



CELIA BROOKS BROWN

She is one of Britain's foremost vegetarian cooks, but Celia Brooks Brown didn't come to catering via any of the conventional routes. Born in Colorado Springs, she arrived in Britain in 1989, at the age of 19, not to work in a kitchen but to pursue a dream of becoming a theatre director. Food was not on the agenda. "Ours was hardly a foodie family – I couldn't cook a Pot Noodle. Literally."

None the less, it proved to be the start of a different sort of career with an audience of the theatrical and fashionable. She started as a life model for Christiane Kubrick, the painter and wife of the late film director Stanley, and it all progressed from there. "She used to ask me to prepare simple lunches. She was passionate about it and I guess it rubbed off." Within a few months, Celia had become the Kubricks' private cook. "They did a lot of entertaining," she

recalls. "Steven Spielberg would come over, and we had Tom and Nicole for dinner during *Eyes Wide Shut*. They were a little – well, just very Hollywood. Nicole said she'd just eaten and skipped all the food. Tom looked a little awkward about it – I guess I know why she's so pencil-thin."

Such an initiation means she's not intimidated by the most high-profile parties, and she insists: "I don't go for trends or themes, not unless I'm asked. That's not what I do. I cook from the heart. It's not fussy. I make canapés with strong flavours and bright colours."

Ignoring trends attracts fashionable diners: Alan Rickman, Jennifer Saunders and John Simpson have all tucked in. "I have a good following around Notting Hill. I did a party recently for Stella McCartney – she's always been vegetarian. I made simple but delicious canapés such as spice-crusted potatoes

Mushroom and onion marmalade gratin tartlets Makes 24

These tartlets are a bit of a cheat, as you won't be fussing around with a load of tiresome pastry. The bases are cut out of sandwich bread, which toasts to a tasty crisp. They're a bit like a baby croque-monsieur, and they're guaranteed to have everyone fighting their way back for more.

These are always the star canapé of every event I do, though I suppose – officially – they don't qualify as a canapé, as each one adds up to two or three tidy bites.

2tbsp olive oil
1 large onion, chopped
Salt and pepper
1tbsp sugar
250g chestnut mushrooms, hand-chopped or finely sliced (easily achieved in a food processor)
Leaves stripped from a few thyme sprigs
12 slices of medium-sliced white sandwich bread

Soft butter

250g Gruyère or mature cheddar cheese, grated

Heat the olive oil in a wide pan over a moderate flame and fry the onions until they start to colour. Sprinkle in the sugar and seasoning. Add the mushrooms and thyme to the pan and cook until the mushrooms are soft.

Take a slice of bread and cut two 4cm circles out of it, using the top of a glass or a pastry cutter. Butter one side and press butter-side down into non-stick muffin tins or mince pie tins – you will probably need two of these. Continue until you have 24.

Pre-heat the oven to 200°C. Top each bread round with about a teaspoonful of mushroom mixture. Mound the grated cheese generously on top. Bake for 10–15 minutes, or until golden and bubbling.

with tamarind cream. It was warm, spicy and zesty, in tune with the season. I heard Jude Law took the dish around getting people to try it."

Though meat is off limits, nobody misses it and Celia does do seafood. "Being strictly non-meat is not limiting with canapés. I do vegetarian sushi, Thai corn fritters with chilli sauce, Thai spring rolls. And there's a big Asian influence in chilli crab cake, and prawns skewered with mange tout with a ginger marinade."

Does her arty following make her long for those theatrical dreams, despite the success of her catering business, five cookbooks, TV appearances and Portobello gastro-tours? "Parties are fun, and each one is a production. I bring together elements and present them to an audience. That's my kind of stage." →
"Entertaining Vegetarians" is published by Pavilion, £16.99. For other information visit www.celiabrooksbrown.com