

Jason Atherton

The British chef, whose first Hong Kong venture opens next month, tells **Vicki Williams** that celebrity is not something he is comfortable with.

MY LIFE

PAGES OF EPIPHANY My life changed when, at 16, I came across the book *Dining in France* by Christian Millau. It was about the best restaurants and chefs in France at that time. It blew me away. This book was the reason I left school and moved to London to become a chef. I owe my entire career to it. Little did I know that I would eventually work in France and for some of the chefs mentioned in the book. I still have it.

PITCHING PERFECTION I've known Gordon Ramsay since his days working for Marco Pierre White, when he had nothing. To watch him achieve success and to be by his side during the good and bad times was a privilege. I think he's one of the best chefs Britain has ever produced. He is also the best at the game, whether it's cooking, writing or charming guests. He's also the only British chef with four hit television shows in the United States. I had a happy 11 years working for Gordon, but he is tough. For him, there is no second best. I understand that. I'm also tough on my team when it's necessary. It was tough launching (Mediterranean-inspired restaurant) Pollen in Singapore (in June) and I really put the team through the mill. I look at it this way: if something goes wrong in the kitchen, we don't have the luxury of time to solve it. We have to solve any problems within 10 minutes. Guests don't care if the chef is having a bad day or is having relationship issues, or whatever. My job is to make sure the food is executed and expedited perfectly every time. The higher up the ladder you go in the kitchen, the tougher it gets, and the tougher you have to be. Gordon accepts nothing less than perfection and this is the philosophy I follow today.

POLLEN COUNT In 2010, I left (Ramsay's London restaurant) Maze



to become my own boss, opening Pollen Street Social in London the following year. I have since opened a restaurant in Shanghai and two in Singapore. Of course, it's a lot of hard work and long hours, and your personal life suffers, but it is what it is. It does get better as the restaurants become established. I stay extremely fit now so I can keep up with the lifestyle and put in the hours needed. But I absolutely love it and I feel like the luckiest guy alive to be doing what I do.

EATING OUT OF HIS HANDS I never

became a chef to become famous. I fell in love with food. I tell all my young chefs that if the other aspects of my success – such as television shows – were lost, I would still be OK, but I would be devastated without my love of food. This is all-important and I believe this should be why people become chefs. Lots of chefs get lost in the media hype, but I tell them not to pay attention to it. I did experience success at a young age, but for me real success lies in creating great food and giving the diner a wonderful experience, beautiful service and good wine, all at an

affordable price. I'm not sure why people are so obsessed with celebrities. I find celebrity chef behaviour in general disgusting and am very shy about (my) celebrity. Diners do want to see me, ask me questions and want autographs, but I'm not wanting celebrity fame.

HONG KONG AHOY! It's a dream come true for me to open a restaurant in Hong Kong (the 35-seat 22 Ships opens at 22 Ship Street, Wan Chai, next month). Like New York and London, Hong Kong is a real melting pot of cultures and cuisines that makes the city feel alive. There's also a diverse range of dining experiences. Hong Kong's dining scene is very contemporary – you have to keep up. It took us about four months to find the right location. I like my restaurants to be in interesting buildings in places that make sense. Ship Street is the perfect place for a tapas bar – a small side street, almost like a discovery you just happen upon. (The restaurant) is designed to have a neighbourhood feel. Although I have a tapas place in Singapore and am opening one in Shanghai early next year, I am not opening a chain of tapas bars. The Hong Kong restaurant has a unique name and its own menu to help make it feel part of the city. When opening a new venue, I'm very clear that I'm opening a restaurant, not a concept. I won't do it unless I have the right location and the right chef. We hope the ambience (at 22 Ships) will be electric and get a buzz from people spilling onto the streets, and socialising at the bar. I think what we're doing here represents the modern face of dining: outstanding food – Iberico pork burgers, scallop ceviche with radish salsa and peanut butter ice cream, for example – that is reasonably priced. That's what people want from a restaurant now. I will be in Hong Kong for two weeks for the opening and I'll be cooking. In November, I'll come back for another two weeks and then return every eight weeks until I'm completely happy with the restaurant. Then I'll visit every three months.