

So you think you can swear

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Celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay tells *David Meagher* why he couldn't give a *#@! about being in hot water for using colourful language on TV.



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The first thing Gordon Ramsay does when he sits down for our interview is tell me how much he likes my jacket. The next thing he does is feel me up. Or rather, he runs his hand over my velvet arm. The world's most outrageous celebrity chef wants to know where the jacket's from. When I tell him it's a three-year-old Ralph Lauren he raises an eyebrow and suggests it would also look good with a pair of jeans.

We're at the Conrad Tokyo hotel, where Ramsay has an eponymous restaurant. It's Sunday morning and the joint is buzzing with immaculately dressed Tokyo locals attending one of the four weddings booked in today. Despite the super-cook's fashionista commentary, Ramsay is sporting his ubiquitous white chef's top, which, along with his 188cm frame, blond, tousled hair and booming voice, means that he is hard to ignore.

Pretty soon I'm into duck-and-cover mode against a fusillade of f-words, embarrassed at his language in such a decorous setting. No surprises here. Ramsay is at least as well known for being coarse as he is for his courses. He virtually invented the stereotype of the angry chef who gives everyone in the kitchen a hard time.

I figure it's as good an opportunity as any to ask him about the recent kerfuffle in Australia over his swearing and the fact that it has sparked an inquiry into the television code of conduct. He is, of course, unrepentant. If anyone is to blame, it's the network

executives who decide when to screen his shows, he says.

“I mean, f..k me. It’s an industry language and I’m not exactly proud of it and it’s not purposely done to create attention. Like I said to (CEO) David Gyngell at Channel Nine (which airs two of Ramsay’s food shows), ‘You’re the f..king broadcaster, you put it out at 8.30pm and if a chef calls me a c..t that’s not my issue. And secondly, if you’re not happy with it, switch the f..king thing over.’

“The British press got hold of it (the controversy) and said, ‘Ramsay banned in Australia’ and I thought, ‘What the f..k?’ I’m not going to change my ways because I’ve upset anybody.”

Ramsay can afford to be candid with Nine’s boss. He’s the network’s hottest property at the moment, even when he’s shown in repeat. His shows *Hell’s Kitchen* and Ramsay’s *Kitchen Nightmares* can be seen three times a week on Nine and he’s on pay television almost in perpetuity. His appearance on Nine’s ailing current affairs program *60 Minutes* last month drew an audience of more than two million. A repeat of Ramsay’s *Kitchen Nightmares* on Nine that same week was the network’s highest-rating show with 1.6 million viewers nationally. In fact, he is so of-the-moment that he couldn’t care less if he appears on the ABC’s *Enough Rope* program when he visits Australia next month, in part to inspect locations in Sydney and Melbourne for a potential signature restaurant.

“I got all this shit from Andrew Denton. He said, ‘Look, if you go on 60 Minutes you can’t come on the show.’ I said, ‘I don’t give a f..k. I’m not from Australia, I’m coming down there and if you think I’m going to beat around the bush because I’ve got to tread carefully to get on the show, mate, I don’t give two shits, trust me.’”

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WE LIVE AT A TIME when it is expected that a successful chef will have a media career as well. A critically acclaimed and commercially successful restaurant isn’t enough any more. And if you are really successful you will have your own magazine, a line of kitchen products bearing your name and maybe even a deal with an airline to “design” its menu. But all of those trimmings are really just a by-product of good television ratings. Would Ramsay have almost 20 restaurants in cities all over the world without his TV profile? Would he be visiting here next month to look at sites for a Ramsay restaurant if it were not for his amazing popularity with local TV audiences? Unlikely and unlikelier.

Ramsay, however, seems highly suspicious of the industry that has made him a household name. Ask him how he feels about being a celebrity chef and he barks: “I f..king hate that term. There’s a big difference between a serious chef and a TV chef, and now that television has caught up with the reality of the excitement behind a real chef as opposed to a TV chef it’s really weird, it’s kind of full circle.

“Cooking on television is easy,” he insists. “From a long shot to a wide shot to the editing

suite it's a f..king doddle. So when I get chefs who want to come in with their names embroidered and they've got a medal in the jelly Olympics I get them the f..k out the door straight away. Mention anything to do with TV (in a job interview) and just forget it."

He may hate the phrase but Ramsay holds a unique position among celebrity chefs. You won't catch him concocting things like bacon-flavoured ice cream or dabbling in molecular cuisine, the style of the moment. And he's a long way from the DIY queens Nigella Lawson and Delia Smith: there's not really a lot of cooking on his shows. Even the professionally trained Jamie Oliver looks a little homespun in comparison. What's unusual about Ramsay is that, through television, he's taken haute cuisine to the masses.

Ramsay was born in Scotland and grew up in the tourist town of Stratford-upon-Avon after his parents moved to England. Ramsay, however, lived in a part of town off the tourist trail on a council estate. Food when he was growing up, he told *The New Yorker* last year, was not about culture; it was just something to eat, usually cheap and often fried or out of a tin. His father, he wrote in his 2006 autobiography *Humble Pie*, was an abusive drunkard. In the same book he revealed that not only was his younger brother Ronald a heroin addict, but that Ramsay gave him money to buy heroin so that he would attend their father's funeral. In September last year Ronald Ramsay was jailed in Indonesia for 10 months for possession of heroin.

At 15 Gordon Ramsay was signed to the Glasgow Rangers football team, but after three years as a professional soccer player a knee injury forced him to quit and to find another vocation, so he studied hotel management.

In 1988 he persuaded chef Marco Pierre White – the Ramsay of the 1980s – to take him on in his two-Michelin-starred restaurant, *Harvey's* in Wandsworth. He credits White with his success. After three years with White, Ramsay went to work for Albert Roux at *Le Gavroche* in Mayfair. Roux encouraged his young protégé to spend time in France and invited him to work at his restaurant at a ski resort in the French Alps. Ramsay later moved to Paris and worked alongside Guy Savoy and Joël Robuchon, both Michelin-starred chefs.

Back in London in 1993 and keen to open his own restaurant, it was White who put him in touch with A to Z Restaurants Limited, owned by a group of Italian bankers who had just bought a failing restaurant business in Chelsea. A to Z hired Ramsay and Aubergine opened in October 1993 with a French menu. By 1995 it had won a Michelin star and by 1998 had earned a second.

With the backing of the Italians, Ramsay opened another restaurant in 1998, *L'Oranger* on St James Street. The Italians wanted Ramsay to sign a multi-year contract, but he was itching to do his own thing so later that year he jumped ship to open his first wholly owned restaurant, *Gordon Ramsay*, in Chelsea. A year later he opened his second, *Pétrus* in St James. By 2001 Restaurant Gordon Ramsay had been awarded three Michelin stars (the maximum), so he opened a third, *Gordon Ramsay* at Claridge's.

Today his restaurant empire has earned him 10 Michelin stars and countless awards. He has restaurants in Tokyo, Dubai, Dublin, Prague, New York and Paris. His Paris restaurant, which is actually in Versailles, got what Ramsay calls a spiteful review from *Le Figaro* when it opened in March. But negative reviews don't seem to bother him. *The New York Times* declared his Manhattan restaurant lacked excitement after it opened early last year, but it has been awarded two Michelin stars and Ramsay reckons it'll go to three stars in November.

One reason bad reviews don't bother him is that he knows they can be just as useful in getting customers in the door as a glowing one, perhaps more. But he was irked when *Le Figaro* critic François Simon gave his opinion on the restaurant, Gordon Ramsay au Trianon, before it had officially launched. Ramsay felt, too, that the attack was largely personal rather than culinary. In New York, however, reviewer Frank Bruni visited the restaurant Gordon Ramsay at the London several times before he pronounced it to be lacklustre, and Ramsay gives him credit.

“He's a very talented man, Frank Bruni. And one thing I've always said is (*The New York Times*) come in five times before they review it, which is a godsend to any restaurant. We got two stars out of four. Was it justified? I'm not a critic, but more importantly I'm f..king busy. The place is turning over \$US400,000 a week and we're going to hit \$US25 million in our first year.”

Other food critics – especially the British ones – don't get quite the same level of respect. “Food critics are very powerful people and we've got celebrity food critics in the UK now who are more interested in talking about their girlfriend's bikini line than the decor of the restaurant – the A.A. Gills and the like. They've become so sort of farcical that they're now a parody of themselves and so people aren't taking them as seriously as they were 10 years ago.”

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ONE OF THE SURPRISES this Sunday morning is that Ramsay up close is utterly charming. He may litter his conversation with swear words but he is far from the obnoxious, aggressive character he is on TV. And he's surprisingly candid for someone with a large empire resting on his name and reputation. He's never watched his own shows (“F..k that”) and confesses that he has a bit of an ego (“Chefs are selfish ... I've been a very selfish, determined f..ker to get where I am today”). Selfish, but focused. “You're selfish because you know that's the way you are when you're faced with an ingredient ... you've got the basic ingredient, but you've got to turn it into something quite magical, charge for it, serve it and be successful on the back of it. Oh, and by the way, that same ingredient is in 20,000 restaurants on your doorstep every day.”

Ramsay says the key to a successful restaurant is to instil confidence and have a long-term vision. “Very few people get that right,” he says. “Chefs don't cook for customers today, chefs are more interested in cooking for themselves. A good chef needs to have

one eye on the dining room and listen in a very articulate manner to what's needed from the customers because it can't just be purely chef-driven. Of course you're focused and you're involved, but you've got to know what your customers want. Customers vote with their feet, they don't ring you up and say they had a mediocre lunch and they're not coming back; they just don't come back."

Matt Moran of Sydney restaurant Aria and the Nine Network's show *The Chopping Block* has known Ramsay since 1994. The pair met through a mutual friend who shared a flat with Moran in London and have since become close friends. Moran says Ramsay is "incredibly charismatic and incredibly passionate about what he does, about everything in life in fact. He's actually a very caring sort of person. The first thing he'll ask me when he calls is how's my wife and kids. He's also very genuine. When you're his mate you're his mate for life." And he says Ramsay behaves on television as he does in real life.

Despite the phenomenal success of the restaurant makeover show *Kitchen Nightmares*, Ramsay says he's ready to wind it up. "Kitchen Nightmares is something that means a lot to me because I put that restaurant in my hands and I work my arse off to turn it around. But unfortunately they take me on as opposed to taking the advice on," he says. "I think I'm going to draw that one to an end. I want to move on now."

Considering he's now had three hit TV shows (*The F Word*, a topical food show produced by Channel 4 in the UK; *Hell's Kitchen*, a US reality TV cooking competition; and *Kitchen Nightmares*, produced by Channel 4 and later by Fox in the US), might Ramsay be cooking up yet another television concept?

"I dunno," he says. "*Nightmares* is much sought-after in 117 countries and I don't want to see it become mundane ... I suppose I want to quit while I'm ahead and move on." He insists he hasn't committed himself to a TV show based on the rumoured opening of a restaurant in Melbourne's Crown complex and says he is still considering several options.

Despite his high profile, Ramsay says he is not concerned with his appearance: "With my wrinkles I'm hardly a f..king male cover of *Vogue* am I?" But that messy blond hair appears to have been produced with considerable effort and the colour is just a little too perfect. Then there's his obsession with running. He says he runs like a donkey because he used to be fat and if he didn't run he'd be even fatter. "I don't think chefs should be fat. Why? Because it's not a good advertisement for your customers."

And he's astute about the power of TV. The industry is brutal, he says, when it comes to deciding who is going to make it and who is not. "You don't use the television, but at the same time you can't ignore it. It's a fine line, isn't it? Where does the television become more important than the restaurant?"

RAMSAY says he runs his business, Gordon Ramsay Holdings, in partnership with his father-in-law, Chris Hutcheson, and intends to keep it that way. "We had a huge interest from a Russian party last year to take 35 per cent of the group, but I don't want to be shackled," he says.

Yet at the same time, if the money and the timing are right he won't rule out selling up. "I'm 41, how long can I go at this pace? Minimum another 10 years? Then I'll f..k off to Australia and retire, then I'll do the opposite of what I've done in my career. Open a restaurant in Queensland and open the f..king thing one day a week and close six days and just open for the fun of it."

A jest perhaps, but it illustrates the immense pressure he is under – he travels constantly and is rarely at home with his wife, Cayetana (known as Tana), whom he married in 1996, and their four children. Unlike some famous chefs who open restaurants around the world under licensing arrangements, Ramsay takes a hands-on approach to the eateries that bear his name and invests his own money in them. He recently opened Gordon Ramsay Plane Food in Heathrow's Terminal 5 in London, as well as Maze by Gordon Ramsay at the Hilton Old Town in Prague. Later this year he will open in Los Angeles and Amsterdam and, if all goes to plan, in Australia.

Stretched too thinly? *Le Figaro* branded his Versailles restaurant "karaoke cuisine", suggesting that without Ramsay's personal presence diners would not be getting the real thing. Ramsay is angry: "I find it extraordinary that (*Le Figaro*) have got the gall ... that's my profile being judged as opposed to the food."

Still, it is a fair question: how does he keep his eye on it all? The answer is the oldest trick in a restaurateur's book: mystery diners. "We spend up to \$US200,000 per year on a pool of 16 to 17 individuals who are all incognito and have all been with us for the last six or seven years and they give us a breakdown, so we're on to it instantly."

No one in his empire knows the identities of these mystery customers who file blow-by-blow accounts of their dining experience (including what went on at other tables) directly to him via email. "I could put that money in my pocket or get myself a new car, but I'm not interested. And I don't want smoke blown up my arse either. Just give me the negatives. Pure negatives, that's what we thrive on."

There's one major "negative" in the Australian restaurant industry that Ramsay considers a challenge – our culture of BYO restaurants. And it will be especially difficult here for him as Ramsay plans to ditch haute cuisine in favour of bistro-style food. "I wouldn't be that stupid (to open a fine dining restaurant) because to be honest fine dining exists when you're there five nights a week busting your arse and you've got the power of the people supporting you," he says. "I look at the number of restaurants in Australia that are successful and they don't have wine lists."

"Jesus, that's a true testament to the success of the restaurant: 99 per cent of restaurants in Britain would never survive if they had no alcohol. To make a restaurant work, to pay your fixed costs, to return the capex (capital expenditure), to make sure you've got a healthy bottom line, pay staff, make money and stand out with a reputation – oh and you can't charge money for wine! F..k me, that's a tall order."

David Meagher is the editor of WISH magazine, published in The Australian on the first Friday of each month. His previous story for this magazine was "Hot, not bothered" (April 19-20), on the art of ironing. He was a guest of the Conrad Tokyo hotel.