

# A WOMAN OF TASTE

Celebrating the 15th anniversary of her eponymous magazine, Australian food celebrity Donna Hay reflects on cooking, career, and business while speaking to *Zara Wong* over coffee, tea and a spiced chai teacake. *Styled by Philippa Moroney. Photographed by Hugh Stewart.*

**Zara Wong:** “How did you learn to cook?”

**Donna Hay:** “I used to go to my grandparents’ house in the holidays. My grandmother would make lots of traditional things from scratch, like lemon curd, jams and cakes. My mum doesn’t like me saying this, but she cooked to feed a family because she was busy, so she didn’t love it. So when I showed an interest in cooking, my two older sisters and Dad were very excited.”

**ZW:** “When did you realise you wanted to work in food?”

**DH:** “I never did, really. I actually thought I couldn’t because I didn’t want to be a chef. I thought it was going to be a pastime.”

**ZW:** “What made you think you couldn’t become a chef?”

**DH:** “I was too scared by the stories that I had heard. My parents don’t even raise their voices. I wouldn’t have survived two seconds.”

**ZW:** “I cook a lot, and those simple tricks that you show on your show – like freezing cookie dough to shape it – change everything. I really want to try the buttermilk chicken recipe, because I didn’t realise you get that kind of texture from adding baking powder to the batter.”

**DH:** “That’s how it explodes! There are a lot of more recipes in the book [*Basics to Brilliance*] than there are on the show, because not every recipe makes good television.”

**ZW:** “What makes a good television recipe?”

**DH:** “Something that you’re going to remember, like adding the baking powder. Some recipes are just good recipes and there is nothing else to say about them, like this spiced chai teacake [that we’re eating now] is just good. I would struggle with this one since I can’t say density and richness several hundred times.”

**ZW:** “Nowadays so many people want to have their own personal brands, and you did it earlier on.”

**DH:** “It felt totally awkward to have my name on the cover of a magazine. I would rather the magazine not be in my name most of the time. Stepping out from behind the masthead was a big thing for me; I’m quite shy so I came across as blunt and maybe a bit aloof. I sometimes speak at events, and once someone actually pulled me aside and said: ‘You realise everybody is here to listen to you. You need to get over yourself and go out there and give it up.’ Now, I would rather get the job done properly than get nervous. And now when I speak at events, especially to young women, you see them listening in a different way – they’re trying to work it out for themselves.”

**ZW:** “How are they listening in a different way?”

**DH:** “The questions that they ask when they throw questions to the audience. Some of them really want to cut through whatever career they are choosing, but you can see that they need some inspiration. It’s possible, but it’s difficult – head down!”

**ZW:** “What do you wish you knew when you first started out, when you were that age?”

**DH:** “I would have liked someone to pull me aside and give me the confidence to run my own race. I was always doing things differently and that is not always looked upon as a positive. I think if you’re going to be the best in your game you have to break the rules. You just do it nicely – no harm done here! I grew up with a mother who told me where there’s a will there’s a way.”

**ZW:** “Do you think being a woman and working in food meant people saw you as a lightweight?”

**DH:** “Definitely. I still think a few people mention the chef thing. ‘Oh, so you’re not a chef.’ No, because I don’t have a restaurant, I am trying to get people to cook at home.’ Don’t get me started on inequality in the workplace.”

**ZW:** “How have you experienced it?”

**DH:** “With me, even saying it makes it worse ... but if you’re a woman in business and you know what you want and you make decisions for your business, you’re not always going to be agreeable to everyone. When you have your own name on something, then if something goes wrong you want to be the one who has thrown that stone. And as a woman, sometimes you feel like if you’re in that position you must be difficult, or a total hard arse, or something is not quite right ...”

**ZW:** “Whereas if a man made the decisions ...”

**DH:** “He would be a legend.”

**ZW:** “And it still happens?”

**DH:** “Absolutely. I think I am tied with the ‘she must be difficult’ [label] but I think when your name is on something it does make you more difficult. You won’t let someone make decisions for your brand or for you. You have to fight hard in business whether you’re a man or a woman, but we are not treated the same.”

**ZW:** “Did you ever think it was all too hard?”

**DH:** “A lot. I would be lying if I said it didn’t say it. I think that comes with my personality of being all or nothing.”

**ZW:** “What made you stay in?”

**DH:** “The thought that I hadn’t finished yet.”

**ZW:** “When do you think you will finish? Will you finish?”

**DH:** “I feel like it could be soon. I am just total extremes. Recipes have got to work. I never was that disciplined until I realised that someone like you can go home and cook a recipe and it could be a total disaster. If something goes wrong, a lot of people unfortunately blame themselves, but nine out of 10 times it’s because of the recipe, so I think that’s why that drove me to being a perfectionist. It’s a fear, but it’s also the foundation of your brand and business.”

**ZW:** “Do you ever think that you will walk away from it?”

**DH:** “Yes, I think there has to come a day when enough is enough. It’s tiring. I often have to have a cup of tea with [Harvey Norman CEO] Katie Page when I get to the this-is-getting-a-bit-hard stage. She is quite wise and gives me a quick get-over-yourself! It’s what I need. Early on in my career she said if everything is okay at home everything else will be okay at work, but if it’s not okay at home, you have to fix it.”

**ZW:** “Do you consider her a mentor?”

**DH:** “Definitely. She is in a hugely male-dominated area and she just doesn’t care. I remember there was something really horrible written about me in a newspaper. She just looked at me and said: ‘You read that?’ She has zero time for it. She said to me: ‘I didn’t think you were that girl’, so I have never read anything again.”

**ZW:** “What is next for you?”

**DH:** “I don’t know but I feel like something is coming. I like change. The team hate me for it. I can rip up floor tiles and rebuild a kitchen and it doesn’t phase me at all.”

HAIR: RICHARD KAVANAGH; MAKE-UP: CHARLIE KELLY; FLOWERS: FROM MY VIOLET; CAKES: FROM FLOUR AND STONE; VINTAGE COPPER POTS, BIRD CAGE, APPLE BOXES AND CHAIR: IN FOREGROUND; ALL FROM TICLET; LA CHAMPAGNE BUCKET AND CANDLESTICK: IN FOREGROUND; FROM PARTIERE ROYAL; DOULTON, WEDGWOOD AND DONNA HAY FOR WEDGWOOD; CUTLERY, CROCKERY AND CAKE STANDS: IN BED STORE; TABLE LINEN DETAILS: LAST PAGES

Donna Hay wears a Valentino coat, from David Jones. Vera Wang dress. Bulgari jewellery. Her own shoes.