

Ryan Riley, who set up Life Kitchen after his mum died of cancer

# A taste for LIFE

Life Kitchen founder Ryan Riley brings people living with cancer together to rediscover their appetites and forget about their illness for a short while

WORDS CAROLINE ROBERTS PHOTOGRAPHS HARRY BORDEN

**J**uicy pineapple encasing a perfectly cooked prawn, the zing of lime and coriander, and then a burst of fiery chilli – it's a pineapple taco and I've never tasted anything quite like it. Replacing a hard and crispy taco shell with a slice of pineapple is a touch of genius, especially if you're suffering from the dry mouth that often comes as a side-effect of cancer treatment.

The taco is one of the recipes we're trying out at a cookery class run by Life Kitchen, an initiative that helps people living with cancer rediscover their love of food by introducing them to some punchy flavour combinations. Food writer and stylist Ryan Riley, 25, set up the project as a tribute to his mother, Krista, who died from small cell lung cancer. As her primary carer throughout her illness, Ryan saw the way the treatment robbed her of the pleasure of eating so he developed Life Kitchen to help others in the same situation by offering free cookery classes. "I work in the food industry and I wanted to use my skills to give something back," he says.

Cancer treatments such as chemotherapy, and radiotherapy to the head and neck, often damage taste receptors and affect the sense of smell, causing food to become tasteless, bitter or metallic. Treatment can also damage salivary glands, leading to a dry mouth and difficulty swallowing. All this means that people with the illness often find it hard to eat the healthy foods that will aid their recovery.

Ryan creates his recipes through a mixture of experience, intuition and science, and for the latter he has teamed up



Ryan with TV's Sue Perkins, the charity's patron

## One lady said the class works because it's barely about cancer

with Professor Barry Smith, co-director of the Centre for the Study of the Senses at the University of London. Many dishes feature 'umami', which originated in Japan and is now recognised as the fifth taste alongside sweet, salty, sour and bitter. "Umami is that savoury intensity of things like soy sauce, mushrooms and parmesan,"

explains Ryan. "We often put two types of umami together – it's called synergistic umami – and that's when you get that really rich flavour. We also use ingredients like mint, cinnamon, wasabi and mustard, as these stimulate the trigeminal nerve, which runs between the eyes, nose and mouth. And we use pineapple, as it stimulates saliva production and really helps with the metallic taste that sometimes comes with chemo."

It's certainly working for tonight's participants. John Tasker, 45, has recently finished chemotherapy and radiotherapy to treat cancer at the base of his tongue. "It's the first food I've enjoyed for months," he says. "The radiotherapy destroyed my taste buds and salivary glands, and I've been told the taste will come back at some time between six months and never. I open the fridge and look longingly at things I used to love, but there's no desire to eat them any more. But there was definitely something there tonight."

Suan Clynick, 68, still has two months of chemotherapy to go. "Everything tastes of sawdust," she says. "I can't tolerate salt and tap water tastes metallic. Nothing tastes good. I used to enjoy cooking but without being able to taste it's very difficult as you don't know how to season the food." She has enjoyed tonight's salmon baked with harissa paste and served with a fennel salad, though, and is planning to try it at home.

### Recipe

#### Pineapple tacos with prawns, chilli and lime

- 1 pineapple, peeled and sliced into wafer-thin circles
- 100g cooked prawns
- 1 chilli, diced
- 2 limes, zest and juice
- 1 spring onion, shredded
- A handful of coriander

In a bowl, mix the cooked prawns with the chilli, lime juice and zest, and spring onion. Fold the pineapple in half to form a 'taco' shell, fill with the prawn mixture, add the coriander and finish with a final spritz of lime.



**Tip:** For extra smokiness, char each pineapple round lightly on the BBQ.



Participants at a Life Kitchen class

However, the cookery sessions have a wider purpose, adds Ryan. "One lady said the reason this class works is because it's barely about cancer at all. And last time, another told me it's the best night out she's had since she was diagnosed two years ago."

The setting of tonight's class definitely helps. The Duck & Waffle, which is a charitable partner of Life Kitchen and hosts a class every month, is on the 40th floor of a skyscraper in London's Square Mile. The restaurant's private dining room is filled with chatter, laughter and the clink of champagne glasses as we cook against a backdrop of the myriad twinkling lights of the city. Ryan demonstrates the dishes along with the venue's executive chef, Tom Cenci, before we get to work cutting our pineapple into wafer-thin slices.

Life Kitchen was only launched a year ago, but it has gained traction very quickly after garnering the support of some top names in the food industry. Nigella Lawson picked up the cause on Twitter, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall hosted the first class at his River Cottage restaurant in Devon, and the project is currently going through the process of gaining charitable status with Sue Perkins as its patron. "Life Kitchen has been so successful because we've got some amazing people behind us," says Ryan. "Without Nigella Lawson, I wouldn't be where I am today. She's become a very close



friend, which is something I never thought I'd say because she's a culinary icon. And Sue Perkins comes along to some classes, chops a few onions and entertains people. She's been so supportive."

The initiative was also named *Observer Food Monthly's* Best Ethical Food Project for 2018. Despite all the attention, Ryan isn't going to lose sight of his roots. This spring, he opens his own cookery school in his home town of Sunderland. "I've acquired this Grade II listed gate lodge at the edge of a park, which is being fitted out by some incredible companies, all for free." And gaining charitable status means he'll be able to apply for grant funding, which will help make the project accessible to even more people.

**Every recipe is tested by cancer patients all over the country**

The next year is looking incredibly busy. With Professor Smith, Ryan has set up a research project, Five Basic Tastes, which aims to find out more about the taste experiences of people living with cancer. The effects of treatment differ between individuals and the pair hope it will help them develop recipes that are tailored to specific food-related symptoms. "We're hopefully going to take that further to

organisations such as the Wellcome Trust and form it into a bigger research project. Every single thing we do in the kitchen is tested with real cancer patients, so that gives us a unique perspective." As well as running his classes around the UK, he is writing 20 recipes for the World Cancer Research Fund, and delivering talks and demonstrations for the likes of the NHS and Macmillan Cancer Support and the Teenage Cancer Trust.

So what would his mother think if she could see all this? "She was quite a shy woman and I think she'd find it quite intimidating at first – it's something I keep in mind every time I do a class, as Life Kitchen is about enjoyment and having a good time. She'd love it by the end, though, and I think she'd be very, very proud."

To support Ryan's venture, visit [www.gofundme.com/lifekitchen](http://www.gofundme.com/lifekitchen)  
Take part in the Five Basic Tastes research by filling in a short questionnaire at [www.fivebasictastes.com](http://www.fivebasictastes.com)

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