

**Do you read the below the lines still?**

I do.

**Don't you lose your will to live with it?**

No. A few years ago, I found it problematic. I even ended up sitting in the room of a psychotherapist. The idea of paying someone so I could talk about myself, I thought was fabulous.

**I'd like to state to our listeners that I'm not being paid to interview you.**

No, and I'm not being paid to be here. But, I'd already worked out what the issue was at that point, which was it is okay to read abuse – it's when you compose an answer, and put your fingers to keyboard to reply, because if you just read it, it'll bounce off. If you start composing replies, then you're in trouble. So I pretty much came off that, I stopped replying for a long while. But I'm rather more at peace with it now. Certain bits of my behaviour have changed, I've had a couple of very rough experiences on Twitter, a pile-on as a result of some very unpleasant talk radio broadcasters. But, even there I've learned the best thing to do is just mute, don't block.

**You can even mute the conversation now. I criticised Julian Assange a few months ago, on the basis that he's a twat. To be honest, my analysis and criticism was nothing more sophisticated than that, really. But, I must have got 2,000 tweets accusing me of the most horrendous stuff. I just muted the whole lot.**

Yes. Muting is better than blocking. I don't mind the controversy. I believe I may have stirred one recently by admitting that I don't like gin.

**Because you called it "ruined vodka", didn't you?**

Yes, ruined vodka. Look, the point was, I wasn't actually... I have this column at the front of the Observer Food Monthly, it's the hardest thing I write – 600 words, it's got to have a clear idea right at the heart of it. It's got to be, generally, quite light, it's got to punch home. We launch it on the Thursday before the Sunday that Observer Food Monthly is published. So I'm the pilot fish, I'm announcing that OFM is coming, and I'm a numbers queen, I'm a control freak. I watch all the metrics, I need to see it punch through. Now, some people might accuse me, therefore, of being a clickbait merchant. I don't see it that way; I want to write something that's popular. But I do really hate gin.

**Do you set out to be spicy?**

Sorry?

**Do you set out to be spicy? Do you want something that's going to...**

I set out to write a compelling column that you're going to read from the beginning from the end. Within the Guardian Observer metrics, there is a particular score they have which says an average article of this length gets read for this percentage. So, if you imagine, we're talking about the online stuff, someone clicks onto a piece. They know how long it takes to read to the end, and they can see how long people stay. So just imagine the piece takes four minutes to read, and almost everybody stops reading after 90 seconds, you're going to get a low score. I am determined to get the

highest score I possibly can. One of the lessons I teach people, when I do teach this class, is nobody has to read a single thing you write. It is your responsibility to make them read from the end of the first sentence, to the end of the first paragraph, to the end of the first page. I am *determined* that you'll read to the very end of what I've written, because it's a jolly read.

**You've got to earn it, but you've got to earn it throughout?**

Yes.

**You've got to maintain the attention.**

Yes, yes, yes.

**How do you do that, then? Could you distil your class into four minutes, for our readers? For our listeners, rather. That was a bad start already!**

Here is a brutal truth, I used to say this in one of the class. I've only done it a couple of times, but it took the air out of the room. There are 100 people in the room, and they've all paid a certain amount. I think it was a Guardian Masterclass, and I said, "Here's the brutal truth. Writing is hard, and not everybody can do it. About 95 of you in here won't be able to write. The other five, only one of you is probably going to be any good." And that is the reality. One of the problems we have in the representation of certain careers is all doable, if only you could gain access. Now, don't get me wrong, access is an issue, when we talk about diversity, when we talk about people of colour being brought into mass media, when we talk about people from socially excluded backgrounds who haven't necessarily had access to all the educational attainments. I'm absolutely aware of all my privilege; I'm a white, middle-class male, who had every advantage life gives him.

**Me too.**

But, putting all those questions of access right in the middle of the table, doesn't mean that you can actually do it. I get an enormous number of people who write to me and say, "Would you have look at my writing?" And 98% of it is awful. Even if you put aside the basic stuff of they can't punctuate, they can't spell, and they don't understand the basic rules of grammar, you wouldn't say to a carpenter, "It doesn't matter that you can't get the table to stand up, it looks lovely," what they have to say is not compelling. One of the most important lessons I was given right at the beginning... I think it was the great Jack Tinker who was the theatre critic at the Daily Mail, and he was a friend of my parents. As I say, so much privilege. He took me for tea, when I was coming out of editing the student paper in Leeds, which is where I started. One of the things he said to me that day over tea was, "Just remember, writing is talking on paper." In other words, if you ain't got anything interesting to say, it doesn't matter what your writing is – it won't be interesting.

**It's the same, I've seen it on Instagram. We've all got the top iPhones now, with the really good lenses, and people think that makes them a good photographer, but there's some appalling...**

Content.

**The way that the photo is composed is appalling.**

Yes, yes, yes. By the way, I should say, I'll put my hand up at this point and point out that all my photographs on Instagram are appalling.

**Like, deliberately so?**

Well, almost.

**Yes.**

The background. A little digression, here. About a year ago, the people who manage me for the live work said, "You really need to be on Instagram." I said, "Well, I'll tell you what, whenever I got on a review these days, I photograph every dish." I don't do it for pretties, I do it as an aid memoire, for when I come to write the review. I go, "They tend to be terrible." There's no standing on chairs, there's no get the lighting right, there's no hesitating. It's 'click, let's move on'. I said, "I'll start posting those." I think I said it this weekend, the weekend that just past, because people complained about the photography. I say, "It is anti-Instagram, it is awful. It's what I had, I'm not going to stop the conversation to take pretty pictures. If you want pretty pictures, there are more than enough people for you to follow."

**But also, I've seen these behind the scenes videos on YouTube, where food photography is not real food. The cream is shaving cream, with matchsticks under it.**

You can't do that anymore, it's illegal.

**Oh, is that right?**

Oh actually, come to think of it. Well, it is still illegal because the Withdrawal Act passed all European Law into UK Law. So, it was a European law which prohibited the use, for example, of mashed potato as ice cream. I was about to say, but we've now left, so does that mean that's gone? But no, I think that would be moved into statute by the Withdrawal Act.

**I remember when I used to go to Crete as a teenager, there'd be the terrible food photography outside the restaurant, where they'd just take the picture of the paella, and all this kind of thing. They take it to the next level in Japan.**

What are they doing making paella in Crete?

**Well, yes, whatever it might be.**

Sorry, that was facetious of me!

**Yes, absolutely. No, it was, and it was inaccurate of me. But they take it to the next level in Japan, because I've been there and they actually have some sort of wax or plastic...**

Plasticised food, yes!

**It's fantastic.**

It's incredible.

**It actually looks like the real thing.**

Yes, yes. There's windows full of it. You find some of it, down in Soho, here in London. Yes, it's hilarious. You know, it's the equivalent to the shiny pictures in the menus, which are a part of certain cultures. That's fine.

**A small amount, the right level of controversy, the right level of spice, if I can call it that, you want that, don't you? You want a bit of a furore, and a bit of people engaging, and talking about your article?**

Yes.

**It's good for business.**

It's got to be engaging, but you're never going to be engaging by not taking a position. If you take a position, someone's going to disagree with you. But, that's fine, not everybody's got to agree with me.

**But the rhetoric seems to be ramped up beyond anything sensible, with people like Piers Morgan, Katie Hopkins, all of these people that are just... I mean, I'm sure they...**

You're not comparing me to them though, are you?

**Absolutely not. Of course not. But Piers, for example, I'm sure he does believe a lot of what he says, but he clearly ramps it up past 11 to generate the clicks.**

Well, he's blocked me. I would... while we're talking about controversy, I would separate myself out, and say... particularly...

**Of course.**

It's banal, it's not even worth saying, while we sit here, while the furore of poor Caroline Flack killing herself, and the hounding by various bits of the media. If you do

not think about the people that you're hounding, you're writing about, you're expressing your controversial opinions about, then you've lost a bit of your humanity. I said, "I don't like gin." Gin will live. It's the kind of controversy you can have. Recently, an American blog, I actually know the editor quite well, posted something about pigs in blankets in America, being the great Super Bowl food. It was a picture of a bunch of sausages wrapped in pastry. I said, "Well, now Britain has something that can unite us."

**Yes.**

"These are not pigs in blankets." I'm trying to think. The only time, I think, where I've got personal actually was a rather nasty, unpleasant, right wing journalist who I know. Toby Young, who I'd known for 35 years, and I finally lost my temper with. Allison Pearson, who seemed quite sane and nice, when I knew her back at the Independent on Sunday, and seemed to turn into a rather unpleasant piece of work.

**I agree with you.**

Those are people who I think can look after themselves. But, in the reviews I'm very, very cautious about attacking individual waiters. I did write about one recently. It came with a huge preamble, about this being a very difficult thing to do. But, if the service is so uncomfortable and unpleasant, then it has to be in there. But most of the time, 98% of the time, I won't ever either mention the staff, or blame them, because as far as I can see, it's a failure of training, rather than of anything else.

**You mentioned earlier, about you writing about the sustainability of food. Why aren't you vegan?**

For lots of reasons. I like the taste of meat.

**But it's a very inefficient use of the Earth's resources, is it not?**

Are you vegan?

**I am. Well, I eat a plant-based diet. I do wear leather.**

All right.

**And I have leather upholstery in my cars.**

Do you?

**I do. I am a hypocrite.**

You might as well eat the rest of the cow, then.

**Well, interestingly, of course, they need high quality leather. Leather is not a by-product of beef, it's the opposite actually. They grow cows and kill them in a certain way, so that their skin is good quality leather, and then they use the...**

Right, so they waste the rest of the animal.

**Well, they put it in things like dog food and pies and pasties, and soups where the poor quality of the meat can be disguised.**

Right. There are a number of things to say.

**So Fray Bentos is an offshoot of the leather industry.**

Human beings are generally omnivorous. There is an awful lot of evidence that the grain feeding of cattle is a terrible idea. It's not good for the environment, when that grain can be fed direct to humans. However, there's a lot of upland country that is not good for farming in any other way. They're brilliant for livestock. They eat a lot of biomass that we can't eat.

**George Monbiot very famously rode back somewhat, didn't he, from his position of absolute...**

Monbiot is a stopped clock, who happens to be correct twice a day. I mean, the way he's flip-flopped on this subject is absurd. I think this morning, today's paper, he was going on about shooting deer, which for someone at one point who was completely vegan because it was cruel... I mean, I don't know where he's at. There's a lot of evidence. I looked at the United Nations agriculture organization stats on carbon emissions around livestock, a lot of which...

**They wrote a report, didn't they, called 'Livestock's Long Shadow'?**

Yes. Well, they miscounted a whole bunch of things. There's a very good book by a chap called Simon Fairlie, who wrote a book called 'Meat: A Benign Extravagance', and he's not your usual defendant of livestock. He grew up in an eco-commune, and he came to the conclusion that we need to reduce our meat consumption by about 50%. But there's something else here, and it's a very interesting social historical question. The middle classes in Asia are booming. So in 2000, 14% of the world's middle classes were in Asia, and by 2050, it will be 68% – and as they rise into the middle classes, their meat consumption is rising. I would love to know who's going to pop over to China to talk to the newly ennobled middle classes and tell them they can't eat meat, because we've all done it. There is going to be a much more complicated conversation that has to be had. I try to reduce my meat intake. The other argument on veganism, which is to do with eating sentient creatures, well, either you think that you do not have the right to take an animal's life for food, or you do – and I'm on the 'you do' side of it. So that doesn't apply.

**I don't think vegans are good communicators, really. I mean, they're too judgmental, and they're too vociferous, and if they want to win more people over to veganism, then they're going about it the wrong way. You don't start a**

**conversation trying to sell a message by condemning someone. I'm not radical in that way, and I don't think meat-eaters are evil. I think, for me, the problem is factory farming more than anything else. I think people should pay the proper cost of a chicken.**

Well, we need to pay the proper cost, indeed. Again, there's some very interesting stats on this.

### **Most meat eaters don't really want factory farmed meat.**

Not really, although we've got to consider the situation for those on low incomes and how that works. So one of the problems we've had in the UK is that preaching around diet has tended to come from extremely affluent middle classes who can cough for a £15 chicken without looking at the many issues that are faced by people on low incomes. I'm absolutely not a believer that we need to lower the price of food to match those who are using food banks, because if you start to match the food supply chain to people on those sorts of low incomes, you will have a deformed food supply chain. It's all quite complicated stuff, and it's also not about absolutes. I think we need to find a middle ground, and go for reasonable welfare. Here's an interesting stat. I was talking to professor Hugh Pennington, emeritus professor of bacteriology. He was the one who did brilliant work on the E. coli outbreak in Lanarkshire, which you may remember, I think it was from the 90s. And we were talking about factory farming of chicken, and I said, "Obviously people are concerned about campylobacter and salmonella. And he said, "Well, the first thing to say is obviously both those things can be dealt with by cooking. The other thing to say is you need to understand the impact of cheaply available animal proteins on human health." So, prior to the arrival of industrial scale animal protein, post the 1950s, a lot of people used to die of diseases like tuberculosis because they weren't nourished enough. The cheap arrival of animal protein produced in industrial scale has resulted in massive improvements in human health. Now, I'm not defending the excesses of industrial meat production, but it's very interesting to look at the statistics on this stuff, and the impact it's had on human health. Arguably, we are now at a point where we're overfed, where there was too much available.

### **And also prophylactic antibiotic overuse in animal feed is actually a ticking time bomb for human health.**

Oh, yes, absolutely. Well, one of the big debates we're having in the UK right now is over how much of American food standards are we going to allow. There are growth hormones and all of that sort of stuff in American beef, and I hope it doesn't come this way.

**I mean, when I'm in America, which is quite often, you see... I'm in a supermarket, and one of the selling points of some bacon will be 'this doesn't contain any growth hormone'. And I'm like, "Wow."**

Yay! A Lot of the debate is under... so this is all stuff that I've been covering for years.

**It's crazy.**

For example, people go on about chlorine-washed chicken, and supporters go, "There's nothing wrong with chlorine. We wash salad leaves in it." Well, no, you're right. Chlorine in solution is fine. We swim in swimming pools full of chlorine. It's fine. That's not the issue. What you have to look at is why is the chlorine being used by the American poultry industry? And here's why. In the EU, now in the UK because it's been written across into UK law, we have rules on the density and welfare of chickens, even in industrial farming. In the US, they have no rules whatsoever. They can stack as many chickens as they like, which the bottom line is that raising chickens in big flocks is a dirty, dirty business. We deal with it by welfare standards and some vaccination, and the US deal with it by chlorine washing at the end to try and get rid of whatever pathogens are on them. Well, that would be fine, I suppose, we're it not for the fact that there's growing evidence that the chlorine washing doesn't actually work, doesn't kill the pathogens. All it does is make them non-culturable. When I started looking at this, my then editor of the paper said, "So why aren't people dropping dead of salmonella in America?" I went "Oh, they are." We haven't had a death, I think it was between 2010 and 2016, we hadn't had a death from salmonella in the UK, whereas in the US it's about 350 a year.

**Incredible.**

Yes. Happy days.

**Tell us about all the other stuff that you do, because we've...**

We'll briefly do a quick run around.

**Yes, I mean there's the podcast, there's the music. There's all your other journalism as well.**

So the music is a very lovely thing. It happened by accident. If I can say I'm immensely proud of it, I *am* immensely proud of it because it's an act of will. To learn to play jazz piano is an ongoing process; I'm constantly deep into it. We gig 20 to 25 times a year, so not massively, but enough. We're playing Ronnie Scott's, the Mother's day Sunday lunch, quite shortly. We have a residency once a month at Zedel, and we do other things.

**What's the band called?**

The Jay Rayner Quartet!

**Wow.**

Well, when we first started getting gigs, I turned to the two full-time musicians in the band and said, "They're saying we need a name." And Robert Rickenburg, brilliant, but basically said, "I think they're coming to the gigs for you, mate." I went, "Fair enough."

**It's an unusual name, given there's only three of you, though.**

Er...

**You know, that was a joke, sorry.**

I was going to say the fourth is the singer, who happens to be my wife. One of the problems that jazz has, is that it takes itself very seriously, and I build my set lists around the patter, around the stories. I have a lot of stories to tell.

**I'm going to come and see this. I love my jazz.**

Right. Well, you have to come, because as I say, I like to think of it as complete entertainment. So there's that. The one man shows are an extension of that. They were originally an attempt to escape discussion panels at literary festivals, because I'd written that book Greedy Man and the Hungry World about food sustainability, and I didn't want to be dragged on discussion panels because I hate them. They're boring. So I decided to come up with a one-man show, which kind of lecture using PowerPoint as a second performer on stage, using it for his video wall possibilities. You can have a gag played out behind you, or you can go in front of the gag using PowerPoint. And it became so successful that it's now a set piece of what I do. If I write a book, there's a show alongside, and that's what happening with My Last Supper. And then the podcast, well we're making one now. I believe you do yours without sponsor or advertiser, no financial model?

**It's indirectly benefiting me commercially, I suppose. It builds the Rolodex.**

Right.

**It's content marketing, but that's a genuine sort of side benefit for me. It's real, but my intention is always because I want to meet interesting people.**

Right, well that's fair enough, and I want to meet them too. I'm making great friends with some lovely, lovely people by inviting them to lunch and recording it. There is a financial model there, and it's working. So it sort of works all around, and I love the fact that it's removed from the control of editors. I do it with Somethin' Else productions, which is the production company that also makes The Kitchen Cabinet, which is the Radio 4 show I do, and they're very, very good on the professional stuff. And it seems... we're well over the million downloads. Got there quite quickly. So we're heading towards one and a half now, and we'll keep going.

**Wow.**

Well, you have an enormous number of subscribers, so...

**We do, also I been going a lot longer than you, but I think yours is a better performing podcast overall. Tell us, I mean, we mentioned controversy there,**

**you felt compelled to criticise Jeremy Corbyn and the clear antisemitism that infected Labour, frankly.**

Thank you.

**I mean, I was a party member for 24 years. I left, I think, about a year after Corbyn became leader, and I joined to vote for Tony Blair, and I did. But I just don't recognise the party anymore. I imagine that your criticisms were received fairly on social media, and that you weren't subject to any abuse?**

Oh, that's very sweet of you, Paul. As well you know, no. I got loads of antisemitic abuse.

**It's disgusting.**

It's extraordinary. It's extraordinary what's been going on!

**How can they not see that it's racism? Because that's the problem with the Corbynites, is that they're racist and antisemitic, but they genuinely believe they're not, and therefore if you say, "You're antisemitic," you must be crazy to suggest that, and therefore you must be in the pay of Murdoch, or the Scott Trust.**

Lisa Nandy, one of the current candidates for the Labour leadership, did give a very good speech at a Jewish Labour hustings, and she talked about how antisemitism was seen as a "racism that punches up". The hard left will look for where they perceive power to be, and that's where they'll punch.

**Well, because the Jews have got the power and the money?!**

Yes.

**An antisemitic trope.**

I know, that's extraordinary.

**I've quite a few poor Jewish friends that would quite like the power and the money.**

I know, exactly. There's also a very good documentary by David Baddiel that has just been on about Holocaust denial, and he very bravely goes and meets the Holocaust denier who says, "You Jews, you all run the BBC." And Baddiel, keeping his calm, says, "Well, if that was true, I think I'd be on it rather more than I am." That was very brave of him. It's exhausting, and it's terrifying, and I'm just keeping my fingers crossed that the outcome of the current leadership election will result in the return of some kind of sanity to the left – because god knows we need an opposition.

**The problem you have, though, is what we call the three pounders. The Collins Review, I mean, when I joined the Labour party, you have to wait a year before you can even vote for your local councillor candidate because they wanted to test you, and make sure you were true. Now you can join for £3 and vote for leader, and that was the problem. Once Corbyn was on the ballot, all of these people... Ray Collins did it for altruistic reasons. He thought, "Oh, well we'll get people involved in politics." But I had friends who were members of the conservative party that joined for £3 to vote for Corbyn.**

Well, yes, I'm sure. I've re-joined to vote again because I want to be able to vote for the party that I've voted for all my life, but haven't done for the past couple of elections. Anyway, that was fun.

**I was chatting with a source close to Tony Blair recently – well, it was Peter Mandelson, he won't mind me naming him, and he said, "The problem is leaving the Labour Party's unethical, but also staying's unethical." He said this, "It doesn't judge whatever someone's done because if you leave, in theory, you've left them to it. You've let them win. You've got no voice."**

But if you don't really hold that position...

**But if you stay, of course, then arguably you're perpetuating and endorsing it.**

There are an enormous number of people who should have left. Who should have got out of there and didn't. I was very disappointed in an awful lot of them, only because *that* Labour party was not... a name is not a party.

**Penultimate question, then. What qualifies you to become the sex columnist for Cosmopolitan, and how can I also write that column?**

That was a very, very long time ago! There were no qualifications for any of these jobs. This is journalism!

**Because I used to read FHM for my sins, and Grub Smith wrote a brilliant sex column, but again, he was kind of, you could tell that he wasn't very good at sex from his writing.**

It kind of happened accidentally. I wrote some random piece about visiting some weird sex therapists for Arena, and then Cosmopolitan liked the way I'd written it – we're going back to the early 90s – came to me, said, "Would you like to?" And I had one idea, and that column was so successful, they gave me a contract, and then they said, "Well, we need someone to write about sex from the male point of view." And I had to say I would have been 23, and I'd been with my then girlfriend, now my wife, for four years. And I'll be absolutely honest, there wasn't a whole lot of action beforehand. So I treated it like a reporting job. I'd call my mates up and say, "What do you think about this?"

**Literally undercover.**

Yes, but also it was a lot of knob gags, and you can make a few of those.

**Yes, you can. I love knob gags.**

I wrote a great piece about why men are jealous of women's orgasms. About why the male orgasm is such a perfunctory and dull affair compared to the female orgasm, which seems frankly outrageous.

**Yes, there's a lot of paraphernalia and build up.**

Yes, and I thought we're really... people don't understand we're getting the bum's rush here. Anyway.

**Now you can't be at the top of your game forever. What advice would you give to someone who wants to be the next Jay Rayner who's listening to this, and 10 years from now wants the top spot?**

I give the advice that I give the people who email me five times a month saying, "I like food, and I'd like to be a restaurant critic. I'd like to write restaurant reviews like you do." And I say, "It's not a food job, it's a writing job." There is no career structure for what I do, and what Grace Dent does, or what Giles Coren does. There's more career structure to be prime minister of the United Kingdom. To try and place yourself in a position where you might get one of those jobs is a vain hope, if I'm honest. But if you want to be a writer, then my advice is write about everything – and start by being a reporter, because the first thing you really need is something to write about, and that's not always going to be lurking inside your head.

**I mean, because you've written about race, crime, mental health the whole panoply of issues.**

Yes, I've done it. Yes, yes, yes. And I still feel like I could, and do. I was thinking about this recently, so a financial advisor comes to me and says, "Have you considered a retirement plan?" I said, "I can't retire from the inside of my head. However, I'm intending to keep going." My dear old mum was still writing, just before she died at 79. I said, "What's more likely than me retiring is the great British public, or their representatives thereof, being the editors, deciding they've had enough of me. That's what's much more likely."

**Is that likely, though? I mean, you're a bit of a legend, really.**

You're too kind! I work on a state of constant paranoia...

**Healthy paranoia, it keeps you on top of your game.**

Healthy paranoia. I am not on staff at The Observer, I'm on contract. I have been for 23 years. Every March 31st, they renew – or at least I hope they're going to – and my way to make sure that they do is to keep getting the numbers, and to pay attention to

every column. And at the point where I start writing with, as Martin Amis said, my left hand, being a right hander, as in doing it lazily...

**Phoning it in.**

Yes. Then everybody will notice. So I am very, very conscious that this is an extremely privileged job – and now I've got it, I better do it as well as I can.

**Now Jay, not only are you a legend, but you're also a legend who does have to leave now because you were very fastidious that we had to go.**

I'm sorry about that.

**No, don't worry! This could go on for hours, and that's a compliment to you.**

It could.

**Thank you ever so much for your time. It's been amazing.**

It's been a pleasure, Paul. Thank you.