

## THE COOK'S TALE

Back in Ireland in her early twenties, with her US-acquired business skills under her belt, Clodagh had already decided that she wanted to work with food. A coffee shop was the dream, but she needed some training. "My parents co-signed a credit-union loan for me to go to Ballymaloe and that was amazing, eye-opening," she says.

"Darina is just amazing," she says, "and Myrtle, of course, and, you know, all the rest of it. But Darina just lives and breathes Ballymaloe. She's tough to work for, but you understand why when you move on and work for someone else or for yourself. She demands perfection and that's for the customer. It's a way of life. It changed my whole thinking on food and where I wanted to be in my career; it's a whole education.

"And Darina never forgets anything. I got a lovely card from her when I opened Homemade. She remembers everything. She has a presidential mind, I always say."

After the three-month cookery course in Ballymaloe, Clodagh stayed on as a chef in the house for more than two years and, during that time, started producing pasta, breads, pates, pestos and sauces for the renowned farmers' market in Midleton, east Cork. Myrtle Allen kindly let her use the kitchen in Ballymaloe and her co-workers called Clodagh "the ICA lady".

"I loved the whole thing so much," says Clodagh, with an enthusiasm that you recognise as characteristic after even a short conversation. "On a Friday, I'd finish service at 11 or 12 o'clock at night and then I'd start making the pastas and all that. I mean, I was about 24, I could do all-nighters. I'd get everything ready and then I'd pile up my Renault Clio and off I'd go. It was a fantastic experience."

She ultimately moved on from Ballymaloe and although she kept up the markets for another few years, eventually Clodagh felt it was time to focus her energies. "I had too many balls in the air. I had the markets and I was very involved with Slow Food, which was totally voluntary, and then I had just been offered a book — actually, that's not true, I chased that, big time," Clodagh says with a laugh.

The very fact that she admits to chasing her first book deal is telling of Clodagh's character. She's ambitious and she knows — not least, she says, from interviews conducted by men — that this is taken to be somewhat strange in a woman. But she's unabashed about it and refuses to be coy about it. Coy is just not Clodagh. She believed that she could do a book, she convinced others of the fact and, as her subsequent strength-to-strength success proves, she was right.

"I really chased it," Clodagh adds of the book deal. "Six months or even a year. I knocked on doors, I looked for an agent in the UK, but nothing was happening. I think I made it happen purely on my determination, nothing else. And then RTE offered me a show.

"At the time, there was nobody doing TV in Ireland. Like, Rachel hadn't shows at that time, there was nobody," she says, though, in fact, Rachel Allen had been doing television for three years before Clodagh arrived on screen in 2007. "But I never had a plan to do TV. I need to do more planning, I think, or maybe it's more that I just go with



whatever I love right at that time; I just jump into it."

At that time, when Clodagh's career really took off in Ireland, there was another love affair in her life besides food and she was, physically, elsewhere. She had met Sebastiano Sardo in 2002, through the Slow Food Movement, of which his father is a founder, but they did not begin a romantic relationship until several years later and, after some back and forth, Clodagh eventually moved to his native Turin. She had written her first book by that time, and wanted to write another, and she believed that Italy could prove inspiring professionally as well as romantically.

"And my career started hopping once I went away," she laughs. "Isn't it funny how

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that happens? But I was quite happy to be away when the TV series was on. The recognition doesn't sit easily with me."

The success at home meant, however, that Clodagh spent a lot of time in airports, a lot of time on the road, an increasing amount of time away from Sebastiano. "In the last year of the relationship," she explains, "I was away so much that we had kind of grown apart and become more friends. And he understood the passion I had for my work but there was that little bit of heartbreak and it was sad, but he's really happy now.

"He really wanted a family, and he had a little baby girl recently," Clodagh says, insisting that she felt no pang of regret at that news. "No, I'm happy for him. I'm quite