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'Ainsley's National Trust Cook Off' Press Pack:

CREDIT: Ainsley's National Trust Cook Off starts 11:40 am on Saturday 18 May, and then weekly for 10 weeks on ITV1 and IT VX.



Chef and TV favourite, Ainsley Harriott will once again be on our screens, in his brand-new series; Ainsley's National Trust Cook Off, airing on ITV1 and IT VX from Saturday 18 May.

The series, which will run for 10 episodes, is filmed at three National Trust locations, famed for their abundant kitchen and walled gardens: Blickling Estate in Norfolk, Wimpole Estate in Cambridgeshire and Tyntesfield in Somerset.

Ainsley and his chef friends cook al fresco in the walled kitchen gardens of the UK's finest National Trust stately homes. In each episode, Ainsley Harriott is joined by two guest chefs in the kitchen gardens of the historic estates who he will challenge to create and cook recipes using the bounty of the garden in an attempt to win the accolade of 'Dish of the Day' whilst celebrating the abundance and beauty of fresh British produce grown by the Trust's team of staff and volunteers.

Alongside the fun of outdoor cooking and friendly competition, Ainsley meets the staff and volunteers of the Trust, and finds out about the work they do to maintain the gardens and estates - picking up handy gardening tips along the way.

Interview with Ainsley Harriott:

- **What can viewers expect from 'Ainsley's National Trust Cook Off' and what's so special about collaborating with the National Trust?**

I think the real beauty of visiting and cooking at some of these amazing National Trust establishments was being able to experience the real detail that goes into preserving them. They are magnificent standalone properties. Every time I walked in, I would think to myself, 'this is beautiful' - and you can understand why people love visiting these places, because they are not just gardens, they're a sanctuary where nature meets community.

Because of the nature of the layout, each of them have their own south facing walled gardens - so they get a lot of sun, which they're able to control. During the series, people will be able to see, for example, how the gardeners place doors to create a flow of air to help the growth of plants or vegetables. There's a lot of fascinating detail - it's a bit like Alice in Wonderland! Everywhere that we cooked, in all the different locations, we had amazing kitchen gardens. We brought along the equipment - all the beautiful barbecue grills, outdoor pizza ovens and so on - and it was wonderful, because it just brought the kitchen into the gardens. It's fantastic to see all the diversity of produce and there really is something for everybody. I enjoyed the space and I enjoyed the quality of the produce that I was cooking with. To be able to pick it out of the ground 50 yards away from where you're actually cooking ... Well, it just makes you feel good.

- **You're used to cooking and exploring different cuisines in different countries, but what was so different about cooking al fresco in the UK and using that fresh produce straight from the gardens?**

There's just something about al fresco eating - it's so so different. Your appetite grows like never before because you're outside and you tend to feel perfectly comfortable eating with your fingers, don't you? But for me, it's the freshness of it. When I was growing up, you had to go down to your local market or store where the potatoes were muddy, the carrots were muddy and everything had a little bit of soil on it! But it was natural. I remember the famous Indian chef Cyrus Todiwala, who was one of the guest chefs on the programme, saying that it was the first time he had ever pulled an onion from the ground and then cooked it. There was a genuine excitement from him and I knew exactly what he meant.

My mother was really green fingered and so I know what it was like to have beans and lettuce growing, also corn and courgettes, because that's what she used to do. Even until her dying day, she still had a little vegetable patch in her back garden, so I'm used to having things that have come straight out of the ground or been picked from a tree. She used to say, 'above the ground, you put it in hot water and below the ground, you put it in cool water.' It's wonderful. It's wonderful for the viewers to see, as a lot of kids today think that meat, fruit and vegetables come from a fridge in the supermarket - they don't really see the source and there's something quite exciting about it.

- **Tell us more about the guest chefs that you have on the show with you! Can you tell us who produced your favourite 'Dish of the Day'?**

Now that is a tricky one. It was a fantastic challenge for everybody. There are 20 different chefs, as we have two guest chefs on every programme. They would come along and I would say, 'you've got to go and pick something from the garden that might enhance your score and maybe give you an opportunity to win today's challenge' - and they couldn't wait to go for it! They would love walking around to find the ingredients, as they don't get to that very often. They're normally in a kitchen, underground, where they order the ingredients, they get them delivered and then they get on with the cooking. So for them, it was a welcome escape, stripping it back to reality. It was back to nature cooking, which was genuinely exciting.

- **In the series, the National Trust volunteers play a big part in the programme. Was there anything that you learnt from the volunteers about the National Trust which surprised you or that you didn't know before?**

Every time you go into these environments, it always surprises you - it's one of the reasons we want to go on days out like this, as you learn so many different things and speak to really knowledgeable specialists. The thing that surprised me most was the absolute dedication and love for what they do - all year round! It's not only when the beautiful flowers come out in the spring or when we get the lovely root vegetables and different types of apples that come later on in the summer. There's a real sense of satisfaction and community spirit. It brings people together as people are doing something that they love to share.

All the judges for the competitions were National Trust volunteers and it was fantastic - I can't even tell you what that was like. In the programme, we find out all about their new growing methods and how they take the fresh flowers from the rose gardens, and how they dry them and make all these wonderful displays that go into the houses. There's just so much going on and there is so much to learn. The enthusiasm of these people, the passion, was just unbelievable. There's a little bit of you thinking, 'wow, I could retire to the country'. I'm in the rat race, I'm in London but everything just slows down incredibly there.

- **If you could only use ONE spice for cooking, what would it be?**

If I could only use one spice again, it would probably be Sumac. I kind of like that citrus, fruity sort of flavour. It's great because you can sprinkle it on dressings, on fish and so many other things.

- **What 3 courses would you serve for a dinner date?**

If I'm honest, I don't ever really get to dessert because I've already won her over after the main course. I should ask my partner really, because anytime you do a cookbook

or anything like that, your partner gets the benefit of trying everything and they also tell you when they don't like something, which is really embarrassing!

I think for starters it would be my butternut squash, stilton and pecan pastry rolls, which I cook with a little pea or watercress salad on the side. They are lovely with a bit of onion cheese inside and some nigella seed on top.

For the main course, I would probably go down the fish route. Perhaps I'd cook a beautiful fresh crab pasta with spaghetti. Anything with spaghetti really - or maybe crab and lemon linguine with pangrattato. You get this lovely crispy, crunchy topping and if you share it, who knows, you could be heading towards a *Lady And The Tramp* moment as you get closer.

Dessert has to be something chocolatey. I do a lovely chocolate sponge tray bake with salted caramel sauce. These are all taken from my cookbook, *Ainsley's Good Mood Food*, of course.

- **You've been a TV chef for many years now, do you still get the same enjoyment out of it now and how do you keep your recipes fresh?**

I still get a great buzz out of it. I think it's because food is something that we deal with every day and, as you can see in the series, we have all this wonderful seasonal produce around us. I'm really one of the lucky ones. And even though it's a bit of a roller coaster ride, where someone else can come along and be flavour of the month or year, the fact that I'm just part of that and the fact that I can still entertain our nation and come up with some lovely ideas to make us more knowledgeable about food is enough.

Not everybody wants to cook but as I said to someone the other day, it's not just about cooking, it's about the fact that when you go out to a restaurant everybody now knows what different foods are. We've all made food a lot more accessible. We've raised the standards. You used to go to a pub and you could only get scampi in a basket but now, it's kind of opened up to all sorts of possibilities, because we've demanded it. And if you ain't no good, guess what, you close down very quickly. People don't put up with nonsense anymore - they talk and they share their experiences, so you've got to be on it. Everyone's a judge or critic, constantly rating everything and giving scores and endless feedback.. So you've got to be on the game. And I also have to give huge credit to the people that I work with. It's having people around you that inspire you. And don't be frightened to cook for one another! Don't be frightened to say, 'Come over. Let's do a meal.' Someone once said to me, 'What's your favourite meal?' and I said, 'Bringing people together'. There's nothing greater than sitting around with people and putting some food in the middle of the table. That for me is the greatest gift. It's a wonderful feeling.

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