

Talking point

# Bor appetit

Liz Nicholls chats to chef Raymond Blanc OBE, owner of Brasserie Blanc and Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, who appears at Thame Food Festival this month.



**Q. Is there one memorable experience that turned you into a foodie?** "My first gastronomic experience was like falling in love; it was a huge discovery. I was a young student with a bit of money in my pocket from selling food I'd gathered for restaurants. French stomachs start working at midday and mine was no exception as I walked past a restaurant and smelt the most incredible smell – dense, rich, complex, very different from the simplicity of my mother's cooking. It was beef kidneys and I went in and spent my small fortune on lunch and a glass of Côtes du Rhône, both tasting like nothing I'd tasted before. It was heaven."

**Q. The restaurant industry is a tough one. What would be your top tips for anyone starting a restaurant?** "Good planning, along with surrounding yourself with the best professionals and advisers, is crucial to the long-term success of a business."

**Q. What are your favourite restaurants in the Thames Valley?** "Brasserie Blanc of course, both Oxford [in Jericho] and Beaconsfield! Others are The Fishes [in North Hinksey, Oxford], and The Sir Charles Napier [in Chinnor]. For a moment of quiet reflection it has to be the Japanese garden at Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons – a place of tranquillity for me and for my guests."

**Q. What's your favourite ingredient?** "I'm a Frenchman, so garlic!"

**Q. Do you have any regrets?** "Never!"

**Q. Is there any dish you dislike cooking?** "No. The strangest thing I've ever eaten were live eels in Japan. They were served in the most elegant way by a Geisha in a beautiful silk gown who brought a huge bowlful of

electric-silver jumping eels. She scooped some in a net, added rice vinegar and sake and then I had to swallow them without chewing. They don't slide easily down your throat, they jump – it was very weird."

**Q. Are there any kitchen gadgets you couldn't live without?** "A pressure cooker. This is one gadget I could not do without. I love them so much I developed my own! We all have busy lifestyles and it's often difficult to have time to put together a delicious, healthy meal for your family. Using a pressure cooker reduces conventional cooking times by up to 70%, but not only that, you need less water, wine and stock in your cooking. And, because of the reduced cooking time, you retain more of the vitamins and minerals in your vegetables. You also save energy. Less time cooking, more time with your family and friends. Voilà!"


**Q. What's your favourite part of being at a food festival?** "If I wasn't a chef, I'd be a gardener. Although I had often dreamt of being a pianist, and tried for seven years, which was a disaster. It was pure vanity; I wanted to be a great chef and have another talent and had this dream that people would come from around the world to eat my food and then I'd burst out of the kitchen, throw down my apron and take to the grand piano. I gave an organist friend a recording of mine, not saying who it was. He said: 'That guy is a butcher, he should stop playing the piano!'. So, going back to your question – I love the diversity of the local produce at this festival."

● Raymond Blanc OBE is ambassador of The Thame Food Festival and appearing at the event in the heart of Thame from 9am to 5pm on Saturday 26th September. Find out more, book special festival events and sign up for the Big Thame Bake by visiting [www.thamefoodfestival.co.uk](http://www.thamefoodfestival.co.uk)

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Raymond Blanc

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