

By AMY BROOMFIELD

Feeling FESTIVE

Chef Jason Atherton, whose star-spangled restaurants traverse the globe, has Christmas sorted. And he's happy to share

There's a common misconception in the world of celebrity chefs that the more successful you are, the meaner and shoutier you become – certainly if TV series like *Hell's Kitchen* and *MasterChef* are anything to go by. But after meeting Jason Atherton – whose series *The Chef's Brigade* marks his first foray into the world of TV chefdom – I can confirm that this isn't always the case.

On the day of our shoot, Atherton arrives on foot with the manner of someone out for a mid-morning stroll. Only the chef's whites are a giveaway that he has, in fact, been checking in on his restaurants (since around 5am as it turns out). A short while later, he is laughing with our crew, regaling them with tales about his family life, which revolves around his wife (and business partner) Ihra, and his three – soon to be four – daughters. "My house is so girly now – I just want a space of my own and some man time!" he says.

Atherton's career was kick-started at El Bulli. He followed that by lengthy stints with Gordon Ramsay and Marco Pierre White, then ventured out on his own in 2010 when he launched The Social Group. This coincided with the opening of his flagship, Pollen Street Social, which after just six months was awarded a Michelin star, as well as five AA Rosettes and third place in *The Good Food Guide's* best UK restaurants.

Today, the group can lay claim to a total of four Michelin stars and 18 restaurants, including ventures in New York, Dubai, Doha, Shanghai and St Moritz. Atherton has just opened his latest eatery, The Betterment, at London's recently launched The Biltmore Mayfair hotel. Then there's his new series on BBC Two, in which he tries to turn a team of amateur chefs into an all-star troupe by competing against Europe's finest kitchens. It's a programme that speaks volumes about his relentless work ethic – for which he has become renowned. "I've been cooking for 34 years and I've given this industry a lot of my time," he says, with masterly understatement. But that doesn't mean no time off, especially around Christmas, when down-time is non-negotiable. "If you're not strict with your time, you'll end up



Jason wears LORO PIANA jacket £xxx; OFFICINE GÉNÉRALE T-shirt £xxx; watch, Jason's own ???



Clockwise from top left: Salmon xxg, £xxx; red velvet cake £xxx per slice; truffle crisps xxg, £xxx; WILLIAM CURLEY xxxxxx chocolates £xxx; sea salt xxg, £xxx; sausage rolls £xxx each

Food Halls, Ground Floor; Menswear, Second Floor; and harrods.com

JASON'S SEASONAL SHOPPING LIST

The midnight snack

Harrods sausage rolls. They are the ultimate umami snack. Lovely sausagemeat, pastry – it delivers on all levels. And with brown sauce – none of that piccalilli nonsense.

The Boxing Day essential

Faroe Islands salmon. We're stuck with this idea that we're supposed to have ham, but Christmas is such a heavy day that, rather than meat again, I like salmon – poached or steamed. I use veg, grated potatoes and fresh herbs from the day before to make a hash, and serve with a salad of crispy bacon, croutons and shallots.

The guilty pleasure

An easy choice: I love a slice of red velvet cake with a cup of tea while watching *Match of the Day*. What's not to like about that? That's when you know you've made it.



Jason Atherton: Ben Harris; grooming: Shikell; Muraza; food: Ntasha; Alpour; Faridant; Thea; Buddley; Isay; Croker

The snack-cupboard secret

Fancy truffle crisps. I have them with good sliced bread (it has to be white), cooked ham – sliced thin – and grated mature Cheddar. The crisps go on top with a little bit of brown sauce – it makes that crunch noise when you push it all down. I had one last night.

The naughty nibble

A William Curley truffle – and it has to be salted caramel.

The tempting tippie

Since filming *The Chef's Brigade* and travelling through Spain, I've developed a taste for sherry – a nice Manzanilla to start, or something like a Pedro Ximénez for afters. Sometimes I'd rather have a glass of that than a dessert.

The pantry staple

Good flaky sea salt. It's just got a better natural flavour – and it even goes well in chocolate.

"I did a five-bird roast last Christmas. The kids were like, 'What is this?'"

being a slave to the machine you built,' he says. "Holidays are sacred and I don't apologise for the time I take off for those. My house and my time off with my family are my only luxuries."

The Christmas family meal, as you might expect, is served with flair, mixing the traditional and the inventive, but also touching upon his wife's Philippines heritage. "We always find a day to make sure we do a *lechón* [a traditional Filipino celebratory dish of roast suckling pig]. It's delicious, so any excuse to have one." Atherton cooks it with garlic rice and a sauce of coconut vinegar, limes, ginger and baby chillies. Then, on Christmas Day itself, he can't help but take the traditional roast to the next level. "I did a five-bird roast last year," he says. "I deboned five birds, put them in the water bath at work, then did the roasting at home. The kids were like, 'What is this?' Luckily, they really like their food." And there's no rushing back to work as soon as Christmas is done. Instead it's a time to take the whole family skiing. "To me, building a secure environment for our children to grow up in and instilling them with the right values is my definition of luxury... and I strive hard to achieve that." □