

‘It’s important to try and make people a little bit happier in all this doom and gloom’

Lorna McNee, winner of the Great British Menu, head chef of Glasgow restaurant Cail Bruich and today’s creator of The Scotsman recipe card, talks to Liv McMahon

It’s fair to say that after some 12 years working in the kitchen at Andrew Fairlie, Gleneagles, and winning the BBC’s Great British Menu in 2019, Lorna McNee could not really have picked a more interesting time – than midway through a global pandemic – to take up her first head chef role. But in taking the helm at Cail Bruich in Glasgow’s leafy West End, she has shown her strength in rising to any seemingly insurmountable challenges thrown her way.

“I mean, of course it’s a completely different situation to what I’m used to,” says Lorna when I ask how the new role is going against the backdrop of new restrictions for restaurants and pubs in Glasgow. “I guess there’s nothing anyone can do really except just adapt and get on with it as best you can,” she adds.

Responding to even the shift in customer mood and demand since the first lockdown is something that Lorna is having to contend with as she maintains Cail Bruich at Home. She explains: “I think everyone’s in a situation just now where they’re maybe a little bit more fed up or over the novelty of lockdown. Lots of people haven’t been cooking at home quite so much or feeling creative, so I wanted to try and make sure we had a menu that was still quite exciting and engaging. “It’s just about creating something simple that

people can enjoy in a more straightforward way – they don’t even have to think about much beyond putting it in the oven,” Lorna says. “At the end of the day you do just want people to be able to sit down and enjoy their meal, and making that a bit easier at this time of year seemed like a good idea.”

With so many people struggling to cope with darker days, colder nights and job uncertainty, Lorna is mindful that her customers could do with just as much of a boost as anyone else right now. “Obviously lots of people are dealing with very different realities, so it’s important to try and offer something that’s warm, comforting – that’s going to make them a little bit happier in all this doom and gloom.”

It would seem, in speaking to Lorna, that the hustle and bustle of preparing Cail Bruich at Home has helped her to navigate a strange, difficult time starting out as a head chef. She tells me that for someone whose craft and kitchen has always been contingent on ensuring consistency, dealing with a different set of rules and restrictions from one week to the next has proved a tall order for her.

Like many others in her line of work, Lorna found herself struggling to adapt to the sudden change in pace of life during the pandemic. “I used to work in a high pressure environment, you know, all



↑ Inside Cail Bruich, above, where Lorna McNee, main, is head chef; one of her dishes, far right

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the time. So I’ve always had this consistency in my routine: every day I’d get up in the morning, walk my dogs or go to CrossFit, go to work, run home.”

She continues: “With rules chopping and changing all the time, there’s not a lot of space for maintaining that consistency. So it’s a really difficult time to work in a kitchen, or to work how I would like to work anyway.”

So what is it like, I ask, when everything stops so abruptly? “It’s generally quite nice, for like a month,” Lorna responds, “but beyond that you’re having to desperately try and maintain some form of exercise to stimulate yourself both mentally and physically.”

Christmas, however, is a time of year that Lorna keenly admits she finds to be a huge lift for her mood – whether she’s swept up in the Christmas spirit or not. As someone who loves this time of year, the absence of the usual things to usher the festive season in has left her yearning for the small, cheesy things that bring Christmas to life. “I’m really that person



who loves going round the Christmas markets, watching all the Christmas films, drinking lots of mulled wine,” she says, noting even how much she misses the sounds of Christmas music blasting out of shops in the city centre.

Her disappointment that Christmas is likely to look and feel very different for us all this year comes from it having been central in her upbringing. “People tend to assume that if you’re a chef, you must have had great

food growing up but for me it wasn’t like that. No one in my family was a great chef or cook.

“The tradition in our home was always getting your frozen chocolate gateau ready for dessert after sticking the turkey in the oven for the entire day” she explains, adding that Christmas being a big deal in her small local community, too, helped to instil a childlike joy and nostalgia around the season even in her adulthood.

While the year ahead will, Lorna says, be undoubtedly tough, “you do kind of band together with the people you work with in a different way and it does create a sense of you being a bit of a family,” she explains. “All I want for next year is to resume normal service and become one of Glasgow’s best restaurants. So there’s no doubt that we’ll continue to push through it, driving ourselves forward and becoming more innovative to make that happen.”

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