

'Made me laugh and
then order an unholy
amount of takeaway'

Greg Davies

ED

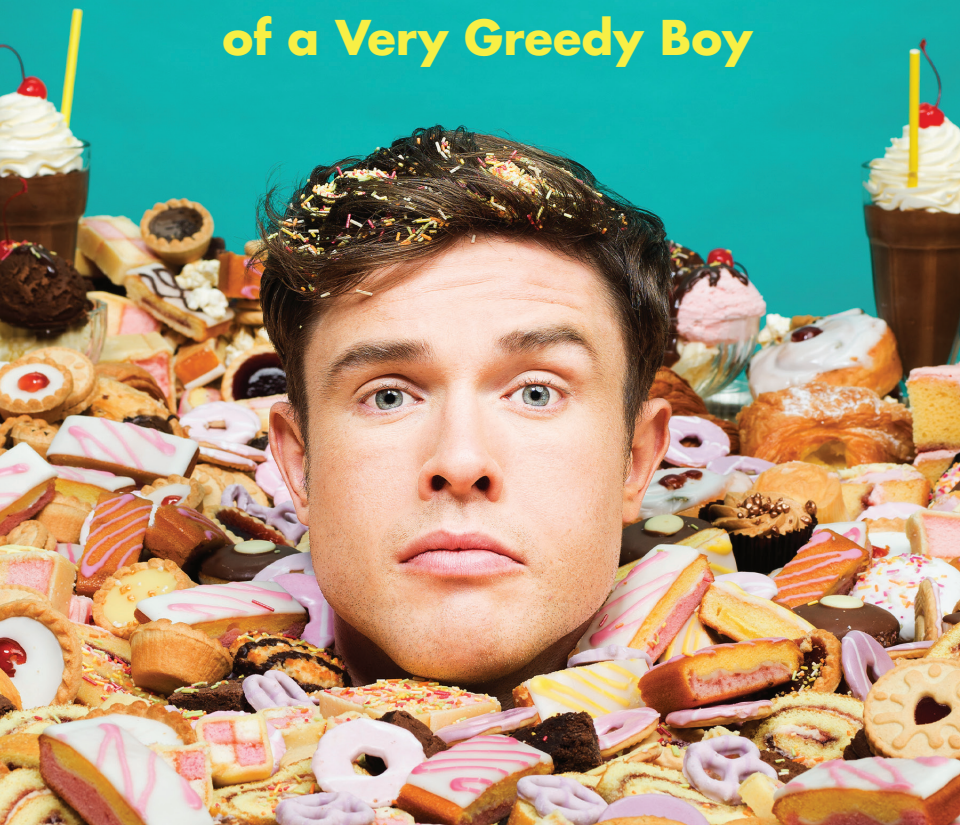
'Warm, honest
and wonderfully
entertaining'

Tom Kerridge



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*For Charlie,
who wouldn't let me dedicate
the book to the cat*

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I

STARTERS

My obsession with food is lifelong. The stereotypical image of a child is one of the fussy eater, rejecting most things that are put in front of them, catapulting bowls across the kitchen, and puckering their faces at the merest hint of a new taste. This was not me. The bowls stayed on the high chair and my face wore a fixed grin, gratefully receiving spoonful after spoonful of whatever new and exciting purée I could lay my chubby little paws on. Most families have a hilarious photo of their child covered in food, the sort of photo that is brought out at gatherings, or as a way to embarrass someone in front of a new partner. There exists no such photo of me. Not a drop was wasted from plate to mouth, and the front of my baby-grows remained absolutely spotless. (Although I am reliably informed that the back of my baby-grows were a different story.)

My mum tells me on a regular basis that my mouth was ‘bigger than all the other babies’ and easily devoured anything that was wafted in front of it. Come to think about

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it, I have made the assumption that she was saying my mouth was bigger than all the other babies' mouths. She could've been suggesting that my mouth alone was bigger than other entire babies. While this does sound believable given the little guzzler I apparently was, I'm sure if it were the case I would've made the news. There would be a newspaper clipping proudly displayed in a family scrapbook. 'Baby's Mouth the Size of Other Babies!' 'There's no need to open wide for the choo-choo train with this little fella, he could swallow a train with ease!' Kriss Akabusi would have squawked on *Record Breakers*. 'I can tell that baby's mine from the cavernous mouth' the caption on *Jeremy Kyle* would've read. Anyway, let's not get bogged down in what ifs – I was a normal-sized baby with a larger than average mouth.

I was as close to being a foodie as one can be as an infant. If I'd had access to Instagram as a baby, I would have been posting pictures of breast milk to my stories. 'OMG, such a great meal at Mum's Boob – you guys have GOT to check this place out.' There was no food I didn't like. My friends would balk at tomatoes, wince at fish and turn their noses up at peas. I welcomed it all, eager to stuff my face with all my parents had to offer.

Celery was the only thing I refused to eat, and I'm fairly sure that's because I instinctively knew that it was calorie negative. I am only a recent convert to celery, and only then after I worked out that its shape makes it a perfect vehicle for peanut butter. It's essentially an edible spoon, and hence a cheap way of turning even the laziest home cook

into a wild and experimental Heston Blumenthal figure. Prior to the celery discovery, I was simply digging peanut butter out of the jar with my finger. After one too many times hungrily trying to bite through my own flesh, though, I turned to my former enemy. But celery on its own still disgusts me. It tastes simultaneously of nothing and everything, and as such should not be trusted. 'It's mainly water!' I hear you cry. Well, firstly, stop crying. And secondly, if I gave you a glass of water that tasted like celery, you would quite rightly hurl it back into my stupid face. 'It burns more calories eating it than it has in it!' Well, then it's a waste of time. I'd rather just mime eating something, burn my three calories and never have bothered my mouth with that stringy monstrosity.

If my parents had a suspicion that they had spawned an eater, this was all but confirmed when the time came to take me to restaurants. Given the choice of what to eat, it was painfully obvious that I wasn't going to toe the line: the kids' menu was swiftly rejected out of hand. I feel safe in saying that I never once chose anything from one of those patronizing lists of misery. Even as young as four I had drawn a line in the sand. My mum remembers distinctly taking me for a pub lunch with my grandparents (Nanny and Grandad to me, Steve and Doreen Gamble to you), and Nanny spotting that the pub had a kids' menu. As any right-minded grandma would do, she let me know. I responded, 'I don't DO kids' menus.' As a frugal woman who still essentially practised wartime rationing in her house, I suspect this attitude was quite a shock to Doreen.

She took it in her stride, though, no doubt silently worried that my mother had produced a monster, and got used to it. Just a couple of years later, while at their house for lunch, I proclaimed that her mashed potatoes were pleasant, but I had heard that Gary Rhodes used double cream in his. The word ‘precocious’ springs to mind, shortly before the words ‘little’ and ‘shit’.

I still don’t stand by the concept of kids’ menus. Rather than them being needed because children are fussy, I believe that it’s the very existence of the kids’ menu that creates fussy eaters. I’ll put my flag in the ground here and now: they should be abolished worldwide. I believe that given half the chance and the right introduction, most kids would happily just eat what adults eat, rather than the sad offerings that are laid in front of them at most restaurants. I hated being talked down to as a child – why couldn’t I have what all the adults had? Fish fingers, onion rings, chicken nuggets, chips, potato waffles – all represented to me an injustice at the dinner table. The adults would order whatever they liked, free to roam the expanse of the main menu, while anyone below the age of ten was fenced into a pen of salty sadness. In my mind, adult food was all excitement and colour, while the kids’ choices were a homogeneous and unnatural golden hue.

As you can see, even I have been brainwashed into using the term ‘golden’ to describe these fried morsels, when this couldn’t be further from the truth. Treasure is golden, Labradors are golden. Fish fingers? Fake-tan orange. If treasure or Labradors were the same ‘golden’ that fried

food purports to be, you would leave it buried and have it put down respectively. The kids' menu is not a worthwhile culinary endeavour. If it were, restaurants wouldn't have to provide activities with it to distract the child. 'Don't worry that all the food is the same shade, we'll be providing the colour with this free pack of Crayola!' Nothing made me less excited for a meal as a child than the pressure to complete a word search with a crayon that was simultaneously too thick and too fragile for the task.

I'm not saying that we should be giving six-year-olds oysters (although I'm sure I would've jumped at the chance to try one), I just think we should give them a little more credit. I'm happy to ease the transition by abolishing menu items one by one. First against the wall? The potato smiley. Never has a happy face been less appropriate. A sad, tasteless lump fixed in a rigor mortis grin, which I always think of less as a potato smiley and more as a potato grimace, the potato's face awkwardly contorted in shock at what has become of it. The smiley face, of course, was later embraced by rave culture and acid house, and although not a drugsman myself, I am led to believe there was a lot more reason for the smile in this instance.

Of course, I could be wrong. Maybe most children do enjoy the food on kids' menus, and I was just a weird fat little snob baby. That will be a running theme in this book – the fact that I could be wrong, that is. We considered *This Could Be Wrong* as a title, before speaking to lawyers who told us that legally we couldn't, as that title suggests I might be right some of the time. History has proved that I

am wrong almost 90 per cent of the time. This is probably one of those instances. Even as I was writing this diatribe about kids' menus, I floated my hateful theories to my wife. The response went something like this: 'Loads of people like fish fingers, Ed. Just because you were born a puffed-up Little Lord Fauntleroy, it doesn't mean everyone else was.'

And yes, there is some evidence to suggest that I was not a 'normal' child when it came to food. (Or generally, but that's a different book.) Exhibit A: At the wedding of one of my dad's friends, a seven-year-old me sensed injustice when I was informed that there was a separate buffet for the children. Ever the noble agitator, I led a rebellion on behalf of the other kids. They were weak and feeble, crushed by the yoke of adult tyranny. They sat there munching on their nuggets, doing their best job of pretending to enjoy them. Some of them, to be fair, were putting on a pretty convincing performance. They were going the whole nine yards – making approving noises, gleefully dipping away into pots of ketchup, some of them even going back for more! These poor, broken fools. Their commitment to the role was such that they even looked at me strangely when I bravely spoke up to the caterers about the culinary discrimination at work. Sure, there was some resistance from our aproned overlords, but no true change is won without a battle. After a short fracas where phrases like 'allocated meals', 'why won't you just eat nuggets?' and 'I'll have to get the bride' were thrown about, and a minor intervention from my father, I'm happy to say that the day was mine. Yes, I lost many things that day: potential friends,

future work for my father and my temper. But what I gained cannot be overstated. A lovely piece of poached salmon.

I recently recounted this tale to my mum, framing it as the first time I tasted poached salmon (we have good chats). She corrected me and told me that that momentous occasion actually occurred when I was eight months old, at a party hosted by her friend from antenatal class. Apparently my ‘eyes lit up’, I tucked in, and everyone else was ‘very impressed’. I wager that far from being impressed, the other mothers were instead quite perturbed that she had birthed such an odd little gobbler. Meeting me as an infant must’ve felt like being in *The Omen*, but rather than my parents producing the spawn of Satan, they had somehow created a pint-sized Jay Rayner. (And yes, you are correct. This is the only book you will ever read where the opening pages about the author’s childhood feature two stories based around poached salmon.)

I’m happy to say that now, I embrace all of the golden foods. I seem to have evolved my tastes in an odd way. As a child I was eager to show that I could play with the adults, desperate to break the onion-ring handcuffs of culinary oppression. Later in life, though, I welcomed back the comforting tastes of fish fingers, oven chips and chicken nuggets. Not the potato smileys though. They can still fuck off.

As a child I was always very welcome at my friends’ houses. Not by my friends, necessarily, but by their mums. The majority of them were raising your classic bog-standard nuggets children. Day after day of cooking the

same things for fussy little snotballs who would only eat about four different meals and rejected vegetables out of hand, turning their noses up at anything that was outside their pathetic ten-year-old worldview. So as you can imagine, a visit from me was like a breath of fresh air. I would appreciatively gobble down anything that was put in front of me, pausing only for breaths (fewer than I should probably have taken) and to wheeze regular thank yous through my fat red mouth. I spent much less time with my friends on these playdates than I did in the kitchen with their mums. If the food kept coming, I was going nowhere.

I have never been a one-helping sort of person and that started at a very early age. To this day, I do not understand the one-helping people. If you like something and there is more of it, then why on earth would you not have a second (even a third) helping? You're telling me there are people who have one helping, enjoy it and then sleep soundly without the constant feeling that they've missed out? There is nothing more tragic than the realization that you've eaten something that you might never get to have again, so you need to pack as much of it as you can into your body while you have the chance. On one occasion I was at a friend's house after school and his mum made me round after round of toast slathered in peanut butter. Every time she offered, I said yes. And every time I ate another slice, she would offer me more. For me, this was heaven. For her, it was probably some bizarre scientific experiment to see how many loaves she could get through before this alien child exploded. But I was never one to back down. We were engaged in a toast

stand-off from which she was never going to emerge victorious. I hesitate to call it a game of ‘peanut butter chicken’, because peanut butter chicken is basically chicken satay . . . and that’s got me thinking about ordering a Thai meal tonight. Food threatens to be the downfall of this entire book. Writing about food makes me think about food and that will stop me writing this book about food. The whole thing is a vicious circle. You know what else is a circle? Calamari. I’m going to get calamari tonight. Oh God. Anyway, eventually she ran out of bread. I won. She gently suggested I go and join her son and play some N64 as he had been alone out there for upwards of an hour.

Being a parent and having your kid’s friends over must be a huge weight off your shoulders for an afternoon. You have none of the long-term responsibility you have to your own offspring when it comes to activities like gaming and, especially, food consumption. They want to eat twelve slices of toast? Yeah, bollocks to it. Give them an entire bag of Haribo just before they leave – it’s not you who has to deal with the consequences. In fact, there’s a pack of cigs in the second drawer down and no parental controls on the internet, you go for it! You’re not my kid. In fact, it’s pure advantage for your own child. If your son isn’t doing well at school, invite the cleverest boy in the class over the night before an exam, load him up on pizza and sugar and watch him tank the next day due to lack of sleep. Leave the whisky open on the side for good measure. That way at least your child is guaranteed to be one place up the school’s league table. But I digress.

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This habit is not something that ended after my primary-school years. Even long into being a teenager I would often find myself the willing victim of a feeder parent. I have many memories of being at parent-sanctioned house parties and while chaotic drunkenness and unremitting horniness raged in another room, there I was talking to someone's mother while they prepared me a cheese sandwich.

Being at other people's houses was always a great opportunity to get my way with food away from my mother's gaze. I couldn't get away with it at Steve and Doreen Gamble's house, but I had a much easier ride at the house of my mum's parents, May and Rod Piddock. My grandma was a wonderful cook, nailing all of the classic comfort meals like a pro but also in the way that only a grandma can. No-frills, delicious and filling staples like roast dinners, sausage rolls and something called bacon pudding, which to this day I think I might've dreamt. It was essentially a big Christmas-pudding-sized suet dumpling with chunks of bacon throughout. Hearty and salty with more than enough stodge to go round. The sort of meal you would eat before going out to plough a field. Very rarely when I was at my grandma and grandpa's house, though, did I plough a field after dinner. I mainly just watched *The Velveteen Rabbit* for the thirtieth time, normally with a stomach ache.

I'd say that's always been the problem with my diet: I eat like someone who is halfway through a day of heavy manual labour. The lifestyle of a comedian is relatively sedentary. A lot of time spent on trains, in cars, or sat backstage. The only physical activity our jobs require regularly is up to an

hour onstage, and that isn't quite enough to justify the sort of meals that would normally be eaten by a scaffolder or dry-stone-wall builder. I used to suspect that being onstage burnt a lot of calories, so I decided to check my step count for a full show. Seventy-four. In an hour. It's better than nothing, I suppose, but given that I'd driven to the gig and it only increased my day's total to 126 it didn't feel enough to justify the gargantuan beef stew I ate when I got home.

Everyone's grandma's food is a special thing. May Piddock was an extremely caring and loving woman, energetic and passionate to her last day. She was a teacher who was beloved and feared by her students in equal measure. All of the love and attention she put into her job and family was evident in her food, and that's something that even the best professional chefs struggle to capture. If you presented the sort of thing grandmas cook to a Michelin-starred chef as a potential menu item you would be laughed out of the kitchen. Professional kitchens are all about precision, skill and exacting standards. I think they're missing a trick. If there was a restaurant run exclusively by grandmas it would be booked out night after night, full of diners desperate for a taste of that warmth and nostalgia you simply can't get from a steak tartare or a scallop foam. Yes, the service might leave a little to be desired, and it would have to shut at 5 p.m., but it would be a hit!

May Piddock's ham would definitely be the star of the menu. Every year for Christmas she would prepare the most amazing gammon joint. You know by now that as a child I was essentially a tiny Tudor king, so a gammon

joint was my idea of heaven. Salty and unctuous meat surrounded by a layer of juicy fat and then enrobed in a sweet and sticky glaze. It was the highlight of my year. We would have it for breakfast on Christmas morning and the day would frankly be impossible to top after that. As I grew older I got into the dangerous habit of going out drinking on Christmas Eve. Inevitably this would lead to furious late-night snacking, which when the fridge is full of carefully prepared food specifically for the next day's festivities is a recipe for disaster. The year I ate all the fat off the ham was not a happy one. The fat is my mum's favourite bit as well, so she had gone to bed hours earlier, happy and contented in the promise of a slice of that sweet treat alongside a fried egg the following morning. Little did she know her drunken oaf of a son would stumble in at midnight, ravenous after a night on the Guinness, and proceed to remove that joyful lardaceous layer with all the care and precision of a backstreet plastic surgeon. I had it on toast. Sorry, Mum, but I'd do it again.

I was thirty-three when my grandma died. Comparatively, this is quite late on in life to lose a grandparent. I was lucky enough to have a full set of them until my thirties, which feels unusual. I remember that all of my school friends lost at least one before we graduated. It's not a competition (and it would be a dark one if it was), but I won. Unfortunately, all that extra time that I got to spend with my grandparents has been paid back in recent years and they've all died. Devastating, of course, but also extremely efficient of them. After my grandma died, I can't

pretend that the lack of ham didn't cross my mind. It certainly wasn't the first thought I had when I got the news, but it was probably in the first ten thoughts. I've never said that out loud, let alone written it down, and I'll be the first to admit that it doesn't paint me in the best light. But that's just how good that ham was. The first Christmas after she went was a hard one. I think we all have that person in our life who truly represents Christmas, and that's who she was to me. My grandma *was* Christmas in our family. It was especially hard on my mum and her siblings of course – they had lost their mum. But I had lost my ham.

So that Christmas I decided, as a heartfelt tribute (with a delicious and selfish bonus), I was going to make a ham in her honour. I ordered a joint of gammon months in advance, got all the intel I could on the recipe and set about creating an edible homage to a great woman. It was a disaster. I made the fatal error of snipping the butcher's string off before I put it in the pan, which meant it unfurled in the water like a big pink sea snake and somehow broke into two pieces. I used this to my advantage and tried out a different glaze on each of the slabs. Both awful. One of them gritty with solid sugar and the other burnt within an inch of its life until it was a bitter black mess. All in all, the worst meaty obituary that anyone could conceive of. Not only is it painful enough to have a recipe go so badly awry, I had to deal with the added devastation that I had somehow offended the memory of a dead relative. It all worked out for the best, though, as my mum assured me that Grandma would've found it hilarious, and this was a much

better option than discovering I could do a better ham than her. Sometimes things are best just left as a wonderful memory.

My grandpa Rod was less of a natural chef. I think that tends to happen when you are married to someone who is a whizz in the kitchen and doesn't mind doing it – you simply don't need to sharpen that tool yourself. (I say this confidently as the cook in my house.) He was a wonderful man. Gentle, kind, and to date the most relaxed man I've ever met. He used to be a policeman, which I always struggled to imagine. Presumably he was fired after letting multiple criminals go so he could get home in time for his bacon pudding. Some of my warmest and safest memories are of sitting with him in his living room after everyone else had gone to bed. There was never any conversation, just a wholly comfortable and satisfied silence. That silence was eventually broken when he was positive that his wife had gone to sleep. That was his cue to shuffle out to the kitchen and pour himself a whisky. As a kid, I remember thinking that cheeky night-time whisky was the most alluring-looking drink I had ever seen. Just a small amount of brown liquid in a glass seemed to bring him such quiet happiness. On the day of his funeral, some of the family went back to his house to collect a few things. My grandma had also recently passed so it was a day of goodbyes. A goodbye to him, a goodbye to them as amazing grandparents, and there was a realization that this was also a goodbye to a house that was filled with so many memories. I found a bottle of his whisky in the kitchen and, being a sentimental old sod,

poured myself a glass to raise to his memory and finally experience what I had seen him enjoy so many times as a boy. It was absolutely disgusting. He really had very cheap taste. I should've learnt from the ham – sometimes memories are enough. You don't need to make grand statements to honour people's passing. Life isn't a film.

My grandpa's bad taste extended to his cooking skills. Aside from late-night sandwiches and whisky, there is only one attempt in the kitchen on record. It's a story that gets dragged out every Christmas in our family. When he was alive it was used to gently ridicule him, but now he has passed the same story is used as a warm and fond memory. Amazing how these things can change. Now bear in mind that this meal he cooked was long before I was born. Yes, he cooked one meal fifty years ago that was so spectacularly bad our family still remembers it. That's almost more of a skill than cooking something successfully. The meal in question was cod fillets cooked in a pan of beer. That's it. That's the meal. For years I've tried to extract as many details about the story from the various family members who experienced it, convinced there must be more to it than that. Some vegetables perhaps? A dash of cream? Salt and pepper, surely? But no. I'm assured it was just cod fillets cooked in a pan of beer. And knowing what sort of beer my grandpa preferred, it would've been Boddingtons. Essentially, a dish of fish in brown foam, which I'm reliably informed had dominant flavours of 'fish' and 'brown'. My favourite part of this story? It was a recipe he had found in a book and it was called 'Tippy Cod'. The past was wild.

His lack of food knowledge and complete ignorance of what children should be eating made him very easy to bend to my will. My mum, still horrified, recently recounted to me an occasion when she went away on holiday and left me at that house with my grandparents. She returned from that trip and witnessed me sat on the sofa like a four-year-old emperor, ordering Grandpa to fetch me a Coca-Cola. Not too unusual, you might think? Well, it was 8 a.m. and, worst of all, he brought it to me. Lord knows how many mornings that had happened, but knowing myself, I would hazard a guess at every single one, starting immediately after she left. I guess we can just be thankful my grandma was doing the cooking, otherwise Mum would've been welcomed by a pissed toddler who stank of fish and Boddingtons.

This attitude I had to consumption, even at such a young age, would never slow down. Many members of my family used to refer to me affectionately as a 'bottomless pit', presumably in the hope that I would eventually discover the bottom of said pit. How wrong they were. I am no quitter, and my childhood gorging was merely a warm-up for the ensuing years of utter dietary domination.

2

THE BIG GAMBLE

The male Gamble appetite is legendary. Not globally, granted. It's legendary specifically among the female Gambles, who all find it disgusting. Every single man in the Gamble family is the same shape. Blessed with broad shoulders but also cursed with a love of food that is determined to make our waists even broader. During the First World War, we would've been the ones tasked with carrying all the equipment, before being court-martialled for eating all the rations. When we get together, there really is no stopping us. Barbecues are where we do some of our best work. My brother, my dad and I have a splinter WhatsApp group away from the main family group specifically for the discussion and documentation of meat cookery. It's called 'The BBQ Boys', and I love it. Scrolling through it now, there are very few words, just picture after picture of cooked beef, pork and chicken. Very rarely do the photos get a response from anyone. Occasionally I will say 'looks great', but mainly it's a photo followed by a two- to three-week silence until

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someone else cooks a steak. The BBQ Boys will not sully the group with pandering messages or frothy chat. It is a pure and holy place strictly for the appreciation of meat cookery, and this temple shall not be disturbed with such trivial things as asking after each other's health and happiness or discussing feelings.

The barbecues themselves are 'gross' (a direct quote from my stepmum, Julie, who will normally vacate the premises when my dad announces we are having one). There is something about the introduction of a naked flame that makes the average British man cook far too much. If you were using the oven indoors, you would happily just cook sausages and leave it at that. That is a reasonable dinner. But when we cook over fire, sausages are just the opening salvo. They're barely even considered food – the sausage is more of a flame-temperature tester before we proceed with the bulk of the meal. Do the sausages turn jet black? Well then, the grill isn't ready to be used. Will we eat them anyway? Of course. Stood up at the barbecue, teeth straining to penetrate the tough charcoal-armoured layer until we hit that cool and dangerously pink centre. Then, the real cooking begins. Entire chickens, pork steaks, lamb kebabs, ribeye steaks, burgers, spare ribs – the whole thing starts to look like a *Game of Thrones* banquet (minus incest, plus halloumi).

This attitude has carried over when I do my own barbecues at home. There's something about starting a fire that makes me not want to waste it. I've often put it down to a caveman survival instinct. I have gone to the effort to make

this fire, this magical life-giving force. Who knows when we will see this again? So I must use it for all it's worth and cook for the whole tribe. But in truth, it isn't that. It's not a lot of effort to start a fire. I have firefighters. And I'm not a member of a tribe, it's just me and my wife, and she can take or leave most meat. It's simply that I approach food like every male member of my family – I eat like it is my last meal on Earth.

My appetite led me to be branded all sorts of things growing up. 'Human dustbin', 'Gobbletron 5000', 'unstoppable pig person' – you know, the classics. I was also regularly told 'Your eyes are bigger than your stomach.' This is a peculiar phrase that is used to describe someone who gets overexcited and overloads their plate. Their eyes widen at the sheer possibility of everything they could be eating, and they fail to take into account that they couldn't possibly fit it all into their stomach. Not, as I used to assume, that the person in question has ginormous eyes. This doesn't work as a phrase. Once I established what it meant I took it as a challenge to prove that while, yes, my eyes were big, my stomach was more than up to the job. To this day, I have never had leftovers. But when I first heard this phrase as a child, I distinctly remember being petrified. The art of metaphor is slightly beyond us in the early stages of life, so we tend to take language fairly literally. Imagine for a moment someone with eyes bigger than their stomach. Multiple images rush through your mind all at once. The first is of someone with massive eyes. As a kid, I wasn't exactly sure how big stomachs were, but I was fairly positive

that they were much bigger than eyes. The idea of some dopey-looking bug-eyed monster lolloping about the place filled me with dread. What if he cried? We'd all surely drown! How big would his glasses have to be? Awful. That person's appetite would be the least of everyone's concerns. 'He's got eyes bigger than his stomach' wouldn't be a careless and derogatory phrase to describe someone's greed but the first thing you should tell the 999 operator. I'd imagine that the conversation would go something like this.

Operator: '999, which service do you require?'

Caller: 'I don't know actually.'

Operator: 'Well, what appears to be the problem?'

Caller: 'It's this man I've just found . . . his eyes are bigger than his stomach.'

Operator: 'Do you mean he has a larger than average appetite? That's not really something you should be calling about.'

Caller: 'No, I mean his eyes are huge. I'm actually a bit worried about his appetite because he can barely lift his head to eat.'

At that point, I'd imagine the 999 operator would hang up. I say 'imagine', but that's exactly what happened to me when I tried it. A huge and irresponsible waste of resources, sure, but invaluable book research.

We also have to consider the idea that the phrase could be describing someone with a stomach so minuscule that it is smaller than the average human eye. This, for me as a