

Foodie fiction

Local culinary hero Prue Leith is making a new name for herself as a novelist, she tells
PENDLE HARTE

Prue Leith in her kitchen, photographed by Charlie Pinder

There's no stopping Prue Leith. At nearly 70, she may have given up the restaurant, the cookery school and the many boards she used to sit on, but not with a view to taking it easy. No, she has been hugely busy with a government trust founded to educate children about food, and with novel writing. As her latest novel appears in paperback, she has a new one in the wings and the only concession to age is a plan to start writing exclusively.

Prue has a canny eye for property too – being brave enough to open a restaurant in then dubious W11 in 1969 (of which more later) certainly paid off and her current home is a mansion in W2 which she brilliantly converted from a warren of 17 bedsits to house her and her two children with a floor each (plus a tenant in the penthouse). Such a diverse and energetic career comes, she says, from never being able to say no. “The problem with me is that I’m always genuinely interested in almost anything anybody suggests,” she admits, which is how she ended up on the boards of the Leeds Building Society and British Rail. But mostly, her interests have revolved around food, which comes, she smiles, from being greedy. “The wonderful thing about food is that every four hours you’re interested in it again.”

Growing up in South Africa, Prue knew nobody who was interested in food. It wasn't until she was a student in Paris that she found she was not cut out for a career in the theatre as she had thought, but working in a restaurant really appealed. Not that it was easily achievable. “They just laughed because in those days women didn't work in restaurants except in cafes or if they were married to the boss.” Women just weren't to be found in professional kitchens. So

when Prue came to London and wanted to open a restaurant, it was not just that the restaurant scene here was undeveloped, but what serious restaurants there were were run by men. “There was Robert Carrier in Islington and Parks in Beauchamp Place – and no women at all, apart from Madame Prunier in St James’, but that was her husband’s restaurant and she was front of house in the classic French manner,” says Prue. So when she opened Leith’s, in a house on Kensington Park Road that

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her property developer husband had bought along with the entire block, she was regarded as a bit of a maverick.

Leith's opened in 1969 to a flurry of publicity focusing on its woman owner and instantly became the place to eat. Prue remembers: “Humphrey Lyttleton wrote a piece in *Tatler* saying ‘if you can risk being mugged and go to the seamy end of Notting Hill it’s wonderful’ so I thought nobody would come, but they came in their droves because they thought it was a great adventure.” Theatre people like Alec Guinness and John Gielgud went to Leith's, as did The Beatles, The Stones, The Mamas and Papas and the music people. “We were very fashionable for the whole of the 1970s and most of the 80s but then we got a bit blasé. We were charging a lot of money and became stuffy, inventing rules like you can't have a big table for a party or sing happy birthday because it disturbs other people.”

Still, the restaurant lasted an impressive 34 years and picked up a Michelin star before Prue sold it and it became the Notting Hill Brasserie (keeping some of the staff, two of whom are still there). Leith's School of Food and Wine came when the perennial problem of finding staff led Prue to realise it was best to train people yourself, so in her characteristic energetic style, she opened her own school, together with Caroline Waldegrave, who bought the whole business in 1993 and recently moved it from Kensington to a bigger site in Shepherd's Bush.

Selling up, says Prue, was to do with wanting publishers to take her seriously as a novelist. “No publisher would read anything else by me while I was still writing recipes” – but in her early 50s, Prue had started writing novels. Her second novel sold a very respectable 50,000 copies and her fourth novel *Choral Society* came out in hardback last year, and is just out in paperback. It's the story of three women in their 50s. “You'll want to know whether one of them is me,” says Prue – and there are bits of her in all of them, she says. Most obviously in the food writer character Lucy who disapproves of prancing TV chefs who know nothing about food. Which of course Prue does too. “And I'm rather jealous of Rebecca [the most chaotic of the trio] because I'd like to be a bit more like that. I've always had a reputation for being bossy and boringly organised”. Bossy and organised being probably quite important characteristics for someone aiming quite as high as Prue. ●

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