

you EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

‘COOKING makes me feel so calm and happy’

I Never more content than when in the kitchen, with a tea towel over her shoulder, Hollywood A-lister Gwyneth Paltrow, whose new cookbook-cum-family memoir is about to hit the shelves, tells *Elaine Lipworth* that she's actually a 1950s housewife at heart

Photographs MARIO TESTINO

I had always assumed that Gwyneth Paltrow was a bit of a fanatic when it came to food. I imagined the beautiful and willowy actress following a rigid vegan diet consisting of brown rice and lentils, and spending her time juicing, fasting and generally suffering for her fabulous figure. (And she admits that there have been times when she has done just that.) So, when we meet for lunch in Los Angeles, it's something of a revelation to discover that she is passionate about cooking.

'I love to cook for my family,' says Gwyneth, who is the author of a new cookbook, *Notes From My Kitchen Table*, that is likely to place her in the same league as those chefs she respects most, including Mario Batali and Jamie Oliver. Yes, there are recipes for veggie burgers and organic spelt flour muffins, but mostly the book is full of delicious indulgences, from pancakes to fish stew, from chicken and dumplings to chocolate brownies. She takes American classics (and a few British

ones too, such as crumbles) and gives each one her own distinctive and healthy twist.

The Oscar-winning star of *Shakespeare in Love* is most content away from the spotlight, in the kitchen of her North London home, making dinner for her husband, Chris Martin of Coldplay, and their two children, Apple, six, and five-year-old Moses. 'Cooking makes me feel so calm and happy – doing things that are routine and mundane. If I'm stressed out, I start to cook and I completely relax.'

It's been a hectic year so far for the actress: promoting her latest film *Country Strong* – in which she plays an alcoholic country music star, singing at the Grammy Awards and blogging on her popular lifestyle website Goop.com. 'My life can be surreal sometimes – like singing at the Oscars [she performed a song from her film]. I think, "What's going on?" It is so crazy. I've been doing way too much. But last week I was at home with my children in the kitchen, and I threw a tea towel over my shoulder – as soon as I do that I feel ➤





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◀ grounded. Funnily enough,' smiles Gwyneth, 'Brad Pitt's mum taught me that [Brad and Gwyneth were engaged during the mid 1990s]. It's the best tip anyone's given me because it's always there while you're cooking. So I got chopping and put the pans on the stove. It's so tactile, I felt like I had just got back into my own body.'

I can testify that Gwyneth's recipes are not only simple to do but they work. Before we meet, I try some of them out – lemon pasta, leek and gruyère frittata, her mother's blueberry muffins and their family favourite, french toast made with challah (Jewish white bread) – and they are all big hits with my family; the actress's oven-baked chips vanish in seconds. The big question is, however, does Gwyneth – with her enviably svelte figure – actually enjoy eating? The answer, I find out over our decadently long lunch at Bouchon in Beverly Hills, one of Gwyneth's favourite bistros, is yes. A lot.

In person much warmer than her ostensibly cool, Grace Kelly-style public persona, Gwyneth saunters on to the patio looking relaxed and tanned; she wears no make-up, her skin is clear, her eyes a vivid blue and her sun-bleached stick-straight blonde hair is tied back in a tight ponytail. She's wearing a sleeveless L'Agence silver top, cropped loose 3.1 Phillip Lim silk trousers and flat sandals by Camilla Skovgaard. With the sun shining, I assume that, like most Hollywood stars, Gwyneth will want to avoid its glare and I offer her my seat in the shade. But she chooses the sunny side of the table. 'I love the sun... and fried food. What can you do?'

She laughs, stretching her swan-like neck towards the sky, before studying the menu and ordering half a dozen oysters in spicy tomato sauce, butternut squash soup with crème fraîche, cod in beer batter and a salad. She relishes every morsel – even asking for bread to soak up the sauce. 'I love bread and cocktail sauce,' she sighs. How does she stay so slim? 'I exercise a lot – you can't be 38 with two kids, be in good shape and eat what you like if you don't exercise.'

The restaurant is owned by one of America's most esteemed chefs, Thomas Keller, and as we dine, a waitress presents her with a signed copy of Chef Keller's latest book. 'Wow, he is a genius,' she exclaims, endearingly expressing the kind of excitement that one of her fans might display if she autographed her own book.

Apologetically, she looks down to answer a text from her children, who are at home in London with their father while she is here in LA filming episodes of the television show *Glee*. It must be hard being away from the children. 'I don't feel guilty unless I am tipping the balance badly,' she explains. 'For example, before Christmas, I went away five times, just little trips, but it was too much for my son – he was very upset and started crying and acting up. I felt horribly guilty. He's little and he needs me. But

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I have just been with them for seven weeks solid, so I am fine with being away this week.'

Gwyneth is delighted that I've tried her recipes – and we discuss the challenges facing every working mother who has the best intentions of cooking for her children, but invariably, pressed for time, opts for fish fingers. Gwyneth also serves fish fingers, but they're always home-made. 'I make a batch and freeze them,' she explains. 'But I think the main thing for mothers is to not stress yourself out. I honestly think that even ordering a pizza and sitting down together as a family is great. You're not always going to have time to cook a meal from scratch. What I do at the weekend is make batches of stuff for the week, such as vegetarian chilli and spaghetti with meatballs. You can make a really delicious pasta or grill a chicken breast in ten minutes.'

'We don't have family dinners every night,' she continues. 'When we're in London [the Paltrow/Martins also have an apartment in Manhattan and a holiday house on Long Island], sometimes I'll go out with friends or with Chris, but we always have a family dinner on Sunday night.' Does Chris cook? 'No, I am the cook,' she smiles. 'But my son can perfectly crack an egg and Apple is into baking, which is good because I am a terrible baker.'

The actress is fiercely private about her precious family life, but she bares her soul in her new book, dedicated to family and friends including Stella McCartney and the Spielbergs. There are tender snapshots of Gwyneth with her children and of her as a child. She grew up in Santa Monica, California, with her younger brother Jake, their mother, actress Blythe Danner, and her late father, film director Bruce Paltrow (he died in 2002 from throat cancer), before they moved to New York.

'We had a swimming pool, a tree house, pomegranate trees... My dad was amazing, he would build stuff for us, like a slide going into the pool. Our house was the one that all the kids came to for sleepovers and swimming dates; my parents loved having kids around. They had their flaws – they weren't perfect by any stretch of the imagination – but they really, really loved us,' she says. 'We had a square kitchen table where we used to eat and I have so many memories of my dad with his

crossword puzzles; he'd have his coffee every morning with lots of milk and sugar and he'd let me sneak sips of it. It was my favourite thing in the world.'

What makes Gwyneth's book unique is that it is in essence a moving, permanent tribute to her late father. Many of his recipes are included, such as his barbecued salmon with ginger and thyme and his 'world famous' pancakes. 'It is hard for me to eat them; I keep expecting him to walk into the kitchen. I make them very rarely, because they are so "him" – I cry every time. They are the essence of my father in a food,' she says. 'My dad loved to barbecue – he'd fire up his grill and do all kinds of ribs, hamburgers and hot dogs. It wasn't very healthy back in the day,' she smiles. 'There is a strong connection for me between food and emotion, because the ultimate high point for him was us being together, joking around and having delicious food.'

Gwyneth was distraught when Bruce was diagnosed with cancer in 1998, and she became obsessed with an extreme macrobiotic eating plan, hoping that, perhaps by osmosis, adopting a rigid diet would somehow save him. 'It's obviously ridiculous,' she confesses, 'but I didn't want him to die and the doctors said he had to be healthier. He literally had a hot dog before his surgery, and I was like, "Come on." So I started to read about how powerful the body can be if you do not poison it with processed food and white sugar – there are cases that show that sometimes people can heal themselves.' (Gwyneth reverted to a moderate diet when pregnant with Apple.)

She tried and failed to get her dad to change his eating habits. 'After his operation, with his radiation treatment, he had a hard time eating, so I prepared a healthy lunch for him – gluten-free soba noodles. He took a mouthful and said, "It's like biting into *The New York Times*." She looks emotional. 'Even before he got sick, it was always my worst fear that something would happen to him because he was my rock. He was so funny, just cool and awesome.'

Gwyneth was on holiday in Rome with her father when he died. 'It was devastating beyond belief and I am still very traumatised at the memory. I still feel it in my nervous system.' She is quiet for a moment. 'I wish he was still alive and it's a real weight that I carry, like a black hole. My friends say, "He's always with you," and I say, "Oh rubbish. No, he's not, he's dead."'

Having a strong spiritual focus helps, she says, although she doesn't follow any specific religion. 'I am interested in Jewish and Christian mysticism and Sufism. I'm also interested in cause and effect and karma and God. I don't feel my father around or anything. I don't know if I will see him again.' A flicker of emotion crosses her face. 'He never got to see his grandchildren. That really sucks because he would have been the best grandfather.'

As we're talking, a young father walks out of ►

A blonde woman with long hair is leaning against a white marble kitchen counter. She is wearing a white button-down shirt with black piping around the collar and a pocket, and blue denim jeans with significant distressing and rips at the knees. She is holding a small red berry in her right hand. The counter is topped with a variety of fresh vegetables, including leafy greens, red chard, and yellow carrots. A bouquet of white flowers is also on the counter. The background shows white kitchen cabinets and a marble backsplash.

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◀ the restaurant, an adorable baby in his arms. Gwyneth is smitten. 'It makes me want to have another one, he is sooo gorgeous!' Would you have another baby? 'I don't think so. I don't know if I can go there again, not sleep and be depressed for two years.' (She suffered a bout of postnatal depression which she says 'was terrible. I felt like a zombie'.)

While she has several episodes playing teacher Holly Holliday in the TV hit *Glee* on the horizon – 'I love the show, it is so uplifting and fun' – the early ambition has faded, perhaps, I suspect, because she achieved so much so young. Gwyneth started acting in her teens and in her

early 20s starred in *Se7en*, *Emma* and *Sliding Doors*, before winning a Best Actress Oscar in 1998 for *Shakespeare in Love*, and starring opposite Matt Damon and Jude Law the following year in *The Talented Mr Ripley*. 'You grow up wondering, "What if I get an Academy Award one day?" You get one and you are 26 and you think, "OK, now what do I do?" I worked really hard, and by the time I had children I was ready to leave acting for a while. There was a lot of freedom in accomplishing that early on.'

While there are no plans to give up acting and become a full-time mum – she played Pepper Potts in the two *Iron Man* blockbusters –

Gwyneth limits her work to one film a year and has decidedly old-fashioned values about motherhood and marriage. 'I am traditional in a 1950s housewife way – cooking, making sure everyone's fed and everything's in order. I think a wife has a responsibility to make a home and to protect the family,' she adds, taking an oyster and closing her eyes. 'This is amazing... I also believe that a wife should have the choice to work or not. My mother was a less traditional wife than me; she was working to support the family.'

Who is stricter with the children – you or Chris? 'We co-parent. We do it together. I don't know what the word strict means; I expect them to have good manners and to behave nicely – sometimes it is such a war to get them to say thank you. The other day, while we were out having dinner, a waiter gave my daughter some juice, and she didn't say anything. I said, "Apple? Baby, where are your manners?" and she said, "I left them in my suitcase."' Gwyneth laughs. 'It was hilarious.'

'I try to make life as normal as possible,' she continues. Can you actually go to the supermarket with all the attention? 'I just do it. I tune it out.' Are the children aware of their parents' fame? 'Some kids in Apple's class are starting to say, "Your mummy is a movie star," but I don't think she fully gets it yet.'

The family spends several months a year in the States, but England, she says, is home. 'The children are at school there and I love London. It is a very civilised, beautiful city. I appreciate its parks so much and love the culture. There are also some great restaurants,' she says, returning to her favourite subject. 'I am obsessed with Tapas Brindisa [in Borough], which has some of the best food I've ever eaten in my life.'

In a few days, the actress will fly back to London to be reunited with her family. 'They will all be up and waiting for me. I'll cook and we'll play in the garden with the dog.' Over cappuccino, I comment that Gwyneth appears to have it all: the brilliant career, the happy family and, of course, the wealth. 'I'm aware that I'm a very privileged person and I'm very grateful,' she says. Does that mean you would be fine without the wealth? Gwyneth reflects for a moment. 'I think it would be an adjustment,' she says with candour. 'Chris Rock, the comedian, said that men cannot go back sexually, and women cannot go back in lifestyle, and that's very true. But as long as I could cook good food and be with my family I think I would be absolutely fine.' ■

**Now turn to page 64 for exquisite recipes
from Gwyneth's book *Notes From My Kitchen Table***