

food:

a love story



By Hazel Flynn

HOW A HIGH-PRESSURE JOB LED TO A HEARTFELT FOOD BLOG WITH A VERY HEALTHY FOLLOWING

"WHITE CHOCOLATE TIM TAMS? OH, THEY'RE MINE," says Jules Clancy. She doesn't mean "they're mine" as in "you can't have any". She means "I created them".

About a year ago, Jules, 38, walked away from what many would consider the ultimate job: chocolate biscuit designer. She quit to follow her dream of being a full-time food blogger and author. But during her stints as a food scientist with Kellogg's and Arnott's, Jules developed several products you may well have in your cupboard.

For all the ideas and experiments food companies churn through (Mango Pop Tarts, anyone?), only a minority ever make it to consumers, and even then, "a lot of them die within six months", says Jules. Among her lasting creations

is Special K Honey Almond cereal: "Every now and then I walk down the cereal aisle just to check it's still there."

Jules grew up on a sheep farm near Gunning, NSW. Her interest in food started early and was nurtured by her mother, June. In fact, Jules' blog, Stone Soup, is named after the folktale she first heard as a pre-schooler watching *Here's Humphrey*. "It was a story about sharing and being generous," she says. "But what I thought was: *Awesome! We can make soup from stones?! As soon as it finished, I said, 'Mum, can we go to the creek and get some stones?'* And she helped me do it."

But it was her time at a Catholic boarding school that really cemented Jules' love of good food. "I didn't realise how good we had it at home

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Jules Clancy has combined an education in food science with a passion for writing and photography



until I had to eat the nuns' food," she says, shuddering at the memory. "They used to make these meat pies, and it would always be after one of the nuns had died. One day, one of the girls found a Band-Aid in one. That's one of the reasons why I studied home science – because I knew we'd be cooking once a week and it'd be half-decent."

Having graduated in food science at the University of NSW in Sydney, Jules worked for the two food giants and travelled overseas. Then she shifted focus by studying wine science via correspondence at Charles Sturt University, and worked in wineries in Australia, France and California. "It does sound glamorous," she admits, "and it is good fun and I met some great people, but the actual



work of winemaking is hard. It wasn't necessarily a job I enjoyed day to day. Wineries tend to be quite wet, so you're always wearing steel-capped boots and I thought, *I want to be able to wear pretty shoes again.*"

Back in Sydney, working as a food scientist at Arnott's and happily wearing heels to the office, Jules read an article about food blogs, which were a new thing at the time. "I had considered a career as a food writer, but it seemed impossible to break into. I started reading blogs and thought, *Maybe I should give this a go.*"



From butter beans to homemade hummus, Jules' simple cooking is made all the more delicious by her exquisite photographs

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In December 2005, Jules started her Stone Soup blog. It has evolved into a collection of original recipes, updated weekly, based on minimalist principles: "Simple equipment, simple ingredients and not too many of them. There are so many chefs writing cookbooks and it's really easy for them to use coriander, basil and mint, when just basil might do the job."

Each recipe is beautifully illustrated by Jules' own photographs, and the blog currently has more than 8300 subscribers and over 77,000 unique visits a month (over half from people in North America), with numbers growing fast. Jules has more than 1550 Twitter followers.

ON HER SECOND BLOG, Breadshoes, Jules writes about restaurants. It began when she landed a coveted booking for two for elBulli in Spain, then widely considered the world's best restaurant. Diners are notified a year in advance, so Jules and her Irish boyfriend planned a European trip around their December 2009 booking. Unfortunately, they split up in September. "He really loves his food, too, and I said, 'Look, if you still want to come, I'm sure we'll have a good time.' But he thought that would be too strange."

A friend convinced Jules to run an online competition for the vacant seat. Whoever put the best case via email would fly themselves to Spain and pay the 300 euros for their own meal. "I ended up having 170 people apply. There were all sorts. A guy from California said, 'I'm not really into food, and I hate paying more than \$5 for a meal, but I like doing crazy things and what you're doing is crazy, so you should take me.' I thought, *Ahhh, no.*"

The winner was Jason, an American doctor. They met for the first time in Spain. No sparks flew, although "it was a relief he was as good as he'd sounded. But eating at elBulli



THE BEST FOOD BLOGS

When she's not writing her own updates at thestonesoup.com, Jules Clancy reads these blogs - her Top 5 foodie picks:

1. **Orangette:** orangette.blogspot.com
2. **Souvlaki for the Soul:** souvlakiforthesoul.com
3. **Nourish Me:** nourish-me.typepad.com
4. **Limes & Lycopen** (nice choice, Jules; this one is by HealthSmart contributing editor Kathryn Elliott!): kathrynellott.com.au/blog
5. **What Katie Ate:** whatkatieate.blogspot.com

isn't like going out to dinner normally. There are 36 courses, so you start talking and then all of a sudden these shiny, pretty things are served and you get excited about the food. I don't think we finished a conversational track all night."

Back home, Jules decided it was time to be bold. Her attitude is an inspiration to anyone who's ever thought, *I could do that, if only...* "The more I blogged, the more I enjoyed it. I wanted to do it full-time. It coincided with my interest in minimalism; the idea of living frugally so that I wouldn't need too much money to support myself. I realised that time was more important than money."

So Jules resigned. "I've given myself two years to make it work," she says. "I've invested some of my savings in myself. It feels great. I love my life. I used to commute an hour each way, and I loved the job and the people, but I hated the commuting. Now I just get up, go to yoga, do a run, and work when I want to."

She's even reconciled with her boyfriend, Glenn. Does he grind his teeth that he didn't get to elBulli? "He's pretty cool about it. It's too late now; they're closing in 2011 - but he's a big Heston Blumenthal fan, so we're looking at going to his English restaurant, The Fat Duck, next year. I think I owe him dinner." ●



Jules' mother June served as inspiration along every step of Jules' food journey, culminating in the touching cookbook *and the love is free*, which Jules says is "dedicated to mums everywhere"

JULES' RULES: HOW TO WRITE YOUR OWN COOKBOOK

In 2007, after being diagnosed with cancer, Jules Clancy's adored mum, June, died. Jules decided to honour June's memory by gathering her recipes and self-publishing a cookbook. In 2009, she released *and the love is free*, subtitled *Mum - a life with recipes*. It's a full-colour, 144-page book with 57 recipes, all photographed, interspersed with recollections of June's life.

"I had a lot of people say to me, 'That's such a beautiful idea, I'd love to do that for my mum,' or, 'I'd love to put together a book for my kids,'" says Jules. "Then they'd say, 'I wouldn't be able to do it.' But there are so many tools out there that make it really easy for people, so I wanted to share that knowledge." The result was her step-by-step e-book, *How to Bake Your Family Cookbook*. (Both books are available at thestonesoup.com.)

TOP TIPS FOR DIY COOKBOOK AUTHORS:

1. BE CLEAR ON YOUR MOTIVATION: "When things get tough, a clear reason will help to keep you motivated, and may mean the difference between a finished book and another uncompleted project you feel guilty about."

2. DOUBLE-CHECK THE RECIPES: "Just because it's written down in Grandma's book doesn't mean it's going to work."

3. THINK LATERALLY: "I rethink photographs rather than re-cook. So, if I was imagining a shot of a whole tart, and the tart didn't come out so great, I'd take a slice and try putting some cream on it. It's all about looking for the beauty in the imperfection."

4. COMPARE SUPPLIER QUOTES: Clancy opted for bound books. She printed 2500 at \$10 a copy (a total cost of \$25,000). At \$29.95 each, she had to sell 900 copies to break even, and has so far sold more than 1000. "In hindsight, I don't think I'd print in Australia, even though I want to support local industry. I didn't even explore offshore printing but now that I know what's out there, I could have the same book at a quarter of the cost by printing in China."

5. THINK ABOUT FORMATS: "Right now I'm not planning to do any more print books. It's so much easier having electronic products. You don't have the cost or work of posting things out; the profit margin is greater so you can afford to sell fewer copies; you don't have to invest money in a big print run; and you can change it as you go. And you can still put e-books up on print-on-demand sites, so people can get a print copy if they want one."

6. SELL, SELL, SELL: "When you're self-publishing, it's really important to put effort into selling it yourself, through family and friends and workmates."