

Sweet Talk

*Helen Goh has long been Yotam Ottolenghi's righthand woman. Now, the recipe developer and psychologist is making her long-awaited solo cookbook debut in **Baking and the Meaning of Life***

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Photograph: John Davis

For near on two decades, Malaysian-born, Australian-raised Helen Goh has led a double life, professionally speaking: working as a psychologist while developing recipes for Israeli British chef and cookbook author Yotam Ottolenghi, whose restaurant empire spans 11 delis

and fine dining establishments across the UK and Switzerland. Unsurprisingly, book publishers approached Goh over the years to combine her two disciplines and expound on the whole “food is therapy” trope. “I see merit in that – it *is* therapeutic – but what else can you say?” Goh quips.

“Then one day it occurred to me that I’d spent so long trivialising baking,” she says. “All the serious chefs were the ones on the pans and the non-serious ones are the ones doing the pastry. Then I thought, *People come to a restaurant because they’re celebrating something, but it’s when the cake comes out with ‘Happy Birthday’ on it that there’s that level of happiness and excitement.*” This lightbulb moment found its ultimate form in Goh’s first solo book, *Baking and the Meaning of Life: How to Spread Joy in 100 Recipes*, to be released on September 28. On the book’s cover, Ottolenghi says, “Helen in her absolute element. It really doesn’t get any better.”

Goh was born in Klang, Malaysia to a Chinese Malaysian family and moved to Melbourne aged 10. “We’d migrated [and] food was sort of the point of familiarity,” she recalls. “Everything revolved around food.” By 20, she had graduated with a Bachelor of Science at Melbourne’s Monash University and was keen to immediately tackle postgraduate studies in psychology, but was encouraged by her faculty to first get some life experience. She began working for a pharmaceutical company, sharing new developments in drugs with doctors. “I found with these multiple-doctor clinics that if I brought lunch, they would all come at once.” Over time, realised Goh, “I was much more interested in the catering than the actual job.”

Soon after, her boyfriend at the time received a redundancy payment. “He said, ‘If you [received] a sum of money, what would you do?’ And I said, very naively, ‘I’d open a cafe.’” Thus came about Mortar & Pestle in Melbourne’s Hawthorn in 1991. “For whatever reason, it really took off,” says Goh. It was her baking that she was particularly known for – a front-page article in the *Sunday Age* of April 25, 1993 christened hers the ‘World’s Best Chocolate Cake’.

Stephanie’s, the flagship restaurant of Australian cooking legend Stephanie Alexander, was down the road and was closing down around the same time as Goh and her then-boyfriend received, and accepted, an offer to sell Mortar & Pestle. Stephanie’s co-owner, the Malaysian-Australian restaurateur Dur-é Dara, took Goh under her wing and Goh followed her to her Nudel Bar in the city, where she remained for six months. “But I felt insecure that I hadn’t trained properly,” she recalls. “I realised how little I knew.” At the time, Dara was opening a new enterprise, Donovans in St Kilda. “[Dara] said, ‘If you want to train from the bottom, then come with me.’” Goh worked

there first as an apprentice and eventually as head pastry chef, all while studying part-time for her postgraduate diploma in psychology, which she attained in 2002; she registered as a psychologist in 2006.

That same year, Goh moved to London to join a new boyfriend – now her husband – who was living there. “I thought I would be a psychologist and food would be behind me,” she recalls. Her boyfriend suggested that she check out the local coffee shop. “It was this sort of Aladdin’s cave,” says Goh of the original Ottolenghi deli in Notting Hill that had opened four years earlier. She was going to undertake a doctorate to qualify as a psychologist in the UK, but her studies weren’t starting for another six months, so that afternoon, she wrote to Ottolenghi to express her interest in working at the deli. He called Goh up within the hour, the two met and, as she puts, “we just kind of hit it off”. Following their culinary meet-cute, Goh started in Ottolenghi’s kitchen the next Monday, making salads alongside Palestinian chef Sami Tamimi, co-founder and owner of Ottolenghi’s delis.

“The [deli] was beautiful, but I kept thinking the counter looked really bare,” she says. “I had this idea: every time someone came in for a coffee, wouldn’t it be great if they took home some biscuits?” So she whipped up an Australian classic – a batch of yo-yo biscuits – to sell. “That was 18 years ago,” she says. “They’ve never left the menu.” Goh worked on her doctorate in counselling psychology during the week (she received it in 2013) and dreamed up new recipes on the weekends in Ottolenghi’s newly acquired warehouse, which would eventually evolve into his famous Test Kitchen. “If I had an idea and I was excited by it, then [Ottolenghi and I] would talk and it would evolve from there.”

Today, Goh lives in London’s Shepherd’s Bush with her husband and two sons, Sam, 14, and Jude, 10; Ottolenghi is Sam’s godfather. Alongside Ottolenghi, Goh co-wrote *Sweet* in 2017, a compendium of desserts and baked goods, and 2024’s *Comfort*, an elevated, “Ottolenghied” take on comfort food. Goh continues to consult as a psychologist with existing clients and also pens recipe columns for *The Guardian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *Observer Food Monthly*.

“The chapters [of *Baking*] aren’t ‘cakes’ and ‘biscuits’ [but] psychological constructs like ‘belonging’, ‘giving and receiving’, ‘ritual and tradition’, ‘nurturing’ – all the things that baking enables us to do,” explains Goh. ‘Ritual and tradition’ has a recipe for ‘shoo-fly’, or currant, buns, inspired by those from pastry shop Babka in Melbourne’s Fitzroy. “When I worked full time at Donovans, on Saturday mornings, I’d get a little sleep in,” she recalls. Her sister, a midwife, would finish her shift in the early hours of the morning and swing past Babka to buy some buns for Goh. “[They] would be just out of the oven and she’d leave them by my doorstep on her way home. I adore these buns and I’ve now recreated [the recipe] for the book – it reminds me of my big sister.”

We cook to eat and survive, she continues, but nobody *has* to eat cake – yet it’s this apparent superfluousness that lends baking its power. “It’s a bit like art: why do you do it at all? It’s not essential for survival. But it makes life meaningful.” HB