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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 down the line by Christine Hayes, editor-in-chief of BBC Good Food and olive the UK's biggest food media brand. Responsible for good foods market leading magazine, a digital offering reaching record numbers of users and it's event business, the brand has been the ultimate cook's choice for 32 years. Last month, Good Food won 'Media Brand of the Year' at the prestigious PPA awards, recognizing its achievements in promoting diversity and building its subscription business during lockdown. Christine also launched olive magazine and lifestyle magazines in Australia during a varied career. Christine, thank you for joining me.

It's a pleasure.

Well, I mean, we should start off by congratulating you on those two PPA awards. I mean, what a great recognition of what the Good Food brand has achieved during lockdown.

Oh yeah, we were so delighted because the team has just worked so hard over the last year in particular. And so it's really lovely to get some recognition and also, I mean, media brands of the year at the PPA, that's the big one. So we were, yeah, unfortunately not able to celebrate together in person yet, but we have got plans for the summer getting together and congratulating all of the team.

It's really fascinating how any business, whether there'd be media or any in any other industries is adapted to the challenges posed by lockdown. But of course, as a media business, you have an audience that's locked down as well. How did Covid affect how we eat and how will it affect how we eat in terms of its impact in the long-term on people's dietary habits?

Oh, well, great question. In the first lockdown we saw people panicking initially, and they couldn't get their hands on particular things, no flour and so on, no eggs in some

cases. So they were looking at flour-free, egg-free recipes, people looking at how to freeze products, because they wanted to use up what they had and not waste anything. And we responded with a video series and lots of recipes, articles and live Q and A's to help people wanting to know how to bake bread without yeast or flour. They were also looking for things like lockdown lunches, family recipes, banana bread, we all know about, chocolate chip cookies. So people were coming to us as the most trusted brand, and at the start of lockdown last year as a team we thought right about what to do. How do we make sure that we give our loyal audience what they need and how do we expand beyond our audience and really give the nation what they need at this really difficult time. We have got a secret weapon at BBC Good Foods and her name is Lulu Grimes, she's our managing editor and she is someone who, when anyone else might be panicking, can just think quite clearly and we got together as a senior team and discussed what we thought the stages would be following lockdown and we put those into place. So they were, we thought everyone initially would panic and then after panicking and thinking we can't go out and go to work, the kids are all locked in the house, boredom, then we've run out of activities to do and this is all feeling not like Dunkirk spirit anymore but actually really boring and then after that we thought it's that horrible phrase but it's suddenly becoming normal again but in a new, darker way, how do we adapt to that? and then we thought of the furlough scheme which we thought was coming to an end and redundancies were being made, we thought hardship. So we looked at those stages and realised they weren't necessarily going to go one after another, like grief wouldn't necessarily be linear and completely adapted our content to focus on those areas and to really help people. And then actually lockdown two we saw an interest in Christmas much earlier than we'd normally see it. So I think people were kind of trying to distract themselves and they were prepping for exciting times ahead, well, we know how that turned out. Halloween was also massive for kids baking, as an alternative to being able to go and trick and treat All the way through though, we've seen drinks, massive growth in tandem with the first lockdown periods. So the interest in drinks on BBC goodfoods.com rose over 300% year on year. That peak period from April to June of last year and actually drinking overtook the family as the biggest for us. And that trend continued all the way through to August.

I think we all know why we all know why.

We all know why, so I'm sure wine sales were up hugely. I know we've got a wine club with Laithwaite's and the BBC Good Food wine club with Laithwaite's has done particularly well. We've started some webinars with them as well, tasting along, and that's been very successful. But also cocktails, people have the time I guess and we're maybe missing going out for a cocktail. So it was beyond the Friday night G&T, a lot of people became their own mixologists.

I mean, I've got friends that have put on weight during lockdown and I've got friends that have lost weight and it's interesting, our dietary habits have definitely changed for good or for bad, some people have gone for the comfort food other people are eating much more mindfully and reading your magazine, trying new recipes, trying to eat more healthfully. I found that I lost a bit of weight because I'm not sort of grubbing pot noodles with five minutes left

before I need to set off for work. That kind of thing. So have you found that the interest in food itself has sort of increased hugely?

Yes. Sure. So I think people were definitely looking for lockdown projects to keep themselves busy and also to keep themselves occupied and learning and so on. So definitely things like learning to make pasta or learning to make sourdough, those have really increased, baking and so on. And anything to do with the kids as well has been important. But we also launched the new video series I was talking about. One of them we called 'In The Zone' and it was kind of, not actual ASMR, but it was very relaxing and it was just sort of showing you how to whisk meringues and things like that. So definitely people had more time on their hands or some people had more time on their hands. Other people had less time on their hands, for example, if they were teaching their kids while trying to juggle their own jobs. So yeah, it definitely affected the content that we're putting out. So big projects that people could do, things like healthy lunches for the children, making sure that the kids were eating healthfully and yeah, definitely we saw as the lockdown was coming to an end, we definitely saw an increase in search for healthier recipes. So I think a lot of people did comfort eat actually and then realized that they were going to suddenly be seen again and started coming to Good Food to look for healthy recipes of which we have millions. I mean, health is one of the most important verticals for the brand and that content is very popular.

I mean, the success has been incredible. The brand reached record page views of 215 million and the site on its biggest traffic day had nearly 9 million page views in a single day.

I know, it is testament to the amazing skills of the team really. One of the things that's important to us is obviously giving people what they want, so we can react really quickly to that. We're very data-driven, but we've also got great instincts. And so that combination really meant that we were putting out content that really resonated with the nation and people really came to us first.

What's the process for putting an issue of the magazine together? Does it have a theme? How do you deal with the subjectivity of people? My wife loves aubergine, I hate it. And I know you have a team of experts rigorously testing recipes before they are put to readers each month, but it is literally a matter of taste isn't it, and people have different tastes...

They certainly do. I mean, when putting together the issues of either olive or Good Food, we consider the calendar of the year ahead. So seasonality is really important, what's in season in Britain at that particular time. So that will usually inform what goes on the cover. And then there are also various different events throughout the year that are incredibly important, for example, pancake day, Easter, and so on. And now also we are looking not just at traditional British celebrations, but also looking at, speaking to our commitment to diversity and inclusion and looking at what are the important dates in the calendar. So we'll plan a year in advance. And then obviously, you know, Christmas is our absolute most important time of the year. We start planning Christmas on the 1st of January, and then we talk about it all year as well.

So in terms of how do we make sure that we're not subjective? I mean, we've got a great team of recipe creators and they're all specialists in various things. So baking for example, or some people might be experts in sourdough and so on. We also, you know, talk to each other and check things and make sure that we're not just using our internal kitchens, so we're not just using the ingredients that we all personally like. We make sure that there's a really broad range for people. I mean, particularly for Good Food, as the market leader, our audience is really broad, so we're always making sure that we're checking in and that there's something there for everybody.

How do you keep things fresh in a spring or an autumn related series of recipes?

Oh, that's a good question. But we find we've always got too many ideas rather than not enough. The last year has been really exciting because we're seeing things through a different filter, so you're approaching spring from a different filter. Christmas last year was a real challenge. What's it going to look like this year? And in the end, obviously everyone had to have a much smaller celebration than before. So, you know, we had to react to that. It's using different contributors, in the last year, we've had a particular focus on increasing, new voices within the brands. And they brought a much richer content to the brand. In fact, we transformed our brand with new contributors and stood behind our commitment to diversity and inclusion and brought some new voices into the brands.

Have there been changes in people's eating habits that you think will remain after lockdown?

Well, we've actually just commissioned a nationwide survey and we'll get the results of that and August just to see what we think, but I definitely think that they have been. We touched on it earlier, I think some people have had time to really consider what they're eating during the day, they're at home, so they can have a more leisurely lunch for example. I think the rise in subscription meal kits is interesting and, you know, lots of restaurants pivoted didn't they to create kits that could be delivered all around the country. Some people also, I think, will have moved out of the big cities, knowing that they can work from home now. And it will be interesting to see if, like some of my friends have said, we've done that and one of the things that's made it possible is because we can still get really good restaurant foods delivered to a smaller town. So I think people have expected to be able to have things delivered to them as well. More mindful eating, I suppose, they have enjoyed sort of learning to make things like sourdough and so on. And just actually spending a lot of time in their kitchens. They probably become much better cooks because they've actually had the time to do it.

Has this amazing job changed your relationship with food? Can you just sort of eat food like a normal person, or do you have to sort of think wearing two hats as you're looking for recipe ideas or what's more of a less of in terms of the ingredients, because you find this sometimes with people in a certain industry that lots of people in real life also do, It's the kind of, people in the television industry can't watch a TV program without thinking, why did the director do

that? And why is that a two shot and a wide shot? Has it changed your relationship with food?

Well I'd probably describe myself as maybe a hands-off foodie, which is a phrase that our creative director, Ben Curtis, sort of when we're talking about olive, for example, you have part of our audience is very very food literate and very good at cooking, but also interested in not just food in the home, but in terms of traveling and restaurants and so on. And I would describe myself as a competent cook and I like entertaining when we're allowed to do that, and then I'll make a big effort then, but most of the time I like assembling things. I like really good ingredients put together very simply. And in that way, I'm probably more like the Olive audience. Whereas with Good Food, I think there's a lot of scratch cooks, like audience scratch cook every day. And they come to us for ideas of really good, healthy, everyday meals, as well as big show-stopping cakes and things like that. So I've always been interested in foods and when I got the chance to work in food, I thought about the fact that I'm not trained like most of our recipe creators are professionally trained. And I found that probably the fact that I come from that different background, I come from a journalistic background has been a good balance. So I can ask some of the questions that they know already because they're so well trained. I can ask some of the questions that the audience might want to know as well.

I love that phrase hands-off foodie. As soon as you said it I thought, that's a label for me, I can come out as a hands-off. I like eating, but I don't really like cooking, but if someone else is a good cook, I will happily scoff at delicious food. I mean, you mentioned, olive there a couple of times in the answer, another one of your huge successes. Last year, you restructured the content team Immediate bringing the olive and the BBC Good Food team together. How does it work in practice? Cause I'm old enough to remember before the Liberal Democrats had the SDP Liberal Alliance where there was one team, but two brands. Is that how it works? Is it the same thing?

Well, when I first got to BBC Good Food, so just over six years ago now, we looked at the Good Food content team and we realised we were probably over-indexing on print and that digital was under-resourced. So we brought the concept team together into three hubs. So we've got a content hub, which comprises the digital writers and our recipe content creators. Then we've got a subs team, which is obviously the sub editors and we've got a design hub. And the idea of doing that on Good Food was to upskill staff to work across both print and digital. And we've got the platform specialists in each of course but it means that content can be planned and generated for a separate format. So commissioned if you like both strands of the business, so print digital and live to a certain extent. And then last year we decided that we would expand this model to include the smaller, more agile olive team so that these three hubs create content for both brands. Although there are of course champions on both brands that look after the needs of different audiences. So the idea is that we support and complement rather than compete with each other in both digital and print. And it means there's greater efficiency, we're creating a single view. So we avoid content crossover, and we're able to promote both brands through editorial, there's joint

content planning and generation, and we can also pull our content archive to create new products, but is it working? Because obviously all that sounds great on paper, honestly, change is not easy for many of us, but we've bedded in, I'd say and the new structure recognizes the extraordinary talent we've got across the both brands and it's allowing us to develop our existing talent. And I think it's also boosted pride in our brands. It also allows us to continue to support print, but switches the doll further towards our digital ambitions. And it's created an environment in which we constantly innovate to create more varied content. It would be really great also to be back in the office. So from September, we'll be back in the office and it will be sitting in a completely different sort of environment and working in a really different way. So we've had to do this and get to know each other remotely, which isn't ideal, but yes, I think it's working. Good Foods' market leading approach and resources has helped support olive and then the smaller brands' agility has really added pace to our group.

What's your working day, week, month pattern like? How do you split your time across both brands?

Well, I would love to say that I've got a system, but I don't. One thing I do try to stick to rigidly though is the one-to-one site I have. I get such a lot of energy from my team and I'm constantly impressed, and to be honest, occasionally intimidated by their creativity and that seemingly in-exhaustive supply of ideas. And the other thing that I do I guess, is that there's nothing more precious than when you put in your time and attention, so the two things I do every morning is set my intention for the day and I also try to do the most difficult thing on my to do list first. This job is like miles away from my previous magazine editor role and it requires a hell of a lot of flex. As a group we're constantly innovating, so along with the BAU staff, like setting the editorial strategy and managing the content team, there's always new projects that take my focus, like exploring new content formats, like the webinars we started during lockdown, for example. So I don't know if there is a typical day, but like one might start with a group management meeting to agree priorities for the month. Then I might have a check-in with my senior editorial team to talk about, this week it's been about premium content for the Good Food app. Might spend an hour editing a podcast, approving press releases, negotiating fees with our talent, in something as mundane, but important as talking to facilities about the test kitchen when we returned to the office and liaising with the marketing team about Christmas campaigns. So I pack it in, not every day is like that. I think it's important to stay passionate and allow myself to do the things I love too. So I still spend a lot of my downtime eating out. And the other thing to say and it's not fashionable to admit it at all, but I honestly think a long lunch every so often with like-minded colleagues or other people in the business is worthwhile. Simply to take time out of the office too. Something that we started doing within the senior editorial team recently as well is a breathing space day, which is once a month or once every two months, depending on how hectic we are, we shut down and say we're not going to check emails unless, if anything's important, give us a call. And we either take a theme, for example, what's next for olive? We did that last year. Or we just say, okay, today is about not doing anything business as usual. I'm going to explore a food market, or I'm going to cook three recipes from competitors or from our own brands. Or I'm going to spend the day immersed in social media, on something that's not to do with food. And then we come

back and report on that in a half day later that week, and it's been really useful. I think it's really important to remember to show up in the store in that way.

One of my clients owns lots of fancy restaurants, and eats lots of good food. And he once told me that when he's at home, he actually just likes to eat some sort of egg and chips or really plain food, to sort of differentiate from his work life. Do you have that where you've got all this nice food that you eat and it's all creative and then sometimes do you just cook yourself a plain omelet with some cheese in it?

I definitely have days where I don't cook anything, but I really like good ingredients. That's probably what I would do. So I might have just something like some good mozzarella, some good parma ham, some really good tomatoes and olive oil. I'll do things like that. Or just really simple noodles in a good stock. So yeah, of course I do. I do like to balance eating out with very simple food at home, of course.

But even those plain dishes have to have some thought put into it, I suppose what I'm trying to get to is when was the last time you ate a pot noodle or had a kebab after a few beers at the pub, like terrible food with no redeeming qualities?

I am known for being a crisp addict and I'm happy to go on record here to say that the best crisps in the entire world are Co-Op's salt and vinegar chardonnay crisps.

They're absolutely delicious.

And don't challenge me on it because they are the best crisps

I won't. I'm actually about to challenge you by saying why don't we quit our jobs and set up a co-op salt and vinegar crisp fan club. Cause I think we get loads of people joining that could be our new living.

I have had an online fight with my big boss at work, Chris Kerwin because he reckons that I think it's roast chicken, is it Sainsbury's roast chicken or walkers roast chicken. He reckons that they're better than Co-Op. So we've had an online fight and we've got an amazing Facebook group called the Good Food Together Group. And we have this fight, my boss, Chris Kerwin and I about crisps and I definitely won. So I think Co-Op's salt and vinegar chardonnay crisps are the past, the present and the future of crisps.

I think his job is untenable. Why hasn't he resigned over this? I mean, he's shown that he lacks judgment. Tell us about the live business. Obviously it's hard to pause because of what's happened, but presumably it's going to resume once life starts to return to normal.

Well, Immediate's already held two live outdoor events. So Our Gardeners' World Fair and there's an Artisan Festival at Hampton Court. And I think BBC Gardeners' World is coming up as well in summer, slightly later in August. But we are still on track to do our BBC Good Foods, flagship show at the NEC in winter. So obviously we've just got to stick to the government guidelines and there'll probably be reduced capacities and we'll work obviously with the local authorities to make sure that we keep our customers safe and well. And we're just sort of monitoring the situation and making sure that we adhere to the latest regulations, but our big flagship show should be back at NEC in November with all the amazing shopping experiences and our celebrity chefs such as Tom Kerridge and Nadiya Hussain for our audience, we also run great masterclasses there, or workshops, I should say, so people get a chance to meet our team and, and cook along with them.

This will be an esoteric question of interest only to the most diehard industry people, but obviously you have the BBC, the brand's title, but it's published under license. And now from BBC studios to Immediate media, which are the company behind it, how does that relationship work? I know that the BBC studios link, for example, allows you to work very closely with its food program brands. Do people just treat you as the BBC, the readers, how does it actually work or do you try and differentiate into, are the readers aware of it that you guys produce the content under license from the BBC?

Yeah, I think as a brand Good Food has got an incredible level of trust. And I think being part of the BBC is part of that. And obviously we work very closely with the BBC and we highlight BBC content, particularly within the magazine because it's very much of interest to our readers. So we work with chef Tom Kerridge, for example, and also Emma Freud who is a regular on radio four and is one of our contributors. And we do highlight all the new TV and radio content around food. So Immediate acquired Good Food from studios back in 2018, but it had previously published BBC Good Food magazine. So we've had a very close relationship with Immediate since 2011. So under the terms of the deal, um, the BBC Good Food brand name and the BBC goodfood.com URL are licensed to me yet by studios.

So all superheroes have an origin story. Can you walk our listeners through your career? Cause I mean, you, yourself personally have been involved in quite a few exciting initiatives. I mean, you worked on the launch of More magazine coming straight from school, you were the editor of Wedding and Home and then transferred to Sydney to launch a new bridal title. How did you get started? Is this what you always wanted to do? I mean, give our listeners a precis of your career if you can.

Well, I just hope my mum's not listening to this because she's still disappointed, but I was supposed to go to university but in my gap year, I started a job. My first job was actually on the launch of Best magazine. So everyone will know how old I am. I am proudly 52. So I worked on the launch of Best magazine and within the six months that I was there, I met someone still a good friend of mine, Joe Bell, who said over at EMAP, they're launching this new magazine. Do you want to come and be my fashion assistant? So I did, I mean, what an amazing job to have, working on the launch of a magazine, like More. And I just got stuck in and then it was like, oh, okay, I'll defer my

place at university. And then the second year came round and I deferred it again. And then it was like, I'm not going to university, I'm having too much fun in London working on More magazine. So I didn't go. So I was in More on fashion and moved into beauty, which is a really good move actually, because within beauty, I got to shoot and write. Eventually I moved to Looks magazine as the deputy editor. And then after all that time at EMAP Metro, which was such an exciting place to work at that time and with people like Dave Hepworth and Mark Allen, I then jumped ship to IPC media to take up my first editorship that was on Wedding and Home. And that was a really good experience as well, because it was like any other women's magazine in terms of all the sections, so fashion, beauty features and so on. But obviously all centered on the big day. But lots of nice travel opportunities as well. The not so good bit was I got married and divorced while doing it. So it was a lot more fun getting married than the divorce bit, because a lot of the time I'd be, uh, did quite a lot of interviews about weddings was always something that got a lot of PR and I'd get asked all the time to talk about my own wedding. And it was fine when I was planning my wedding, but once I was getting divorced, it was actually quite awkward. So while I was there, IPC at the time, had a joint venture with Time Inc in Australia and Time Inc had a magazine called Bride To Be, and the MD of Southbank, which was part of IPC I worked out at at the time, Tim Brooks asked me if I wanted to go over and sort of share my experience with the Australian team. I think I bit his hands off actually. So I went to work over there with a really good team for a couple of months. And I just fell in love with Sydney. So when I came back I just said if there's any chance I can go more permanently, I'd really like to do that. And, and that actually happened shortly afterwards. So I was there for about two years. I also wrote a wedding column for the Sydney Herald, which is fun, actually no it was The Sun Herald sorry, not the Sydney Herald The Sun Herald and helped launch an interior magazine. And it was doing the interiors magazine made me realize that wasn't where I wanted my career to go and my publisher over there, I said, well, where do you want to go? And I realized it was food. There's an amazing food scene in Sydney and amazing farmer's markets and great wine, obviously, great restaurants. And I realized it was food. And then I think it was on holiday, I'd come home and I was talking to some of my friends and they're like, when are you coming back? When are you coming back? And I was like, well, I'll come back when there's a suitable job. And then shortly after that, I got approached by BBC Worldwide, it was at the time when my friend Jane Bruton was working. And I think she'd known that I was really into food and heard that they were launching a magazine that eventually became olive. And thank you Jane, if you're listening, she put me forward for it. And then I met Orlando Morin and Nick Brett and amazingly I got the job. It was the most exciting news to hear because I'd flown back from Sydney to London for my interview. And then within four days flew home and then found out when I got back to Sydney. So it was just so exciting to know that I was coming back to London to work on a launch or something that I was really passionate about.

You've made some incredible progress on diversity and inclusion. Could you tell our listeners about it?

Is fair to say we've transformed our brands with new columnists, with new recipe writers, with video presenters, we've given a platform to some voices that are just too rarely heard in food media, but there's still loads of work to do to make sure that we better represent our existing audience and that we attract new audiences because

you know, food should be about bringing everyone together and exchanging ideas, exchanging stories. And that's what we need to do more of. And particularly with BBC Good Food's scale, we've got a responsibility to evolve in order to make our content better and richer and relevant to how we live and eat today. So as a team, we've really made a commitment to changing things quickly, but meaningfully at the same time, we've tapped into our networks to make it happen. And then crucially, we've also diverted our budget to ensure that we're supporting our commitment to diversity and inclusion. So we've put our money where our mouth is. We pay our contributors fairly and that's been really key. So we've commissioned more inclusive content. And as I said, we recruited new columnists, recipe writers, video presenters, podcasters and we really want to amplify voices that as I said before are rarely given space, I think it's really transformed us and better serves our sort of generation spanning diverse audiences. We've got a campaign called We Are BBC Good Food in which we celebrate our new and existing contributors. So some of those people might be Melissa Thompson. She's just won a food writing award at the British Guild of Food Writers for her work in Good Food amongst other things. And we've also got Marverine Cole who's our new beer sommelier and podcast host with Tom Kerridge. We've got a new video presenter, Divya Sharma. And we've also sourced appropriate talent to create underchampions, recipes or cuisines, such as Filipino and Ethiopian. We've also started an ongoing recipe audit to ensure that we're crediting cuisines correctly and making sure that we've got under champion cuisines such as Ghana and Burmese, and we're paying the right people to fill those recipe gaps and working on a long list of digital first diverse celebration recipes and recruiting new talent within our team as well. As well as our contributors. So yes, we are committed to constant learning and training to help identify where we have unconscious bias and within food it's particularly interesting, so we've all really probably got a bit of a Western mindset when we're testing and editing recipes and so we're sort of looking to people in other communities to get us on track there and say why are you always thinking this way? And where can you improve? So, you know what, we've made a start, but there's still a hell of a lot today.

What's next for BBC Good Food and olive?

Well for olive it's all about adding whole life kinds of perspectives, by which I mean, sort of developing our lifestyle, our homewares and our kitchen aspects. And we're also obviously looking at the return of travel. That's going to be really important for olive in the next few months. And then across the board, we're getting even closer to our audience so that we can produce more personalized content for them. So we're exploring new content formats, we've had a lot of success with podcasts, and now we're focusing on our online learning webinars and baking and health courses on a platform called FutureLearn. We're constantly pushing for more diversity, equity and inclusion in terms of everything. So content, contributors, and recruitment, we've really got to address age, ethnicity, neurodiversity, socio economic background, LGBTQ, and disability. As I said before, focusing on personalization and premium content, we really want to mirror the success of print subscriptions in digital, and everything's underpinned by sustainability. We need to keep that uppermost in our minds when we're commissioning content so that our content is as useful to the audiences as possible. And we're also kind of looking at family life health and the

building blocks of being able to cook for anybody regardless of their dietary requirement in cuisine.

Christine. That was a hugely interesting conversation. Thank you ever so much for your time.

You're a superstar. Thank you.