



COMFORT AND JOY

In her new cookbook, The Christmas Companion, British-born, Venice-raised food writer and famed hostess Skye McAlpine shares how she creates a magical festive season (without the stress)

words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE

Photography: courtesy Skye McAlpine (opposite page).

If Skye McAlpine – author of four cookbooks, *Sunday Times Magazine* recipe columnist and founder of home-and-table goods brand Tavola – were to sum up her career, it would be as follows: “I’m obsessed with the idea that it actually is quite easy to create magic in your every day. Small things that require little effort can have a greater impact on your quality of life, and [that] of those around you, than you would think.”

It’s this life-enhancing philosophy that has informed her three bestselling cookbooks to date: *A Table in Venice* (2018), *A Table for Friends* (2020) and *A Table Full of Love* (2023). And to this collection now comes McAlpine’s fourth tome, *The Christmas Companion*, published by Bloomsbury.

“There’s something about Christmas,” she shares. “It gives us the licence to go that extra mile, put lots of decorations on the table or cook that extravagant dish.” Readers will enjoy recipes for tortellini *in brodo*, a dish traditionally served on Christmas Eve across Italy, as well as classic British festive fare (think succulent turkey with all the trimmings) and, in tribute to Antipodean custom, a pavlova.

McAlpine’s husband, whom she met at university, is Australian and her sons, aged 13 and six, both hold Australian citizenship. In her own joking words, she identifies as Australian, too. “The only one [of us] who’s technically not Australian is me,” she laughs. “I’m like, ‘Guys, take me in.’”

The recipes produced by McAlpine, who was born in the UK but raised in Venice, are often inspired by the cuisine of her adopted city, but with a distinctively relaxed sensibility. “I’m big on shortcuts,” she admits. “If there’s a simpler way of doing things, that’s the path I’m going to choose. We’re all time-poor and I’d rather spend my time sitting and chatting with my friends than [cooking] up some elaborate dish.”

Her father, former Conservative politician Lord McAlpine, had extensive business interests in Australia, in particular in Broome in Western Australia’s Kimberley region, where he founded the waterfront Cable Beach Club Resort. The family travelled frequently Down Under (in another interview, McAlpine noted that by aged three, she’d already clocked up 18 trips to Australia), experiences that seeded a lifelong love of the country. Her mother, Romilly Hobbs, helmed Hobbs, a fine-food delicatessen in London’s Soho, in the ’80s.

McAlpine and her parents moved to Venice when she was six, intending to stay for just a year, but the city became their permanent home. McAlpine enjoyed an authentically Venetian childhood, steeped in the city’s culinary traditions: seeing firsthand how Venetians revere seasonal ingredients at the *mercato* and their daily observance of *aperitivo* hour.

At 18, she returned to the UK to read classics at Oxford University before undertaking a master’s degree in classics reception theory, examining the impact of classical civilisation on Western culture, at University College London (UCL). Next came a PhD on the English translations of the Roman poet Ovid’s love poetry, also from UCL.

An unexpected backstory for a future food writer? “[Throughout my studies], I was always spending a lot of time reading cookbooks and planning supper parties, when I probably should have been focusing on my studies,” reflects McAlpine. Her passion for cooking “took on a life of its own” during the year of maternity leave she took when her eldest was born. “I started writing a blog [*From My Dining Table*] and it grew,” she says. “And by the time I finished my PhD, I had been commissioned to write my first book.”

Thanks to years’ welcoming loved ones into her homes (she splits her time between London and an apartment in the exquisite 17th-century Palazzo Gradenigo in Venice), McAlpine has entertaining down to a fine art. In July last year, guests including designers Alex Eagle and Charlotte Olympia assembled in Venice for the joint 40th birthday celebrations of McAlpine and her husband,



featuring a number of dinners (one candlelit black-tie affair at home, another in a garden festooned with lanterns), gondola trips and fireworks.

Her flair for entertaining beautifully, whether for the grandest of occasions or cosy kitchen-table suppers, has attracted nearly a quarter of a million followers to her Instagram, who are smitten with her charming and invariably mouthwatering tablescapes, like scenes plucked from a Dutch still-life painting. So it was a natural next step when, in 2021, she launched Tavola (meaning ‘table’ in Italian), a line inspired by her love of Venetian craftsmanship and vintage crockery.

“For me, tableware feels like a piece of the puzzle in making life simpler,” explains McAlpine. “You can just take some mozzarella and fresh tomatoes and put them on a beautiful platter and suddenly you have that kind of ‘wow’ moment. What’s going to make it easier for you to have six girlfriends over on a Tuesday night when you finish work at six o’clock?”

The ceramics – some adorned with fruits and flowers, others simply trimmed with a ribbon of colour around the edge – are handmade near Venice. All of the glassware is handblown and much is crafted in Murano. Imperfections are celebrated, not avoided. “[Two pieces] might look the same, but when you look at them next to each other, they aren’t identical,” says McAlpine. “That’s really important to me – it’s the spirit of the collection.”

For McAlpine, making Christmas special does not equate to heaping stress onto an already jam-packed period of the year. “That’s what I really wanted with [*The Christmas Companion*],” she muses. “Pick the bits that you are going to enjoy – baking sticky buns to have on Christmas morning, making your own crackers – but if it’s not actually fun for you, then you mustn’t be doing it. I always say, ‘Food is a people business’. To me, it’s all about the people who eat it and bringing them together.” **HB**
The Christmas Companion by Skye McAlpine, published by Bloomsbury Publishing in hardback, \$55.