

American Pie

British chef and culinary star

Jamie Oliver discovers a new America every day—and it's getting tastier with each mile he travels.

BY LAUREN PAIGE KENNEDY

q&a

British chef, international TV personality, best-selling author, nutrition revolutionary, world-renowned restaurateur—these are the obvious descriptions for famous foodie and father-of-four **Jamie Oliver**.

But L.A. homeboy? Southern soul man? Western ranch-hand?

For his new cookbook, “Jamie’s America,” Oliver, 35, spent months traveling across the United States to discover what *really* stirs its people, from authentic barbecue in the smokehouses of Georgia to traditional Egyptian soups in Astoria, Queens, to the delicate use of cilantro and chiles in surprisingly fresh and light Mexican fare in Southern California. Along the way, he met countless characters—cowboys working Wyoming ranches, church folk pleased to dish on family secrets, native Navajo steeped in indigenous cooking techniques—who together set the table for the likable Brit. They also schooled him on what it means to eat in the “real” America, far removed from both fast food and four-star restaurants.

The result is a big, brash volume of recipes and flavorful images that present an eclectic menu of converging palates—much like America.

Here, for our dining issue, *Washington Flyer* sits down with Oliver and eats up everything he serves: his musings on why he thinks the second season of his reality series “Food Revolution,” recently filmed in Los Angeles, may be even more radical than the premiere season set in Huntington, W.Va.; his new taste for American democracy; his tips for frequent flying; his favorite D.C. chef; and why “Jamie’s America” will show the world that not all Americans spend their days at the drive-thru.

WF: Your latest venture, “Jamie’s America,” is extraordinarily ambitious. What inspired it?

JO: I’ve been working in America for 10 years, but kept going back to the same places—New York and San Francisco. Doing this series was a chance to see more of America and show the world that there’s much more to American cooking than fast food and frozen pizzas.

WF: For the book you traveled to New York City, Los Angeles, Arizona, Louisiana, Georgia, Florida and Wyoming. Did you discover any cohesiveness among the regions, either in the cooking or in the wider culture, or did you simply find many smaller Americas?

JO: I guess both, really. I was amazed at the variety of the cooking that people did, but always welcomed to share and learn in

whatever they were doing. The pride that the Americans have in their local cooking is the same, whether I was on a mountain in Arizona with the Navajo or in the bayou of Louisiana with a Cajun.

WF: Do you have a favorite region of the country or a culinary experience that particularly inspired you?

JO: I couldn’t pick a favorite, because all of the places were so different and I learned something everywhere I went. I am crazy for chilies, though, and seeing how they were used in L.A. really turned me on. I’m now slightly obsessed for fresh, light, authentic Mexican cuisine. Avocados, chilies, cilantro, limes—such light and fun ingredients to play around with.

WF: Your adventures took you off the grid: You hung out with cowboys, gang mem-

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bers and country pastors from the South. Is this the way to find the real flavor of a country, by skipping the famous restaurants and sampling the fare real folks eat?

JO: I'd like to think so. I have a team of ninja researchers who find these places and people for me. Anyone can do a Google search, but I'm looking for more. A real, person-to-person, boots-on-the-ground kind of research. My guys really do their homework.

WF: You're famously passionate about nutrition in school lunch programs, home cooking and your restaurants and recipes. Did you leave the U.S. feeling hopeful that not all Americans dine on fast food five times a week?

JO: I am not at all passionate about nutrition! I am passionate about food. Real, proper food, and learning how to cook it. The people I met were amazing home cooks, and producing really artisanal products. Whether it was the barbecue in the South I tasted inside a falling-down shack or the beautiful cakes that the ex-cons from Homeboy Industries made in L.A., there was just so much love and attention given to the food that I can't help [but feel] optimistic.

WF: Was the experience of traveling across America an extension of, or directly related to, your "Food Revolution" television series that launched in Huntington, W.Va.?

JO: Actually, I did "Food Revolution" a year later [in 2009], although in many ways I've been trying to get it going for the last seven. I think the country and the broadcasters in [the U.S.] are finally ready for some really gritty television. It's not easy to watch, because it's real. And believe me, it wasn't easy to make, either. It was the hardest thing I've ever done. I was away from my family and my home with a whole bunch of people who just wanted me to go away. I don't recommend it.

WF: With so many irons in the fire—14 best-selling books, TV series, your foundations, restaurants, a magazine, blogs, PR commitments—you've become a mega-brand. You must find yourself on an airplane constantly. How often are you in the air?

JO: I can't keep track, although I bet if you asked my wife she'd know.

WF: On your website, jamieoliver.com, you post a "question of the week," which was,

at the time of this interview: "What are your traveling tips when you fly?" Please share with us some of your own!

JO: Flat beds. The funny thing is that on the flight over here [to the U.S. to do press] from London was the first uninterrupted sleep I've had since Buddy was born. [Buddy is Oliver's fourth child, born in September 2010.] I fell asleep before we took off and woke up as we landed. I have a whole new love for long plane rides.

WF: You and your family are in the process of moving to Los Angeles?

JO: Yep, we're coming for three months and putting the girls into school.

WF: The L.A. Unified School District reportedly just turned you down when you approached them to do a second season of your series, "Food Revolution," in Los Angeles. Do you plan to fight the decision?

JO: No need, really. The show will feature schools in some way, whether they like it or not. As soon as they announced their decision the parents started writing to me and tweeting about it. If the parents want us to help their kids, then we will.

WF: What is your favorite travel destination in the world?

JO: I love Italy.

WF: Finally, what is your impression of Washington, D.C.?

JO: I've been to D.C. a couple of times, and flew through every time I went to Huntington. I've always been working and never got a proper tour, but the view out the window of my car was unbelievable. All of those buildings and monuments in one small place.

WF: This is *Washington Flyer's* dining issue. Have you had any outstanding dining experiences in or around D.C.?

JO: That wild Spanish guy José Andrés has cooked some amazing food for me. I went to his little bar [Minibar at Café Atlantico] about six years ago and got a tour of his kitchen, and he showed me all of the cool equipment. I ate this little candy-floss foie gras thing that was amazing. 🍷



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