



Follow Your Bliss!

Every day is a festival of fantastic food!

LIFESCAPE
in conversation with Rose Elliot

Rose Elliot, also known as the Vegetarian Queen, published her first book, *Simply Delicious*, in 1967 and since then has written over fifty cookery books, which have sold three million copies all round the world. These have opened the eyes of thousands of people to the health-giving benefits of vegetarian and vegan lifestyles. Rose Elliot has made a lasting contribution to the way in which vegetarian cookery has developed and thus the image of those who like non-meat meals. So much so, that she was awarded an MBE for exactly this.

Rose treasures her private life as well as generously sharing her life and creativity with us in books and events

nationwide. We are very privileged to have had this conversation with her.

In her case, 'we eat what we are' as much as we are what we eat! Rose is a festival of love and joy – a devoted wife and mother, entrepreneurial cook, renowned author and much more - and prefers to prepare and eat those foods that embody this! We said we would like her to talk about life, love and motherhood, and she said this summed her up well!

LIFESCAPE:

You are now celebrated worldwide for your vegetarianism, making you a real celebrity veggie rather than a veggie celeb! You have made vegetarianism more accessible and

attractive, and been rightly rewarded. How did it feel in 1999, when you were awarded the MBE for your services to vegetarian cookery? Were you expecting it?

Thank you. I feel I've been so fortunate to have had the chance to do the work I love, which combines creativity and communication in a way, which makes a difference to the animals and to people's lives... I am so lucky, so blessed. The MBE came as a complete surprise. In fact when the letter came informing me, I almost threw it away before opening it, thinking it was political junk mail! I was brought up with a strong spiritual ethic and the strong belief that I had 'work to do' in this life, but I originally thought that this would be within the White Eagle Lodge (the religious Charity which my grandmother founded through her own mediumship). I did work there for over fifteen years, mostly in the kitchen (!) which is how my cookery career began... and that was completely unplanned by me.



Farming, all of which are very close to my heart.

In most of your books you convey a real delight in the ingredients you use. Are you very influenced by colour and do you find yourself drawn to different colour foods on different days to cook or write about?

Yes, colour is very important to me. My first choice of career was to go to art school and design textiles or clothes, but my parents would not contemplate the possibility. Then I got distracted as I met my future husband! All I wanted to do was to leave school. I saw my chance when the vegetarian cook at the Retreat centre left. I begged them to let me leave school and take over the cooking.

I did that – with just my five O level GCEs – and found cooking to be a very satisfying way of expressing my love of colour – along with yummy flavours, textures and aromas... Cooking is the main way I express my creativity.

Many of us love certain foods for the memories they revive. For example, I believe you are quite fond of Thai and Asian food. Is this because you have been on holiday there, or for some other reason?

I love Asian food, both Thai and Indian... all those fragrant spices, creamy coconut milk and fresh herbs and vegetables. I haven't been to Thailand, only India and Sri Lanka, where I was in paradise, foodwise. Particularly in southern India, it was so good to be in a country where being vegetarian was the norm – I look forward to the day when this is the case in Europe – or even world-wide (let's not hold back here!). I also love the piquancy and freshness of Japanese

vegetarian food, the use of seaweed, the salty-sweetness of the sauces, the attractive presentation.

You are Patron of the Vegetarian Society, VIVA! and the Vegetarian and Vegan Foundation. Are we working toward a unified voice for all those who wish to move away from a meat-based diet?

I would like to feel that we are all working, as you say, toward a unified voice 'for the animals', as Viva! would say. There is much work to be done and each is working so well in its own way, on particular aspects. I feel honoured to be Patron of them all. But I think we're all working, basically, 'for the animals'. Once people start treating them right – which means an end to eating them and abusing them – the knock-on effects on individual health and the health of the planet, and the fair distribution of food for everyone on it – are huge. That's my aim, my vision and the motivation for my work.

There are now so many recipes in your books, Rose. How do you manage to come up with new and original recipes again and again! What is your secret process?

I'm very restless and easily bored. I really dislike cooking the same thing twice, although I will do so in order to test a recipe. My family find this difficult because they sometimes long for old favourites – and there I am offering them some new experiment! My husband summed it up well: he said when I'm working on a new recipe I give him that dish at practically every meal for a while, then he has it once when it's perfect, after which it goes into a book and he never sees it again!

Do you think up recipes in dreams, from meditating on certain ingredients, from reading books, from eating out, or how do they happen? Can you share something about the creative process?

Yes, all of those things. It might be a flavour, a texture, a colour, or the need to create a particular type of recipe for some occasion that starts me off. Sometimes I get an idea and it works perfectly first time, but more often than not, I have to do it again, once or sometimes many more times to perfect it. →



It might need more liquid or more or less of some ingredient; or when I taste it, I think another flavouring would be better. Then I have to make sure the amount is right for the container or tin and re-check the cooking time. There are a lot of details that have to be right and I am always on the look out for short cuts to make a recipe as simple and practical as possible. I think three testings is probably the average.

It is well known that you have been a vegetarian since you were a child. I believe it was a fish that turned you into a vegetarian! Tell us about that.

My parents, because of their spiritual ideals,

were becoming vegetarian when I was born. They had long given up red meat, but were still eating the occasional fish and chicken. One evening, when I was very young, I saw my mother preparing herrings for supper. I was appalled to see the whole fish and asked her whether it had been killed for me to eat. I remember my shock when she said that it had. I refused to eat it, and would not eat fish or chicken after that. Soon the whole family became completely vegetarian.

Today's toddler seems to love the healthy option one day and say "yuk" the next. We are surrounded with less than healthy, synthetic "treats" -

biscuits, sweets, lollies and so on which seem to blunt the taste buds to home-made treats. Does this wear off? Any ideas?

This is a difficult one. I do think, though, that if healthy food is the norm in the home, and the children see their parents eating and enjoying healthy food, this approach will rub off on them. I'm glad that there wasn't quite so much junk around when my children were little.

I do think you have to be firm and set limits whilst not being completely fanatical – and make sure there's plenty of fresh fruit, crudités, hummus, nuts, seeds, raisins, dates and dried apricots etc easily available, along with water to drink.

If someone gave you a meal that inadvertently had meat in it, what would your reaction be? Would you just think – mistakes happen? Many have found themselves in this situation and been quite upset, especially when the person/ restaurant owners responsible didn't seem to find it that important.

Meat-eaters often don't realise quite how offensive meat and fish are to a long-term vegetarian. When it happens to me I simply point it out and ask for something else.

I was once taken out to a meal at a classy restaurant and although, when the booking was made, they said they would have something suitable for a vegetarian, the first course they served was a potato salad with bacon in it. I pointed this out and asked for another. When it came back, it still smelt of bacon and I realised they had simply rinsed out the bacon! I could not eat it – and they were not very pleased with me!

Last year you gave a list of your top ten vegetarian cookbooks for the Guardian and said what you looked for. I quote: "Inspiration, first and foremost: the recipes have to leap off the page and make me want to rush off and cook them. Secondly, the atmosphere of the book: it has to be warm, friendly, accessible. And thirdly, of course, the recipes have got to work."

This sums up your own books! Which is your favourite book and why? →



It's kind of you to say so. Well, it's always the book I'm just working on, isn't it! But it's a bit like one's children – they're all different and I can't choose between them! I am particularly proud of my two latest colour books – *Vegetarian Supercook* and *Veggie Chic* which is coming out this autumn; and my early books – *Simply Delicious*, *Not Just a Load of Old Lentils*, and *The Bean Book* (which is still in print) will always have a special place in my heart.

What else would you like to see in terms of Veggie/Vegan PR generally? More VIVA! road shows? What other

ideas do you have to show people that vegetarian food is exciting, good for us and the planet...

I think the VIVA! road shows are absolutely fantastic, along with magazines like this. I am so happy to have the opportunity to write my weekly column, *The Vegetarian Kitchen*, in *The Guardian Weekend* magazine and I would love to do a vegetarian cookery series on TV. And the more of us there are out there, believing it, doing it, living it, the more others realise the possibilities and join us, and so it goes on...

How many of your books or recipes get taken up by catering establishments, schools, or government offices? And what of Europe and America where we have LIFESCAPE readers too, are your books widely available there?

I'm always thrilled when people tell me that my recipes have inspired them to open a restaurant, or a health food shop, or a catering business... My books are available in America and some parts of Europe, but it would be good to see more of them out there.

What we eat and our relationship with food is affected by our upbringing for better or worse! How do you remember your parents?

Both my parents influenced me in their different ways. My mother (like my grandmother) was a mystic and also an astrologer (she taught me). I was very influenced by her spiritual attitude to life. She taught me many things such as not to kill anything and she would never let me pick wild flowers and just throw them down. She was deeply interested in health and the relationship between food and health. She taught me 'you are what you eat' long before it was fashionable. We always had wholemeal bread and flour – my friends thought I was very weird – but I'm really grateful to my mother for all of that. She also taught me to cook vegetables in what is now the modern way, with hardly any water, until they're only just done. My father was unusual and original but also a very practical, down-to-earth Yorkshireman. I think I've inherited some of my quirkiness and creativity from him!

Do you see what you do as work, Rose, or has it always been a way of life that is inextricably part of who you are? Many people have a conflict between work, family and their "real interests". Your whole life seems to be extremely integrated, and focussed, so any advice for Lifescape readers?

Yes, it is what you say, a vocation, a way of life that is inextricably part of who I am...but I would say that in principle I do believe in encouraging people to do what they really and truly love doing. So often people do things through a sense of duty, or to please

others and bury their real passion which would lead them to their true vocation and success in life. I have some of Joseph Campbell's wise words stuck to my word processor: 'follow your bliss'.

Many say that, "it's not for me to dictate what my child will eat". What are your views on this?

If you're vegetarian or vegan it's only natural to feed your children the same kind of food as you're eating, particularly if you believe passionately in that way of life. I do believe that later on, children need the freedom to decide for themselves and we have to respect their decisions.

It can be physically hard work cooking. I imagine that devising and creating new recipes sometimes takes it toll. Do you have people who help you or do you do it all yourself? What labour saving devices do you totally depend on? Are they human or technological?

Sometimes when interviewers come into my kitchen they seem surprised that it's so normal and not 'cheffy'. My favourite labour-saving device is my faithful much-used Magimix. I also have a stick blender, an electric whisk, and a small electric coffee grinder, which I prefer to a pestle and mortar for grinding spices. My favourites are my heavy wooden chopping board and my sharp knives, though. I do have a dishwasher, but best of all is my husband who will slip into the kitchen unasked and unannounced and quietly tackle huge piles of washing up when I'm testing or making a special meal. I'm not a tidy cook and this 'washing up service' is really appreciated!

This is a confusing age as one day the papers will report how it's good to eat bread and the next day not, and then we have the good and bad soya days, depending on which scientists are speaking up. What to speak of the dairy debate which does bewilder many new vegetarians. There are so many seemingly "authoritative" opinions backed up with statistics! What are your views on this?

When reading reports, such as the vicious anti-soya stuff on the internet, I've learnt to ask myself 'what axe have they to grind?

What's in this for them?' As far as individuals are concerned, I feel that when you're healthy and eating natural food, as little processed as possible, the best way of finding out what's good for you is to listen to your body. Eat what you fancy and see how it affects you. We're all different and also, our bodies change, so what's good for us at one time is not as good at another. For beginner vegetarians or vegans, I think the material published by both the Vegetarian Society and VIVA!, both on the internet and in print, is an excellent starting point.

When not creating wonderful meals or writing about them, what do you think about?

Astrology is my other main interest and also part of my career, though the cookery takes up much more of my time. I love astrology: contemplating an astrological chart – a diagrammatic snapshot of the heavens, from the view-point of the earth, at any given moment. This gives me such a sense of the vastness of the universe and the perfection and harmony of its order. The magic it can have on people's lives has to be 'seen to be believed'. It helps us to accept ourselves as we are, whilst at the same time showing us what we might become. I do yoga and meditate most days. I love being with my family, eating out (which I don't do nearly as often as I'd like), going to films sometimes, and I've just started painting again.

Lots of good cooks say they can't eat their own cooking. I'm sure this isn't true for you, but are there times when you long to have someone cook up a feast for you? And if so, who would it be?

I love eating what I cook! I also enjoy eating out and being cooked for. I had some memorable meals last year – every meal I ate in Goa was mouthwatering.

I was taken to Le Manoir au Quat'Saisons as a birthday treat and enjoyed the fabulous vegetarian 'tasting' menu on a long and leisurely sunny summer's afternoon. I also had a fantastic, memorable meal cooked by Michael Dean, at his restaurant in Belfast.

Family wise, are you the main cook in the family?

One of my daughters is living at home at

the moment, though usually it's just my husband and me (and he never cooks!). All my three daughters are excellent cooks and I love cooking with them. When we all get together, at Christmas, say, we all do something, and it's really fun.

You really are the picture of health! Can you let us into a Rose Elliot Day as regards what you generally eat... and enjoy.

It varies all the time, depending on how I'm feeling and what book I'm writing. When I was working on *The Vegetarian Low-Carb Diet* I was eating absolutely in that way, lost some weight and felt very good on it. At the moment I'm 'between books', eating in a raw vegan way, and feeling wonderful on that. So breakfast is usually fresh fruit – grapes today – followed by a big salad of organic leaves and avocado in vinaigrette and another salad, perhaps grated carrot, chicory, red pepper, cucumber and watercress with vinaigrette and chopped pecans and raisins, for supper – and fruit to snack if I feel hungry. At other times, I might like a more substantial meal, especially in the evening, and this would be a lovely spicy vegetable curry with dhal, for instance!

As an animal lover, what is your general view of the treatment of animals around the world? Are we gradually evolving in our consciousness?

I would like to think so – you have to believe that – though I am often shocked by the amount of cruelty that still exists and how closed and insensitive some people are. For myself, love of animals, a desire to protect the global ecology and to see a world where there is enough (healthy) food for everyone, plus health issues, are my own motivations. I love the fact that this is a totally independent decision anyone can take, which can, quite literally, improve the world as well as their own health. That's so empowering, isn't it!

Finally, Rose, what is your most favourite place on the planet when you are not actively working?

A remote hideaway on a Greek island! 🌿