

ROYAL TOUCH

Culinary secrets from the Royal Chef



BY NORA MANTHEY

Carolyn Robb was the Royal Family's chef for thirteen years. She travelled with Prince Charles and was there when Prince William and Prince Harry lost their mother, Princess Diana. Her expertise and experiences inspired a cookbook: 'The Royal Touch, Simple stunning home cooking from a former royal chef'. Carolyn's brand, 'The Royal Touch', is inspired by her experiences as a royal chef as well as her love of the British countryside and British produce.

We spoke with Carolyn about the Princes' preferences and the Dalai Lama, about being the first restaurant critic in Dubai and sustainable sourcing in the early days.

Carolyn, you grew up in South Africa and started to cook at a very young age. What inspires your cooking to this day?

My mother. I am the youngest of five children and my Mum was the most amazing cook. My father's hobby was gardening, and he was a wonderful gardener, and so we always had fresh fruits and vegetables from the garden. My mother was always busy using all the produce he had grown. She had been through the war and was used to not letting anything ever go to waste. Everything we had at home was homemade and I just loved learning from her, while my siblings were at boarding school or university. Later, I went to university and studied languages but I knew I wanted to cook. So I came to Switzerland and worked at the Hotel Jungfrau for a season and then I came to England and did a 6-month intensive Cordon Bleu diploma and loved every minute of it. Then, I was very fortunate because while at school, I got invited to attend an interview in London at Kensington Palace.

Please tell us about that. Roles in the Royal Palace are hardly advertised openly.

No, indeed they are not. The job was not generally advertised. The principal of Tante Marie School of Cookery, which I attended at the time, called me in and asked if I would like to apply. Three of us were selected to go for an interview. I worked very hard and I was a top student at the end of the course but you also needed to be someone that was not a party girl, because you would need to live in, in the midst of a family. It was a real commitment. I did two years with the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester first and then moved on to serve Prince Charles and Princess Diana for 11 years.

Your inspiration came from the cooking in your family, and you went on to cook for a family. Were you seeking these similarities?

Absolutely. That is why I loved the job. Working in a restaurant or hotel, I would not have enjoyed as much. I love cooking for small numbers, although we did a lot of big events as well. It was indeed looking after a family, and I enjoyed making special things with and for Prince William and Prince Harry. As small boys, they enjoyed baking.

What did the Royal Family like?

When I was with Prince Charles and Princess Diana, menus were planned around what was growing in the garden at the time. Prince Charles had the first farm in the UK to be certified organic. Much of the fresh produce that I used was home-grown, so I would go into the garden, see what was there and then plan the menu around that.

It is hard to imagine the Royal Family living off cabbage and potatoes in winter. Were there greenhouses?

In the winter, we would buy some things as well, but we would never serve strawberries or asparagus at Christmas time. We went with the season.

How did you manage the kitchen?

We worked to a budget. Prince Charles was very keen that nothing ever went to waste. As we moved around a lot, it was a lot of management. Usually, we stayed at Kensington Palace in the week, and at Highgrove during the weekends. We also went to Scotland and made several overseas trips a year, so we were constantly moving around. We had suppliers in each place we went to and always used local suppliers and producers. Prince Charles always preferred local produce; we used local butchers or fishmongers, or eggs and butter.

That seems very forward thinking for the time.

Yes, I learnt about sustainability and traceability when I was a young chef of 20, 30 years ago, while chefs working at hotels and restaurants did not know about it but would just phone up their supplier to order what was on offer. But Prince Charles wished to know what he was eating, so I learnt all about it. It was amazing to work with someone who cared so much about food, because it made my job more interesting and challenging.

In your biography, it says you always wanted to cook for the Queen.

My Mum's parents were English and she was a great royalist. When I was seven years old, I came to England. My father took me to London for the day, and we were standing outside Buckingham Palace, outside the railings like everyone does, and I remember saying to him that I wanted to cook for the Queen one day. Unbelievable that it actually happened. Although, when I chose the cookery school, I knew they had previously supplied chefs for the Royal Family.

What is the main difference between cooking for the Royal Family and a common family?

Not a lot when it comes to the basics. But it is an immense privilege, and there is a lot more variation when you cook for the Royal Family. I would one day prepare dinner for the little princes and then the next day be on a yacht in Hong Kong doing a banquet for 300 people. But despite cooking for high-profile events, I was always behind the scenes. Occasionally, I would meet the guests. Prince Charles would call me in after a meal when it was appropriate.

Please tell us about the visiting dignitaries you fed. Who was the greatest challenge and why?

It was very important to find out what they could and could not eat because of their religious and cultural beliefs. Take the Dalai Lama, for example. The menu was very simple, it was everything from the garden, Prince Charles wished for it. I served home-made pasta with vegetables fresh from the garden and home-grown berries with ice cream made from the very special cream from the royal dairy in Windsor. When Prince Charles was entertaining, he loved to serve his own home-grown produce to his guests.

You were there when the princes lost their mother, Princess Diana. You later lost your husband, who left you with two daughters. Did this experience help shape your own?

It did in some ways. It was completely surreal when Princess Diana passed away. It was so very sad seeing what those two young boys went through. They were so brave, but clearly it affected them. Only now have they begun to talk about it. Prince Harry, William and Kate set up a charity for bereaved children. An experience like this does teach you a lot. You have to live for today and do all you can for today, every day.

Do you believe there is comfort in food?

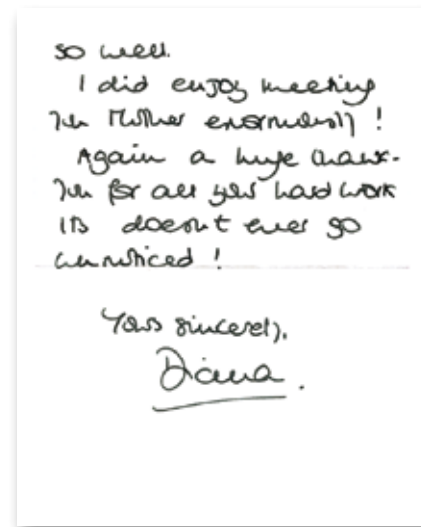
Very much so. That is always the way that I have cared for people. I have lost both my parents in recent years, and I always made sure that they had the best possible food, even when they were very unwell. I loved cooking for Prince

Charles. He works very hard and would often say 'just leave something cold for me' when he got home late. Yet, I would make sure there was something warm for him. I think it really makes a difference, and it is important as a family to sit down and have a meal together at the end of a day. I always sit down with my two girls for meals, and we cook together at the weekend.

What is the idea behind your brand "The Royal Touch"?

Carolyn Robb - The Royal Touch is a Culinary & Lifestyle Brand. I created The Royal Touch as an expression of my culinary expertise, my royal experiences, my great affection for the beautiful British countryside and my love of those simple things in life that make us smile. The brand is iconically British. The brand is aimed at those with aspiration, and our products are simple, stunning and have a little »





whimsicality in the designs. The brand was launched at the British Embassy in Tokyo, and we have diversified in many directions since then.

The areas that The Royal Touch covers are licensing, promotional events (for producers such as Nestle in Germany and PG tips in the UK), and 'royal-themed' events with travel companies, and we have created some beautiful lines of culinary products for cooking and dining. We have created the basis for a television series (adventures with the royal chef - which is under consideration with several production companies), and I am working on the concept for my second cookbook.

Could you summarise your food philosophy for us in a few words?

Keep it simple. Use locally produced ingredients. Cook what is in season. And cook for friends and family, as it is an important way of bringing people together and comforting them.

You have worked as a food editor in Dubai. Has this switch of roles, from chef to guest, changed your cooking?

I had two years in Dubai. The first year, I set up a food importing company and consultancy. We were bringing in a lot of European-style produce, which was not readily available back then.

The second year, I became Time Out magazine's food editor, and for the first time ever, I was sitting at the other side of the kitchen door. It was a real eye-opener. I understood the challenges, especially in Dubai, where every hotel had one centralised kitchen that fed about ten restaurants within the complex. As a general rule, the head chef was European, but the rest of the personnel were Asian. So these chefs from Nepal or Sri Lanka, who had very little knowledge of European food, were trying to produce French or Italian food. The food looked stunning. Asian presentation is impeccable, but it needed a lot of improvement overall. When I arrived, it was the first time they heard anonymous critical reviews.

Other magazines would announce their critic. I was fair but also honest. Some of the hotels called me in and asked my advice. You look into every detail. Some restaurants had incredibly fancy cutlery, for example, but every time you put it on your plate it would fall off because the plate was too small and the handle of the knife too heavy, ruining the whole experience.

You have been with the high society, first the Royals and then the newly rich. Is there still a personality you would like to cook for?

An entrepreneur, someone like Richard Branson from Virgin or someone who works tirelessly for charitable causes like Bob Geldof - people who work really hard to make things better for others.

What is your advice for busy people who want to eat healthy?

Breakfast is really important. Before you leave home, a bowl of blueberries with porridge or granola is a really good start to the day rather than picking up an over-sweet muffin or over-sweet coffee on your way. For lunch time, pack your own lunch. Even if you do not have time to cook, it is really easy to prepare your own salad or your own sandwiches with wholemeal bread. In the evening, time is short again, but it does not take much to boil some pasta and some fresh vegetables with it, or to cook a nice steak or piece of fish with a potato in the oven.

And lastly, what is the next course in your life?

Expanding the Royal Touch brand and learning more. One of the reasons I moved to Dubai after I left the Royal household was to understand the commercial aspects of the business better, and this was very beneficial to me. I am busy with my two young children, so naturally the brand is about family and making your home life as simple as possible in the best possible manner.

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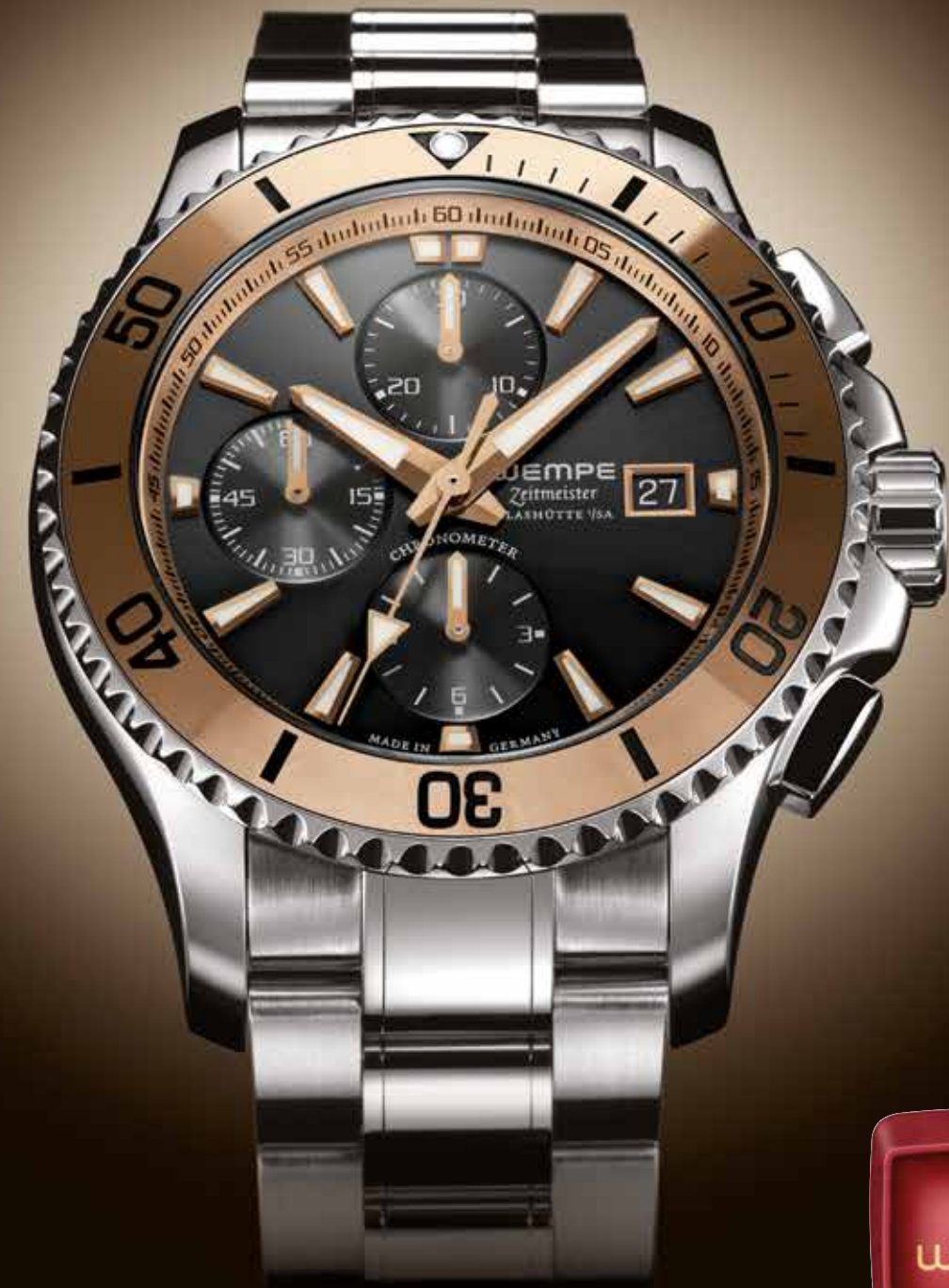
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