

# ‘My recipe for Christmas? A main course you can bung in the oven. Everyone sitting elbow-to-elbow. Plenty of red wine.’

Who better to grace the *Healthy* Christmas cover than Gizzi Erskine – the one-of-a-kind chef who’s winning our hearts for her insistence on doing it in her own quirky, relaxed way? (And reckons she’s found the formula for the perfect no-deprivation diet)

WORDS Susan Gray PHOTOGRAPHS Grace Huang



Although Gizzi Erskine, 34, isn’t quite a household name yet, it can only be a matter of time before she’s up there with the Hestons and Delias. (Although don’t, whatever you do, call her the new Nigella – she’s careful to point out that she’s a trained restaurant chef, having done time at Leiths School of Food and Wine, not a food writer or talented amateur.) She has had a growing band of devotees since *Cook Yourself Thin* (the Channel 4 show, which back in 2007 introduced the revolutionary idea of delicious *and* healthy food), but for now most people might need a visual prompt before placing her. (You know, that one with the beehive, the tattoos and the black eyeliner.)

However, with a newish, high-profile gig as the *Sunday Times*’ chef and her book published earlier this year, *Skinny Weeks And Weekend Feasts* (Quadrille, £19.99) gathering serious traction, that’s all set to change. And Gizzi’s making the most of her moment. It seems the world is finally ready for her quirky, unique cooking style. In the run-up to Christmas, Gizzi’s schedule is so crazy-busy, her publicist requests we start the *Healthy* shoot at 8am, to ensure we get the cover photo in the bag before she has to be at an important lunch appointment (at, where else, the Pollen Street Social, the trendy Michelin-starred eatery that plays around with the usual idea of posh food).

When Gizzi walks in bang on time, she’s barely recognizable – make-up free and dirty hair (left that way at the hairdresser’s request, all the better to sculpt that trademark beehive). Having built up her rockabilly image, she guards it fiercely, and carefully picks through the rail of proposed outfits. We’re so tight on time, we do the interview while she’s in make-up, having her hair backcombed to a 90-degree angle. ‘It’s quite hard to discuss feminism when you’re having your hair done,’ she says. But don’t imagine she’s going to let that stop her...

*Healthy*: *Skinny Weeks And Weekend Feasts* is your answer to the eternal dilemma of loving good food, but striving to be healthy. It’s selling very well – do you think this is because it’s struck a chord?

Gizzi Erskine: The whole idea came about after filming a TV show, *Cooks To Market*, for nine months, working 16-hour days, six days a week; it was an epic schedule (the show, in which home cooks competed to get their ideas for food products manufactured, aired on Sky Living last year). To have energy I just would eat, and because I’m 5ft 10in tall, I thought I was getting away with it. Then I went on the scales and I’d put on one-and-a-half stone. And I hadn’t noticed!

I find conventional diets quite hard to stick to, because they’re depriving. One Sunday, I was reading about a female bodybuilder who was advised to eat low-carbs and low-fat in the week. One day a week she carb-loaded, fat-loaded and drank alcohol, and found she always lost weight after that day. So I asked a nutritionist, ‘Does this work for us common folk?’ And it does for two reasons: you’re motivated to sustain your diet, because you have something to look forward to, and the indulgent days rejig your body, and stop you from plateauing. ➔

I found the diet a real revelation. In the week I wanted something that was fridge-to-table in 30 minutes, but then at the weekend you start to enjoy the process of cooking. In eight months I've lost 2st, so I weigh less than before. It's been a slow thing, but I've never felt deprived. On Twitter you have an instant response, and people have reacted to *Skinny Weeks And Weekend Feasts* really well.

Definitely, I think I've found the Holy Grail. Serial dieters like the austerity of diets, but I don't. Dieting involves massive commitment. The complaints I've had about the book are that it doesn't feel like a diet. But it is, the recipes are all calorie-counted, and I've also broken down the GI [glycaemic index] count, so it gives you the right carbohydrates and portion sizes. For instance, a sandwich has double the carbohydrates you're meant to eat in a regular meal, so I've looked at French tartine open sandwiches, which give you more filling, so you have more of the delicious stuff. It's a bore having to weigh pasta, but you can have a delicious salad on the side. Also, here we eat all our food in one big meal, whereas in Italy pasta is an in-between course, and you only eat 60 grams of it. You'll also have salad and antipasti, satisfying your craving over a longer period of time.

**H:** Why do people like your food?

**GE:** Because of my love of world food, people are now willing to take on new challenges in cooking. I know how I feel when I turn on the television and think, 'Here we go again' at another roast pork recipe or tarte tartin recipe. [Laughs.] All those recipes are great, but I love the fact the world is so small now. The internet is so brilliant. Any world ingredient can be on your doorstep the next day, we're all more well-travelled now, and restaurants with cuisines from all over the world are on every high street. We're pushing boundaries, and there isn't anyone else of my age in the media doing this. But people can relate to me. I'm a massive feminist, and my personality is something that people can grab on to. I'm one of the only girls who does television to the level I do, and still cooks professionally: I'm not just a food writer, I'm still a chef.

**H:** Tell us about your feminism.

**GE:** It's really important that girls feel capable of doing anything boys can do. Some of the weirdest stuff I've been asked to do has come from women, wanting me to be dumbed down. It's never happened in kitchens, but on TV, women want you to portray yourself in a particular way, and you're not allowed to know as much as the guys know. So the male chefs are portrayed as having authority, and I'm thinking, 'Why can't I have authority?' I've turned jobs down because of it.

**H:** What's your foodie philosophy for Christmas?

**GE:** I'm the biggest Christmas fairy you'll ever meet. The first mince pie is the best ever. For Christmas Day, do as much as you can the day before. I don't see Christmas Day as any harder than doing a roast.

My philosophy for entertaining generally would be to do a really easy starter: smoked salmon with delicious quality salmon, delicious quality brown bread and delicious quality butter (see recipe, right). I love unsalted butter and putting salt on top. Pudding can be made in advance. The important thing to focus on is the turkey, the stuffing, the gravy, the bread sauce and the potatoes, so if you want to be experimental with the vegetables, then you can. With Brussel sprouts I do them two ways, because my mum always over-buys things: first I stir-fry them with chestnuts and pancetta or smoked bacon, to keep it as British as possible. Cream of sprouts is just very finely chopped sprouts with cream and nutmeg, and it's so simple and so delicious. Then I would



Presents as brooches? Gizzi's unique style extended to her way with accessories

do red cabbage with apples, and mash with mixed root vegetables. [Here the interview momentarily halts for perfecting eyeliner.]

**H:** Do you spend the whole of December preparing for Christmas?

**GE:** I make Christmas chutney at the beginning of October and do a pudding with my mum around the same time. I make my sister and myself a chocolate log with chocolate chestnut-cream filling and salted caramel: it's blooming lovely. For parties, I'm a real anti-canapé person. I believe people would rather have a big vat of stew or chilli, served in small bowls, so it's more than a mouthful, and you feel more satisfied. Something like a venison stew with chestnuts and parsnip and potato mash. My entertaining ethos is that you should have a first course that's nothing much, a main course you can bung in the oven, and then have some good red wine, with everyone sitting elbow-to-elbow, and helping one another to food. I like the Mediterranean way of eating where everybody leans over each other to grab something, instead of the British stiff upper lip, sitting there like you've got a poker up your bum.

**H:** Have you ever had to rescue a Christmas kitchen nightmare?

**GE:** I'm quite good at knowing a recipe before I start, and that

would be my tip for insecure cooks: just read the recipe all the way through first, then you know what you're doing, and can confidently foresee any potential hiccups.

**H:** You seem very happy in your skin. Tell us about body confidence.

**GE:** My mum gave us a really good start with body image. Everything was in moderation, we were encouraged to eat and try everything. She was a size 10-12 and was very happy and active. I've never queried my body: like every girl I may put on a dress size now and then, but I think it's always been a really healthy attitude towards food, and enjoying it. When I was bigger, I didn't even notice it until I went on the scales. It was when I lost weight that everybody started noticing it. And then I noticed a pleasing difference: since then I feel more active and clothes fit better. With fame, when you have more pictures of yourself, it's easy to notice more flaws, but when you have a really good picture of yourself, then it can make you more confident. Every woman, every human, has weird insecurities. For example, I did my teeth veneers when I first got famous because it made me feel better.

My insecurities now don't come from the physical side about being in the public eye, they come from a capability side. Yes, I can be quite vain – but if I wasn't good at my job *that* would really offend me.

## ENTERTAINING GIZZI'S WAY

### A NICE LITTLE SMOKED SALMON PLATE

MAKES 1 PORTION

2 quail's eggs  
1 thin slice of sourdough bread  
125g really good-quality cold smoked salmon, cut into thin slices  
1 small cooked beetroot, cut into small cubes  
5 caper berries (in vinegar)  
1 tbsp half-fat sour cream  
1 tbsp salmon roe  
Few sprigs of dill  
Squeeze of lemon juice, plus wedges to serve  
A good grinding of black pepper



**1** Soft-boil the quail's eggs in boiling water for one-to-two minutes. Shell and halve. Toast the bread. Lay the salmon in the centre of a plate. Arrange the beetroot, berries, cream, roe, and quail's eggs over the salmon.

**2** Scatter with dill, drizzle with lemon juice and grind over a little black pepper. Serve.

### ICED BERRIES WITH HOT WHITE CHOCOLATE SAUCE

MAKES 1 PORTION

100g mixed berries (for example, blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, redcurrants, blackcurrants)  
15g white chocolate  
15ml double cream  
1 tbsp Cointreau (optional)



**1** Arrange your choice of berries on a plate, and pop them in the freezer for three hours, or until the berries are solid.

**2** Put the white chocolate and cream in a bowl over a pan of simmering water and stir continually, until the chocolate has just melted and the sauce is smooth.

Alternatively, you could pop the bowl of chocolate and cream in the microwave and allow to cook for a few seconds to melt the chocolate. Stir in the tablespoon of Cointreau, if liked.

**3** Take the berries out of the freezer. Drizzle over the chocolate sauce; serve immediately.

Recipes from *Skinny Weeks And Weekend Feasts* by Gizzi Erskine (Quadrille, £19.99). **H**