

London Evening Standard

standard.co.uk



LITTLE CHEF
The junior Jamie with a book deal and a global following
London Life
Pages 25 & 26

Page 29

CHRIS OFILI RETURNS TO THE CAPITAL FOR HIS NEW TATE BRITAIN SHOW, AND FAY MASCHLER ON C

IS BABY ARCHIE THE NEW JAMIE?

When this two-year-old's dad lost his job in the recession, he started a cooking blog. Three months on, Nick Coffey has 1,000 hits a day and a publishing deal. **Viv Groskop** discovers how toddlers and food proved a winning recipe for one enterprising family

ARCHIE, two, answers the door wearing a dinosaur T-shirt and Bob the Builder slippers. So far so normal for a toddler. But he's also wearing a Gruffalo apron (one of two favourite aprons - Archie likes to rotate) and a professional chef's hat. He always wears it when he's cooking. "Daddy! Muffins!" he exclaims upon realising that he has guests - and off he bustles into his family's tiny kitchen, which is barely four feet square.

This small, pristine end-of-terrace on a back street in Bushey, near Watford, is home to Archie, already dubbed "the miniature Jamie Oliver". He is the son of Nick Coffey, 36, a stay-at-home dad and the unlikely gastronomic powerhouse behind MyDaddyCooks, a blog launched in November which has gone viral in just three months. The blog has fans in the US, Brazil, New Zealand and Australia and gets between 500 and 1,000 unique visitors a day - a big deal in blog land. Last week Nick signed up with a publishing agent, a book deal is in the works and the BBC has already been round to film in "Archie's kitchen" - where, as Nick puts it himself, "there isn't even room to swing a toy cat".

MyDaddyCooks features videos of Archie and Nick cooking together. Their favourite recipes are chicken satay, chicken tarragon stew, oven-baked

risotto, pan-fried sea bass with roasted cherry tomatoes, French savoury cake loaf, and linguine with crayfish and dill sauce (seriously, look on the blog. And Archie cooks and eats it all). A recent study by Merchant Gourmet found that most mothers rely on just nine recipes which they constantly rotate (the list included pasta, pizza and sausages). So no wonder MyDaddyCooks is going down such a storm - with, says Nick, mums and dads alike.

This daddy-son cooking project started a year ago when Nick was forced to close down his seven-year-old business supplying drinks to hotels and restaurants in the London area. "That sector was the first thing hit by the recession," he says. "I think last year a lot of people reassessed what they really needed and we found ourselves having to do that too. I virtually became a stay-at-home dad and found, to my surprise, that I had never been happier. Luckily, we've never been hugely materialistic. We still go out and do things like buying clothes but it's on a restricted budget." His wife Jo, 37, a psychotherapist, is now the main breadwinner - unless MyDaddyCooks takes off, that is.

At first the blog was just a creative outlet for Nick - plus a way to interact

Continued on Page 26



Little chef: two-year-old Archie Coffey's culinary skills have helped make hi

Continued from Page 25

with other parents online. Its overnight success is perhaps down to Archie. With his big brown eyes and curly mop of hair, he looks like something out of Vogue Bambini. Meanwhile, Nick has a disturbingly familiar "goody actor" look and is frequently mistaken for both Adam Sandler and Ben Stiller. He describes himself as a "store-cupboard cook": his recipes are "very forgiving" - by which he means ingredients. He is a great fan of experimentation and making mistakes.

TODAY the two of them are making cheese, broccoli and tomato muffins: Nick measures out the ingredients, Archie mixes them. Of course, he's only two, so he can't do much - but what he can do, he does with gusto, standing at the stove in a Fun Foot high safety chair. "These muffins are a classic," says Nick. "It's just a base of flour, oil and milk. Then you can add anything else you've got in the cupboard."

Nick is under no illusions about how unsophisticated his cooking is. That's the whole point. "Recipes that I think are obvious are hugely popular on the blog," he says. "The other day we were snowed in and I did tuna pasta. It's obvious but people love it. They will send me messages saying things like, 'Why did I never think of making a casserole with my kids?'"

Since Archie was born, his parents have been vigilant about his eating habits. They wanted him to be a natural gourmet, not faddy about anything and in control of his own appetite. This was partly because both parents are foodies but also because Archie was diagnosed with a dairy allergy at six months. "He had a skin reaction to Philadelphia cheese at six months. His face just swelled up. So we used dairy-free formula when he stopped breast-feeding. Later he had dairy-free butter and soya milk until the paediatrician said we could try milk products again at 18 months. Now he's fine with it."

By then Archie had discovered his own appetite. "We did baby-led weaning instead of spoon-feeding," explains Nick, "puréeing things and hiding ingredients just seemed counter-intuitive to me. Why purée a vegetable when you can just give a baby a small, soft piece

to hold? We would all sit down at the table to eat and he would just eat what we were eating."

"From the age of six months he would play with it and gum it. Yes, it was messy but food never became a battle. We just let him discover his own appetite and self-regulate. By nine months he was feeding himself with a spoon. I put a video on YouTube from around the same time of him using chopsticks. The upshot is, he has a lovely relationship with food."

Archie, who turned two in October, will now eat virtually anything - including Chinese and Thai food and, his favourite snack, extra-mature Parmesan. Recently the TV presenter Kirsty Young was complaining about children being over-indulged: "I remember, as a new stepmum, hearing Nick (her husband) say to his children, who were very young, 'What do you want for breakfast?' And I said, 'I can't believe you're asking them that!' I'd have been, 'Here's breakfast. Eat it up'". This is Nick Coffey's philosophy too: he says it's all about making a non-issue of food and not allowing a child to be fussy. "Archie knows that if he doesn't eat it, that's it. Unless he really doesn't like something - which is rare - or he's ill. But he doesn't think, 'I know - I'll wind them up and they'll bring me more stuff!'"

Nick thinks his kind of cooking is perfect for any other family living on a budget. "We are living frugally at the moment but it is not prohibitively expensive to eat well. I think the blog has struck a chord with a lot of people because of that message." It helps that the recipes are just made up, he adds. "They come from 20 years of cooking. I just cook spontaneously and make it up as I go along. I got lots of emails from women saying, 'I have sent this to my husband. I hope he gets the hint!'"

Nick is slightly bemused, though, by all the excitement about the blog. "I didn't start this project to make money. I just wanted to wake myself up a bit and do something I love. It's a lot of work - I've had to teach myself two-camera editing and the videos can take eight to 10 hours to produce. Then there's the weight of all the emails and all the messages on Twitter - it's nuts. But it's such a vibrant and enjoyable project, I'd like to see if it can become more than just a blog."

He is thrilled that fans of the blog find it inspirational. "I haven't had any negative feedback so far. Although I did get some people messaging me at the start to say, 'Maybe you shouldn't put the tea towel quite so close to the hob...'. I think it all works because it's not scripted and I'm not media-trained. There's one video where Archie waits



Gastro-beasties Nick and Archie Coffey hard at work in the kitchen at their Bushey home

off in a strop. In another one you can see I'm tired and grumpy. The only thing I want to show is a little kid happy in his own skin having fun with his dad. Archie loves it: he enjoys watching himself on the videos and laughing at himself. While it remains fun for him, I'm happy." He would stop doing it if he thought Archie wasn't enjoying it, he adds.

He hopes adults enjoy the food as much as children. "I love it when I get messages that say, 'Forget the kids, I made this for my husband tonight.' But most of all it's about Archie having a healthy relationship with food."

in front of him, he would love that. But he won't eat it all. He will eat some and say, 'Full up'. That's how it should be.

"One of my favourite videos is when we made the pan-fried sea bass together. When it appears he says, 'Wow'. Just because he's two it doesn't mean he can't appreciate well-presented food. He just loves the theatre of it. You know what's really weird, though? The thing that he loves most of all - even more than the cooking - is washing up."

Now surely not even the real Jamie Oliver was that perfect as a kid?

For more information and all the recipes, see www.mydaddycooks.com