

Living

Close Encounters
Anna Haugh

‘A baby or a restaurant? I’ll have both’

The Irish chef pushed through bad advice, fiery kitchens and the pressure of balancing ambition and motherhood. Now at Myrtle in Chelsea she’s doing things her own way, she tells *Tom Doorley*

Don’t open a restaurant if you can’t cook. Don’t cook just for restaurant critics. Don’t use your imagination just for the sake of seeming imaginative.” This was the philosophy of Myrtle Allen, the undisputed doyenne of Irish food. And it’s quoted on the menu of Myrtle in Chelsea, Anna Haugh’s restaurant, named in Allen’s honour, which brings fine Irish food to one of the world’s great gastro cities.

This missionary work also involves her recent 15-part television series for the BBC, *Anna Haugh’s Big Irish Food Tour*, which aired throughout the UK.

It’s all a long way from Presentation Community College, in the Dublin suburb of Terenure, where the careers teacher said to a 16-year-old Haugh, “You’ll be sick of cooking when you’re married,” and refused to give her advice on how to make a culinary career.

“A friend’s mum had said to me, ‘Have you ever thought of being a chef, Anna? You change when you’re in the kitchen.’ And she was right, I do. People can see it. That careers teacher, Mrs O’Shea, actually laughed, she even slapped her thigh! So I went to the home economics teacher and she gave me a leaflet for the Ballymaloe Cookery School and my mam said, ‘Oh no, Anna, that’s not for you.’ I mean, I’m from Tallaght; we didn’t have that kind of money. Little did I know how much Ballymaloe would mean to me in the end.

“My mum was from Barnacullia, my dad was from Ringsend and they had to get into working life as soon as possible. But they said we could be anything we wanted, they would make it happen, so

I went home and said I want to be a chef and Dad said, ‘Nooooo!’ A doctor or a lawyer would be fine. Years later I came home from London and he said, ‘I want to say sorry. All those years you were in those great kitchens and I just didn’t understand.’ He’s an absolute legend and I get my strength of character – you have to have it when you’re managing people – from both of my parents.”

After a foundation course in graphic design she headed off to a summer job in a Pontins holiday camp on Jersey. “At first I was making sandwiches in the café and then I was moved to the main kitchen, where my job was to open great big cans of fruit cocktail. The kitchen was empty when I started and I just stood there. After a while something clicked and I realised: this is where I belong.”

Although offered a place in what was the Dublin Institute of Technology on Bolton Street to pursue graphic design, she enrolled in the institute’s Cathal Brugha Street campus to do professional cookery. “I worked in Eddie Rocket’s when I was there and I loved it, I even learnt about admin. Then I got my first placement in the Salthill hotel in Galway – I wanted to get out of Dublin with some of my friends – and we just opened packets! I wanted to make everything from scratch. The head chef

told me, ‘Tell your supervisor to send you to somewhere they make everything in house – even the bread and the ice cream. Only the best places make their own ice cream.’ So I did and I was in L’Ecrivain the following summer. It’s thanks to the Salthill hotel that I’ve been on this amazing journey through great Michelin-starred kitchens.”

After graduation she was hired by L’Ecrivain and worked under the head pastry chef, Mary Knox. In time Knox left, told her she had taught her everything she knew and handed over the pastry section to her. “I had chefs working under me and I was just a commis,” Haugh recalls.

“Eventually Seamus Commons, the head chef, said I should go to Paris to finish my training, so I lied to my parents and said I had accommodation sorted. I found a hostel – it had a view of the Eiffel Tower, fabulous – and I ate delicious food from the Monoprix down the road.

When I ran out of money I got a job in a little deli and brushed up my French.”

Then there followed a big jump in terms of kitchens when she got a job with Gualtiero Marchesi at the Lotti hotel in the Place Vendôme. “It had one Michelin star and I was head pastry chef. I was mad to learn and I used to come in on my days off to watch the guys at work. It used to really freak them out. They told me this



Anna Haugh, above, and with her son, Oisín, right, who was born in 2021. At her fine dining restaurant Myrtle, Haugh champions Irish produce in modern European cuisine

was as senior as I’d ever get as a female chef so I told them to shove it up their arse. That probably wasn’t my best decision. I was hot-headed, I was very young, there was masses still to learn but I was also homesick, so it was back to Dublin and L’Ecrivain.”

After a few weeks she was off to London. “I just phoned up Pied à Terre and asked for a trial.” This Fitzrovia restaurant had just achieved a second Michelin star under the fiery Australian chef Shane Osborn.

“It was like something from [the restaurant kitchen drama] *Boiling Point*,” Hauge says. “It was crazy. I had just done the mise en place for the signature starter and one of the guys accidentally flipped the tray. And someone had just set fire to

something and I think the KP [kitchen porter] had just walked out, mayhem! So I just quietly started again. At the end of service everyone seemed to be arguing, but Shane pulled me over and said he’d like to offer me the job. I said, one condition, that I’m not on pastry and he was as good as his word. I was the first female sous chef in Pied à Terre.”

Pied à Terre was a notoriously hardcore kitchen at the time. “If you lasted three months it was a huge achievement. I mean, it was your stereotypical scary kitchen. But I do believe that Shane is a good person, amazingly skilled. His timings were always impeccable. If he said he’d be plating up in two minutes it would be exactly that. But he was very emotional and very young to be a head

chef. He would literally smash two phones a day – and one of them might be the landline we used for ordering. There were times when I stood between him and the phone!”

After two years there Anna moved to the Square in Mayfair. “I learnt so much from Rob Weston and Philip Howard there. It was all about seasonality and that was very new back then, but after a year I was back to Pied à Terre. It was old-fashioned in some ways. If I did something wrong I’d get yelled at. Then there was an egg dish that wasn’t quite right when I handed it to the pass and Shane just looked at it and threw it back at me.



“If I did something wrong I’d get yelled at. There was an egg dish that wasn’t quite right when I handed it to the pass and Shane just looked at it and threw it back at me. And I said, no, that’s it. He couldn’t believe I was leaving

And I just said, no, that’s it. He couldn’t believe I was leaving.”

There followed a couple of years with a high-end catering company where Haugh rapidly rose to be director of food. “I’m five foot two and I was managing all these young men. I had to be very tough. When I was roaring at them I could see the fear in their eyes, they were petrified. I had this sense of power. We got things done but I’d walk home feeling deep, deep shame. And I decided things had to change. I was still a tough nut but with better communication and respect.”

After this Haugh had a trial at the Savoy for Gordon Ramsay and cooked Irish food. “‘This isn’t Irish,

it’s blancmange,’ they said. It was a twist on Myrtle Allen’s carriagee moss pudding. And I did this very refined boxty. I got the job and it was great, I was not just head chef but a kind of GM [general manager], you had to be on top of everything. Gordon loved the simplicity of my cooking. But I knew I wanted my own restaurant.”

After a stint at Bob Bob Ricard in Soho, during which she “fixed a lot of dishes”, she found a premises beside Bibendum on Fulham Road, but the Irish landlord wanted to charge her the same rent as Chanel next door. “I phoned up Adam Byatt [of Elsytan Street] and he said walk away! So I did. And I had to get up on the horse again and start all over.”

The next year, 2018, she got hold of a premises in Chelsea and Myrtle was born. But there was another birth. “I had a baby. After seven years of IVF, Oisín was born. People said you can have a baby or a restaurant and I said I’ll have f***ing both! He’s four now and when I’m with him he’s everything. No phone, no emails, no work, just him and me.”

Opening Myrtle in 2019 was a challenge. “Making a profit in the first year of a fine-dining restaurant is unheard of but we were on track to do it. The month before the first lockdown was our busiest ever. The team were furloughed but I had to find the money to pay their taxes and I had to honour all the contracts for equipment. It was brutal.”

She would do it all again, however. “I did things my way,” she says. “You can ask people for advice as much as you like but in the end it’s your own decisions that count. You just have to be true to yourself.”