



What do the people in our star-studded line-up above have in common? They're all customers of Suffolk's own caterer to the stars, Gemma Haining. Paul Simon discovers how she built up her celebrity portfolio

# Celebrity MASTER CHEF

I suppose we tend to most admire those people who do the things that we could never contemplate attempting. My own personal 'bridge too far' is the idea of cooking a meal for a large number of people. Especially when those people are very, very famous indeed.

Which is why Gemma Haining is something of a local hero to me. For the professional cook and caterer counts Richard Curtis and Emma Freud, film director Paul Greengrass, actress Helen Atkinson-Wood and Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Mrs Gordon Brown amongst her many clients. In any case, I'm not entirely convinced that any of these would be much taken with a diet of spam fritters, wedges and coconut polenta cake.

So how did Suffolk-born Haining, as bubbly as a bouillabaisse during our interview except when being asked to spill the beans on her famous clients, get into this business?

"To start with I've always been around fantastic cooking. I grew up as part of a big family and we would put on huge parties for friends and so there would always be lots of people round the table and lots of food, drinks and fun. So I've always loved big events!"

Surprisingly though, her initial career was not directly in the food business. "I

worked as a medical rep based in Suffolk and Norfolk. However, I got very involved in organising meetings with doctors and so ended up talking with chefs and organising the front of house – that kind of thing. I'd also help organise charity balls in the Fleece Pub here in Boxford and although a group of friends did it, I'd do the majority of the cooking!

"After we had done these two or three times, I realised that this is really what I wanted to do. I looked into various courses but given that I was already in my late 20s and wanted to progress quickly with my career, I thought the best way of doing that was to enrol at Leith's School of Food and Wine for their one year professional diploma."

This was an astute move, as Leith's both harnessed Haining's raw talent into something quite formidable and through its network of contacts gave her some pretty immediate outlets to try out that talent.

"My teacher had worked in different branches of the industry and for a broad spectrum of highly regarded chefs and was quite a hard lady. She really, really pushed us and that benefited me. I learnt the importance of timing everything right and having an attention to detail, being a bit of perfectionist (which I am) and of course great ingredients!"

Those lessons have been well learnt. "I hope I'm good at my job and am discreet (too discreet Ms Haining, too discreet). I aim to create both lovely food and a lovely experience and exceed expectations. If you go round shouting and swearing that doesn't really help in that endeavour.

"My first job through Leith's was with Emma Freud. We paired off straight away in 2004 and from then I built up contacts via Emma and Richard (Curtis)." Freud herself has nothing but praise for Haining. "She listens brilliantly to her brief and follows instructions wonderfully – or makes all the decisions herself with great intelligence and huge imagination if needed."

During her association with the Family Freud-Curtis, Haining has displayed that imagination many times over having cooked for dinner parties, children's meals and even for a Walberswick beach party.

But doesn't working for people with this heightened profile entail more hassle than less well-known clients? "No I don't think they are really any more challenging. The numbers of people is probably the only difference. When working with anyone for a long time you learn their likes and dislikes, regardless whether they are celebs or not. The majority of the time when I'm asked to do a very specific dinner party or event I do try to sit down and bounce ideas off them."



Suffolk caterer Gemma Haining. Above left; a few of her celebrity clients. From left; Sarah and Gordon Brown; Richard and Emma Curtis and Helen Atkinson-Wood  
Main photograph: LUCY TAYLOR

This is where her attention to detail comes in very handy. “I try and suss out what they really want. They might not always want to express what they want and there is a skill in bringing it out of them.”

Gordon Brown, apparently, knew exactly what he wanted – although it was rather surprising for a Scottish-born politician. “I cooked very traditional meals – indeed fairly English ones. Haining has cooked for the Browns during both his tenure at No. 11 Downing Street and since their move next door.

“I’d be brought in for particular evenings and be asked to cook for a certain number of people.” So what were the kitchens like and did Gordon offer to do the washing up afterwards?

“I didn’t stay there! I would just drop off the food and collect the crockery later, usually the next day, just as I would for any dinner party client. And I did the washing! Initially, I had to fill in security check form asking things like ‘are you a terrorist?’ It was a bit nerve racking going through those Downing Street gates and the police scans. I’d take the food to the kitchen and leave it with specific cooking instructions. It was very surreal and I never got used to it.”

Haining had always planned to return to Suffolk, but actually came back earlier than anticipated because of the death of her father. Since then she has turned an old stables at the family home in Boxford, near Hadleigh, into a kitchen and preparation area and has quickly expanded the scale of her operation.

“I wanted my business to grow so that I could cater for functions of 150-200 people, as well as being a personal chef for smaller events. I got a business growth loan from Babergh District Council which has helped me to build a professional kitchen and to partially fit it with equipment. I couldn’t expand my business if I was operating out of a small kitchen.”

What does she most enjoy about her present work?

“My greatest joy is making canapés. We have certainly moved away from cheese and pineapple! The current trend is for miniature meals, for example, mini fish ‘n’ chips or Yorkshire pudding and beef or even bangers and mash!” she laughs.

“I also love doing Moroccan and Thai food as they involve big flavoured dishes. More demand for these types of cuisine is coming through, including from weddings, where the bride and groom wanted something more memorable, such as lamb couscous (see inset), than the more traditional stuff – although I can do that ▶

► as well,” she adds careful not to turn off the more cautious couples. “In any case, I organise tastings for weddings to give people piece of mind.”

Occasionally even someone as thorough in her planning as Haining finds that things don’t run as smoothly as they should. She recalls a time at which “there was a wedding when the catering service tent blew across the field and then the heavens opened and the tent began leaking. The wedding cake was a traditional Italian cake consisting of a tower of profiteroles – it was being assembled by another hired caterer, but it was not sticking together properly due to the weather. She then did a runner leaving me with a collapsing pile of profiteroles, which I had to reassemble and present at the appropriate time. Fortunately, the bride never realised!”

Less hazardous has been her choice of suppliers since returning to Suffolk. For Haining, the county is a rich source of great food. “I source all my meats locally and they are all wonderful. For example, the lamb comes just down the road from here and that’s a great thing for me. I get my fish from the Suffolk coast and we have great cheeses and produce such as rapeseed oil which comes from not far away. I also use my mother’s herb garden and the vegetables that she’s frantically growing for me!”

So the admirable Gemma Haining has the means, the suppliers and the clients to make a major impact in the Suffolk catering market. Now if only I can interest this local food hero in my recipe for spam fritters, I’d be made as well!

■ For more information on Gemma Haining’s company, GRH Catering Limited, go to [www.gemmahaining.com](http://www.gemmahaining.com) or call her on 01787 211953.

### *Canapes*

Beetroot cured salmon on blinis with soured cream, caviar and dill  
Quails eggs with a spicy dukka mix  
Baba ghanoush served with garlic pitta fingers  
Chilli falafels and a spicy tomato dip  
Balsamic roasted red onion and camembert filo parcels

### *Main courses*

Harissa spiced lamb shanks with apricots and coriander  
Vegetarian Wellington served with a mustard cream sauce  
Jewelled couscous and a fine green bean salad with pomegranate seeds

### *Dessert*

Individual lemon tarts with goats cheese cream, summer berries and a fruit coulis

### *Suffolk Cheese table*

Buxlow Wonmill  
Hawkston  
Suffolk Blue  
Suffolk Gold  
“Suffolk Mud” tomato chutney

Gemma Haining picking fresh rosemary in her garden. Below; a menu which Gemma produced for a wedding this summer  
Photograph:  
LUCY TAYLOR

