

Like Father...

Cook, blogger, radio presenter, author and most importantly dad Nick Coffer chats to Flying Start about how becoming a stay-at-home dad was one of the best things to happen to him and his toddler son Archie.

Nick Coffer never imagined he would end up where he is now when he became a stay-at-home dad in 2009. Fast forward just two years and not only has his blog – www.mydaddycooks.com – attracted worldwide attention, but he is also star of his own radio show Nick Coffer's Weekend Kitchen on BBC Three Counties Radio and has recently launched his My Daddy Cooks recipe book.

"I became a stay-at-home dad when my business started to struggle in the recession. Having spent much of 2009 looking for new projects and work, I decided to set up the blog as a little side project, just to document all the fun, mess and chaos of my time in the kitchen with my then two-year-old son Archie," Nick told Flying Start.

The blog features videos of Nick cooking in his "tiny" kitchen in Watford, with the help of his sous-chef Archie, "a chatty, creative and wilful little boy with a vibrant imagination". It also features other brilliant family food recipes and a whole diary section, in which he talks candidly about anything from the death of his grandma to the home birth of his daughter, Matilda.

"I didn't really come up with the concept as such," said Nick. "I had no agenda at all when setting up the blog. I just wanted a creative outlet, something just to keep me a bit sane. I had no idea that it would become as popular as it did. In fact, in the early days, I was shocked when I first realised that people were actually cooking the recipes I was putting on the blog! I just hadn't thought that far ahead."



...Like SON

Words: Jennifer Shuttleworth

As for the name of the blog, Nick was looking for something sharp and to-the-point, something that clearly explained what it was all about. "I was very excited when I came up with this name," he said.

His first big breakthrough was being featured on BBC London news in January 2010, followed by an appearance on Lorraine on GMTV and then Archie featured on the front cover of the London Evening Standard. "Believe it or not, I really wasn't phased by it. I love creating content. For me, content comes first, always. The subsequent publicity was an unexpected bonus rather than the aim. Also, I was brought up in the music industry as my dad managed some big Indie bands. This meant that I had been around TV and the media so it didn't feel completely alien," Nick told Flying Start.

Being a stay-at-home dad, hanging out in the kitchen was (and remains) one of Nick and Archie's favourite activities.

"I just wanted the videos to show the quality time we spent together, so it was logical to have him in the videos." That said, in the very earliest videos Archie's face wasn't shown, he was slightly off camera. But as time progressed, Nick and his wife Jo decided it was a shame to cut him out.

For Nick, cooking with Archie is quality bonding time. "For sure, you have to leave all your mess inhibitions at the kitchen door when cooking with young kids." He continued: "The mess really is worth it. It's not really hard work, as long as you view it for what it really is - play time. Getting kids in the kitchen really helps build a positive relationship around food for them. It shows them that food is fun and exciting. Cooking also has the added benefit of teaching many different things, almost accidentally, in a completely informal atmosphere. When I look back at the videos, I can see Archie



learning to count, learning new techniques, even learning some basic geography. Plus cooking is early science. It's a great thing to learn that if you put something into something else, there is an effect that happens."

Nick doesn't feel it's a question of parents having to encourage children to help with the cooking, more a case of just involving them organically. "Once they see how much fun can be had - and they begin to cherish the quality time - many kids will not need further encouragement to get into the kitchen."

Although Nick receives a lot of questions from parents about what their children should eat, he isn't keen to get into discussions about the subject. "My attitude has always been to just cook tasty family food and to eat it together. There will be good days and bad days but that is all completely normal. Archie has broad taste but there are days - and sometimes weeks - when he won't be into food. I just accept this as part of being a toddler and I trust him to know when he needs to eat."

Nick's love of food stems from his childhood and his parents, who have always loved food. "My mum is a brilliant cook and my dad is a really good one too (he taught me how to make great pasta sauces). Both my grandmas used to encourage me to cook, as did my mum." However, Nick's love of food turned into a passion when he moved to France at the age of 18. "I loved the food culture there and I loved the way the table was such an important part of family life." He added: "I am not actually a chef - far from it - I am just a home cook, albeit I would like to think a really good one!" He considers cooking an important part of family life and believes it is important to try to eat together as a family where possible. "Food is a central part of life and I want it to be associated with happy memories in our house and in our family."

He added: "Cooking is very therapeutic I find, especially after a stressful day. I love being creative and I also love feeding my family. The effort involved is all worthwhile when a meal goes down well." According to Nick, cooking doesn't have to be time consuming though: "Many meals can be thrown together in 10 or 15 minutes. Pastas in particular can be really quick."

To come up with ideas for new recipes, he constantly plays with ingredients that he regularly has in his own kitchen, trying to find new ideas around them. "Much of my cooking is very spontaneous and I try to capture that spontaneity when I write my recipes. Of course being around so many great chefs for my radio show gives me loads of inspiration too, although the challenge there is to use the ideas in a way which can work in a busy home kitchen rather than in a fine-dining restaurant."

Nick's radio show - Nick Coffey's Weekend Kitchen - goes out every Saturday at midday for two hours on BBC Three Counties Radio and is also available online. "It is basically a lovely lunch party. We have three guests in the studio (a mixture of top chefs, top authors, amateur home cooks and wine experts) and we eat and drink our way through two hours of radio! It's a lovely way to spend a lunchtime. I had the idea for the show and took the concept to the station editor and to my surprise - and joy - he commissioned the show and it is soon coming up to its first birthday. I had appeared a fair bit on radio but never as a presenter, but the station decided to take the risk on me and I am really pleased they did as I absolutely love broadcasting," said Nick.

"I am privileged to have fantastic chefs every week on my radio show. They are inspirational and I can only marvel at their level of creativity and expertise. But as I said earlier, I am not a chef, so I will just enjoy eating their food, rather than aspiring to open my own kitchen," he added.

Published in May, Nick's recipe book - My Daddy Cooks - contains

100 recipes for the whole family to cook and eat together. "It is not a kid's cook book, nor is it a kid's activity book, it is 100 per cent a cook book, chock full of tasty recipes. All the recipes use ingredients that you will have to hand in your kitchen and my cooking style is relaxed, flexible and informal. It has to be, bearing in mind that I often have a toddler in tow! I like to give twists to classic dishes (a Mexican lasagne, for example) and also make cooking as easy as possible (there is a whole chapter of "no-cook" pasta sauces). My aim when writing the book was to have a book that anyone could open at any page and think that they would want to cook that recipe. It may sound obvious but I was determined to create a book that people would cook from. There are many cook books that I truly love, which I have read from cover to cover but from which I have never cooked. I wanted this book to be the opposite."

Judging by the feedback that Nick has received so far, it would appear that people are thoroughly enjoying cooking their way through his book, so much so that he is starting to write book number two. "I am also working on lots of ideas in radio and TV. As with all creative pursuits, there is no guarantee of any of them coming off but it is fun putting them together!"

Archie in the limelight

What is your favourite food to eat?

Pasta and Chinese.

Which is your favourite recipe to cook?

When I make my soups. ["Making soup" is Archie's term for taking as many ingredients as he can and turning them into a usually inedible concoction. It's basically creative play in the kitchen].

What is it like cooking with your dad?

Fun. Messy!

What do you enjoy most about helping your dad in the kitchen?

Making mess.

What is your favourite thing about your dad?

He's funny.

What is the best thing about cooking?

Playing and making mess.

What other hobbies do you have?

Swimming and doing shows. [He likes to do imaginary shows in his bedroom with all his toys].



My Daddy Cooks, published by Hodder & Stoughton.

10/10. Finally, a collection of delicious and interesting recipes for all the family. Fantastic book, inspirational and easy to follow. Go get your copy of this must-have recipe book today - Flying Start Magazine.

You can visit Nick's website at www.mydaddycooks.com

