



Ainsley Harriott has a voracious appetite. We meet at Chez Gerard on Charlotte Street, London and, after planting smackers on cheeks, his fingers immediately dive into the bowl of nuts on the bar. Food is obviously his thing, but this automatic snacking isn't gluttony. Like his uninhibited tactile affection when meeting people, this is more of an expression of his passion for life, his appetite for activity, as I discover over lunch.

way arthritis is perceived doesn't help: 'It's been tarnished with the age thing,' he acknowledges. 'If you have it too young, it's almost like you're not quite there.' As for Ainsley himself, he says he's 48, but I'm having a hard time believing it as he's just so darn energetic. And then there's the indefatigable good humour – every so often he roars with laughter at some joke (his own, more often than not) and bangs the table with glee. I keep a wary eye on the jumbling wine glasses.

with Derek McMinn, pioneer of the Birmingham hip resurfacing technique. McMinn decided the hip wasn't at the right stage to be resurfaced at that point. 'He said, "When it becomes agony to sleep on, or difficult to walk, or you'll notice when you start to get passionate with the missus or something, you'll feel a grating. That's the time when we'll review it again." It was weird to go away and think, "Alright, I'll wait for that to happen".'

Sure enough, the time came when his

What's he like?

Celebrity chef Ainsley Harriott chats with **Rosie Brunt** about how he has coped with his arthritis

Ainsley talks with his mouth full, and talks a lot, fortunately for me. Never mind old-fashioned notions of manners, this lunch interview is the only available slot in his busy schedule. For Ainsley Harriott – *Ready Steady Cook* frontman, face of Fairy Liquid and number one author who has sold 1.5 million recipe books worldwide – is not one to rest on his laurels. Amongst all that, he manages to balance work and family life with his wife and children.

Holidays are clearly a chance to get away from it all, and he's not long back from a skiing trip. 'It's quite interesting talking about this, considering that less than a year ago I had my operation,' he reflects.

In fact, Ainsley has been skiing twice since he had surgery to resurface his hip in 2004. His arthritis started to aggravate him four years previously: 'I was always a fairly aggressive tennis player and I got to the stage where I thought: hold on a minute, something's wrong here,' he says. 'People I used to beat easily started to get a little bit too close to beating me. I couldn't roll my hip like I used to.'

Ainsley isn't afraid of talking about his arthritis publicly, but he does understand people can find it hard to deal with. The

Before his television career took off, Ainsley spent 20 years working in professional kitchens – from The Dorchester to Quaglino's. Despite his very physical job, he thinks his arthritis could actually be down to too much skiing when he was younger, heading down the black runs kamikaze-style.

It's so frustrating, what's best for me?

Facing up to his arthritis, Ainsley embarked on a long process of trying various treatments – including supplements and exercise. It's difficult to imagine this larger-than-life happy character at a loss, but he confesses he experienced the confusion that many people with arthritis face over treating their condition. 'There are so many people offering so many different options, it's so frustrating, thinking "What's best for me?"', he says. 'And what works for one person doesn't necessarily work for somebody else. And do you believe them?'

After seeing various specialists and doing a lot of reading up, Ainsley eventually met

hip was causing serious problems and the operation was agreed upon. Ainsley realises he was fortunate to be able to have surgery privately. Even so, the operation still had to be put off for a whole year to fit around work commitments. *Ready Steady Cook* involves 100 staff – taking the show's host out of action for four weeks involved careful negotiation. 'It had to be a joint decision in the end because it affects so many people,' he explains.

After the surgery, he preferred to steer clear of the morphine on offer, and says the other people on the ward taking it looked scarily boss-eyed. 'They're looking over and they're thinking, "That's Ainsley Harriott," then, "No it's not," and they look again and it is,' he giggles.

Recuperation in hospital involved exercises, which he tackled alongside a lady who had had her knees and hips done. 'It was the first time she'd walked in about five years, I was almost crying with her,' he recalls. And there was laughter too – when Ainsley's agents came to the hospital to visit, they got the full entertainment package – serious walking demonstrations accompanied by comedy falls, and the opportunity to try out his special bed. ➔ p15

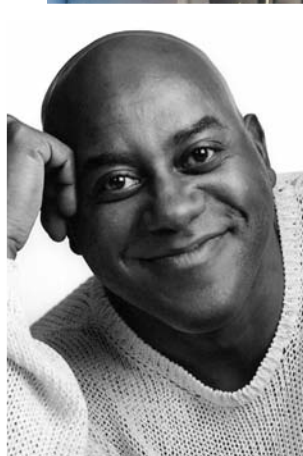
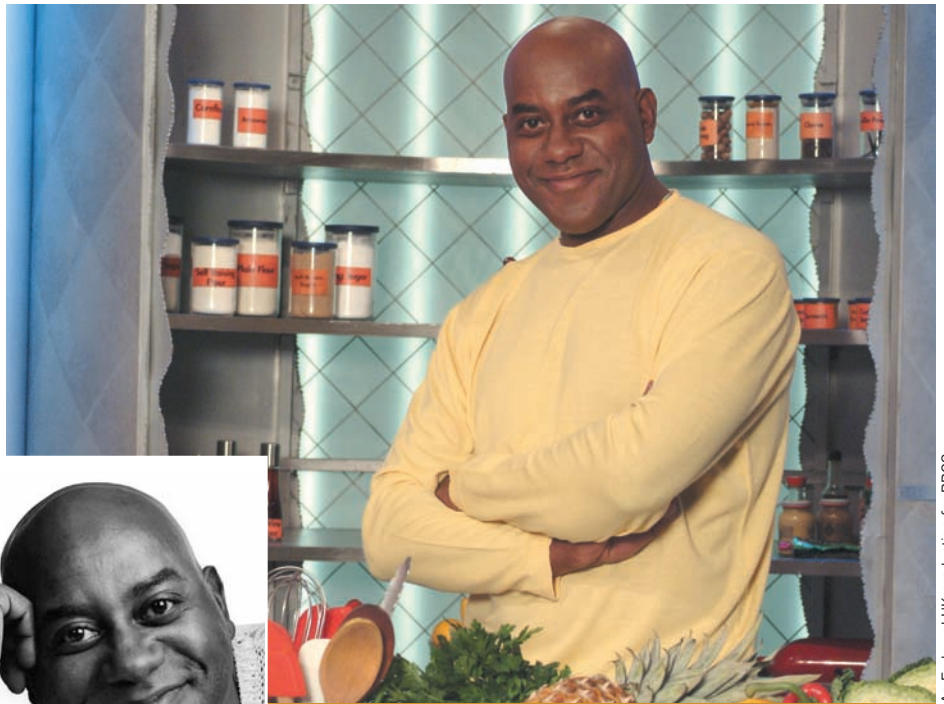
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'The bed did everything – the perfect marital aid, that bed was,' he grins.

He was in and out of hospital within a matter of days. Back home, he had to adjust to not rushing around. 'It's really weird when you're not able to do anything,' he says. 'I had a pair of tongs to pick things up, because you can't reach anything. And you really have to be disciplined about exercise – going for a walk every day, my dog wondering why I can't throw the ball for him.'

His children turned out to be more than helpful: 'They loved it. It was an opportunity to show off their cooking without Daddy interfering. I'd just have to wait and enjoy whatever they did. It was a wonderful time, to be able to be calm, to read and catch up on stuff.'

Time out didn't last long. His hectic schedule meant that four weeks after the operation, he was in South Africa filming a new cookery series.



(above) Ainsley on the set of *Ready Steady Cook* (left) in a reflective mood

An Endemol UK production for BBC2

It's the ability to run around pain-free that matters

Whilst in South Africa, Ainsley met up with Nelson Mandela. A fantastic experience, he says. 'He had the most wonderful cane that he walked with, and I thought to myself, I'm going to get something like that.'

Not long after, he had to fly on to Australia, to do more filming there. His new cane met with some suspicion at customs, causing Ainsley to launch into his best Rolf Harris impression. 'They were smelling it and doing all sorts of stuff, and I was like "Can you tell what it is yet?" The other security blokes fell over laughing, but one gave me such a dirty look. Love it.'

With so much intensive filming so soon

stage of bad pain, which was greatly eased by hydrotherapy. Since then, Ainsley's mobility has greatly improved. He's been skiing, is back playing his tennis – not necessarily winning, although he's surprisingly laid back about this.

'It's not the competitive element that matters, it's the ability to run around pain-free,' he says. 'Yes, [the hip] irritates me a little bit still, but not to that grating effect. Exercise – really pushing yourself – is what people need to be really prepared to do.'

He's a big believer in facing facts: 'We're becoming more and more aware of the problems that affect our lives and arthritis is a biggie. I think far too many people actually brush it under the carpet because we just don't want to deal with it.'

Many celebrities are often unwilling to

after the operation, it was a hard summer. There was a

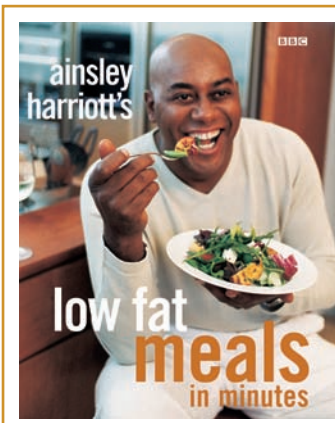
talk about their arthritis, but Ainsley is understanding of this: 'It's because you don't want to face up to it, that's why,' he empathises. 'It's very difficult. There's a fault with something in your body and that's very hard for anybody to accept. And I totally respect people's privacy in that department.'

There's a fault with your body and that's very hard to accept

With his boundless enthusiasm, and cheerful on- (and off-) screen presence, Ainsley's character rather flies in the face of common misconceptions of people with arthritis. I wonder whether there isn't a pressure to keep the eternally happy persona going. What happens when someone comes up to him in the street, and he's having a bad day because of his arthritis?

'I would share with them that I was feeling a bit under the weather,' he says. 'People want to know. Because you open yourself up to them on television, they kind of open themselves up to you too – which, when you're running for a train, is a little bit difficult.' Ever the comedian.

Sadly, Ainsley does eventually have to make a move. His exit is as swift as his entrance. I watch the spring in his step as he departs and massage my aching laughter muscles – I'm exhausted. **an**



Win Ainsley's fab recipes

BBC Worldwide has teamed up with *Arthritis News* to give away five copies of Ainsley's book *Low Fat Meals in Minutes*. Simply answer the following question: **In what year did Ainsley have his hip operation?**

Send your answer with your name and address to Ainsley Competition, *Arthritis News*, 18 Stephenson Way, London NW1 2HD. The editor's decision is final. Only one entry per household. Winners will be drawn at random and notified by post. Closing date 30 September 2005.

Q & A

Ainsley answers Arthritis News readers' questions

Q Do the *Ready Steady Cooks* know what's in the bags before the show?

(Eileen, from Nuneaton)

Ainsley: 'You don't know what you're cooking until you see the food. I can assure everybody out there that the chefs don't want to know what's in the bag. Because if you know what's in the bag and you lose, then it's devastating. By not knowing, that leaves you with a little bit of saving grace because you can always say "Oh well, I should have done this, I should have done that".'

Q Has your arthritis affected your signature wiggle?

(Parul, from London)

Ainsley: 'Actually, I couldn't wait to do it as a way of loosening up the hip. That was never a problem, because you're so pumped anyway, doing a show like that and I'm naturally an energetic person. My father has that natural ability too. Even when I'm at home I'm still very up, that's just the way I am. I've definitely inherited that, and I'm very proud of being like my father, being able to smile at life.'

Ainsley's tips for roasted vegetables

'Heat your pan up in the oven. Then get a bowl, toss your vegetables in oil and herbs. Your pan should be hot so it's going to sear your vegetables as soon as you put them in and you'll get the charred effect. If you're doing butternut squash, scoop out the seeds and cut it up into wedges with the skin on. Then put in a little bit of rosemary, a little bit of butter and I sprinkle it with a little drizzle of honey. Roast them in the oven for about 40 minutes at 180 degrees centigrade. Once they've gone a bit crispy, they're absolutely gorgeous.'



you do. Why not take your crème fraiche and knock some olive oil into it? If you're looking for something that looks more like butter, add a touch of rock salt and spread that on whatever you want. When I did a low fat cookbook, the research showed we love the taste of fat. What you have to replace it with is big flavours, whether that comes in the form of spices or herb – you con your tastebuds effectively.'

Q Do you think it's possible to be a top chef if you have arthritis?

(Julia from Rosshire)

Ainsley: Yes, young enough, I think you could. I think 45 is a bit too old. After that, it's very stressful on the body. Make no mistake, you're talking about being in a place where it's always warm, it's an industry where you're on your feet all the time. But, for anybody who wants job satisfaction, there's nothing greater. Every time you send out a dish, you think "Wow, I did that." And you get feedback.'

Q To keep a reasonable weight, should you have a big breakfast, a moderate lunch and a light dinner?

(Muriel from Stretton)

Ainsley: 'I was at an event with Cliff Richard the other day, he still looks pretty amazing. I've seen him play three sets of tennis and really go for it. He didn't beat me, but three years ago he probably could have done. And the key for him is breakfast and one meal a day. You can have as much fruit and vegetables in between. But everybody has a different metabolism, you just have to find out what works for you.'

Q What is your favourite dish?

(Susan from Cwmbran)

Ainsley: 'Food is a seasonal thing, a mood thing. I love the idea of lots of wintery food – you can't beat great stews and great puddings with lashings of custard, love it. We know our waistline doesn't love it, but that's the kind of comfort food I really enjoy. And I really look forward to the summer, I love the idea of beautiful fresh fish on the barbie.'

