



# OUTSIDE THE BOX

Awarded an Honorary Fellowship of The Society last year, John Reardon is one of the most singular and determined photographers you are likely to meet, with a quite individual style and approach to the industry. He speaks to Simon James



“It’s quite out of the ordinary to become a top chef”, says John Reardon, who is undertaking a long term project on chefs and people involved in Britain’s growing interest in food, for which he has twice won the Glenfiddich Food and Drink Award for Visual Work. “They’re immensely driven and creative people. To succeed as any form of artist, you must have something special; and top chefs undoubtedly fall into the same category.

“Certainly, there’s representation involved in how the food’s presented; but there’s more than that, because you’ve got to eat it as well. In some ways, it’s like putting on a show. It’s all put together on a plate, and criticism in the media comes as quickly as it

does for the first night of a West End play: make a mistake and you’re shut down with equal speed.”

Reardon’s background lies principally in photojournalism; but he’s always done feature portraiture, and worked across the breadth of editorial.

Born in Cape Town, he moved to the UK, and practiced as a freelance in Birmingham from 1980-84, at which time he helped to found the iconic photo magazine *Ten-8*, as well as publishing the books *Handsworth Self Portraits*, and *Home Front*, the latter with Derek Bishton and Salman Rushdie – an essay on the people of Handsworth, a multicultural area of Birmingham.

He moved to London in 1984, initially

**Above: Gordon Ramsay.  
Left: Bernadini.**



Top: Carluccio and Giorgio Locatelli.  
Above: The Last Supper.  
Right: Richard Corrigan.

freelancing for Rex Features, and latterly IPG (Independent Photographers' Group). He shot the beginnings of the Palestinian intefada in Gaza in 1987. Also in the 1980s, working with Rex Features, he photographed the civil war in Sri Lanka.

Reardon had to stop travelling for personal reasons in 1994, first becoming Deputy Pic-

ture Editor on *The Observer* for a couple of months, and then its Picture Editor, until he returned to freelancing with IPG in 1996, at which point, he says, it was ceasing to be viable to make a living in photojournalism, and he increasingly worked as a portraitist.

The last photojournalistic projects he undertook were on Kosovo, and the September 11 2001 attacks in the USA. Then, through commissions for *Observer Food Monthly*, which was launched in 2001, he began to specialise in photographing chefs.

"*Observer Food Monthly* was launched on a

shoestring", he says, adding, "Any new section of a paper begins on a tiny budget: being put together by the staff on the weekly sections, the picture desk's stable of photographers, and whoever else happens to be around.

"Lucy Cavendish, whom I'd met on assignment for the *Telegraph Magazine*, became its Editor, and we got on. We started with the obvious names, like Marco Pierre White; I photographed Gordon Ramsay for the second edition. We only had a few minutes. He wasn't quite the household name he is now. I'd photographed him once before, after he chased



“To begin with, I was feeling my way, but gradually the pictures started to get a little more constructed. For example, I’ve tried working with the ingredients of a meal as well as with the chef. One of the early ones was Richard Corrigan, from Soho’s Lindsay House: it was rabbit stew with cabbage.

“He put all the ingredients out, but the full table made me realise that all I needed was the rabbit. So we rescheduled. When I went back, he’d prepared some beautifully skinned rabbits; but that explained to me I didn’t want skinned rabbits: I wanted a bunny.

“So I took all the gear away again, arranging to come back another time for full-on, head-on, furry rabbits. This time, I arrived to discover he’d cut his hand badly, and gone to hospital to get it sewn up. But I did finally get the picture, and it was worth the wait. I love it. His cut hand is bandaged so he looks like a boxer, and the rabbit on his shoulder looks like the losing contestant. He really understood what I was doing.

“I’ve had a lot of cooperation and understanding from the chefs generally and, once I get on a roll, I’m more or less left on my own to take them where I want to go. They’ve allowed me to explore an aspect of portraiture which uses references, in this case food, as well as humour, in building a dynamic image. I am however acutely conscious of the difference between a portrait containing a humorous element, and one that’s just plain silly: essentially the pictures have to work.

“When Lucy Cavendish left *Observer Food Monthly*, to be replaced by Nicola Jeal as Editor, I didn’t feel that I found common ground with her for the first few months, and I didn’t do much with the magazine. Then, after about six months, she asked me if I’d be interested in shooting a chefs’ portrait based on Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*. That was the start of taking the chef portraits into the studio.

“I’d determinedly avoided studio portraiture up until that point, and I was nervous about it, but it offered the chance to construct something. By now, I’d also had a fair degree of involvement with the chefs. They’d begun to trust me, the pictures were getting a reputation. If I suggested something, even if it was a bit off the wall, they were likely to do it.

“Any picture based on *The Last Supper* deserves a degree of reverence. Of course, I had a blueprint, but I needed to simplify it down to something we could manage, while retaining an essence of the original.

“I started off with photocopies of the seating plans, which were outlines of the image of the painting, and then arrived at the big question: who would play Jesus? First thought was Giorgio Locatelli, because of his hair, and second was Angela Hartnett, who was at the Connaught, because she was the only woman. Ironically, in the final picture, if *The Da Vinci Code* is to be believed, we got it right - Angela appears on the right of the Christ figure.

“I had to work out how to solve various technical issues: the table, for example, is on a slope so you can see a bit of the food. We also started out with loads of props, but I took

someone from his restaurant with a spade.

“That was his first taste of press notoriety. We made the portrait with him looking through the hole in a meat cleaver. It summed up his image, caught the eye of the magazine’s designer, and ended up on the cover. Today, we’re said to have a somewhat feisty relationship, but in truth I respect him immensely.

“With the benefit of hindsight, it seems there’s been quite a progression in my portraiture since the beginning of the chef series. When it began, it was a case of shooting in restaurants, in dark corners, working with two

lights and small props; from where it’s moved to shooting in the studio, trying to create something from a blank canvas.

“As the series developed, I began to realise you could do more with chefs than, say, the Prime Minister, who has a defined image and a whole team to ensure it’s preserved; or actors, with whom you’re given very little time, and who again have a persona from which they’ll never stray. I’ve always found you can do more with writers than actors, because they aren’t so concerned about selling an image of themselves; and it’s the same with chefs.



**Top:** Iffraaj.  
**Above:** Medaglia d'Oro.  
**Right:** Street Cry.  
**Far right:** Fergus Henderson.

most of them off to simplify the result. Even in the studio, I try to use a minimum of props: preferring to make the image as graphic as possible, and let the subject shine through.

"They're rather bigger budget than the standard magazine portrait, but I didn't really consider that at the outset; lots of things were done on the cheap. *The Last Supper* backdrop, for example, was only 18ft wide, extended with velvets. Otherwise, it was just done with lighting; a couple of lights behind the table on the background to halo it; a very big main light from above; a couple at the side; and then two or three in front. I also put a velvet in the front, because I didn't want feet to be showing, and we lit it to be very dark.

"Then you have the small issue of managing 13 of the largest egos in cooking, sat around a single table: trying to get them all to interact with Gordon Ramsay as Christ, and screaming at him to look ethereal.

"The frame that became the final picture is unique among the 40 rolls I shot. Hand on heart: the halo hasn't been put in with Photoshop. It's a round of brie, which Marcus Wareing, who is the least animated person I have ever photographed, just picked up and threw across the table. I wasn't even focusing the camera. I was just standing there with a cable, and my son, Alexander, who was assisting, was suddenly saying, 'Did you get

it, Dad?' And that's the only frame. He did it without being asked; and if he had been asked he could have thrown it 1000 times without ever getting it in the right place, with everyone looking at it.

"For the next production, I decided to hang Fergus Henderson, chef/proprietor of the restaurant St John, and author of *Nose to Tail Eating*, which advocates using every part of the animal in cooking. The idea was to have him hanging in what looked like an abattoir, next to a pig's carcass. Hygiene regulations prevented the use of a real abattoir, so I shot it in the studio against a hired backdrop.

"Hanging a person is something of a complicated business. As well as the usual crew, we also had two circus technicians on hand to ensure the shoot went safely.

"I tend to get obsessional about details, and in this case spent two hours concentrating on the hooks. As can be seen, the hook in the final shot is actually beginning to straighten out, but by then we'd got it. Fergus, looking a bit like a maverick Mr Toad, makes the shot: he's got a kind of boyishness to his face, and he always photographs really well. Despite solidifying the chefs' conviction that I am in fact completely mad, that picture was a great success.

"Since then, there have been numerous other themed shots. Antonio Carluccio and Giorgio Locatelli, for example, posed in an alleyway as the Italian mob: they came, they saw, they made me an offer I couldn't refuse, with a fish and a violin case.

"I've also addressed serious issues from the catering world, such as in the story, *Why are all the best chefs men?* for which five top

male chefs donned high heels, mini-skirts, and fishnet tights.

"The shots have moved on: stepping into the studio has worked; and the committed cooperation of the chefs has been the ingredient that has made the series. Faith however is never quite absolute and, since the Fergus Henderson shoot, every time I've phoned a chef to book a portrait, the conversation has always seem to start out with a nervous voice on the other end of the phone saying, "You're not going to hang me, are you?"

From having had an aversion to the studio, Reardon seems to have acquired something of a taste for it, and if he thought chefs with big egos were a challenge, he hadn't met his next subject yet.

"Darley is a global thoroughbred stallion breeding operation", he says. "They were looking at ways of rebranding, in an industry very much bound by tradition. Thinking outside the box, they engaged me - neither a sports nor a horse photographer - to take a fresh approach to making images for their advertising and promotion.

"Not understanding the finer points of the horse, let alone stallions, I set about trying to make well constructed attractive images that the designer and copywriter could work with. Ignoring all convention, I began to look at details, close ups, and unusual camera cropping and angles.

"My greatest difficulty was always the lack of control I had over the shoots. Stallions can be difficult for their grooms to handle at the best of times, sometimes agitated and at other times quite simply dangerous.



“After a number of attempts at shooting the stallions in situ, I began to feel I’d exhausted every possibility that the very limited environment in which they were kept afforded me. I expressed an interest in trying to light the horses to create a more ‘studio’ feel, as a way of doing something new and different. Quite sensibly, this was always shot down, as the company felt that the risk of the stallions freaking out wasn’t worth taking; at the very least they might destroy the set, and at worst injure themselves or their handlers. Some of these stallions are worth £10s of millions if not £100s of millions, and for the most part are wrapped in cotton wool and looked after like celebrities.

“Then, when I was asked by the agency to suggest a concept for the 2010 campaign, I went back to the studio idea. By this time, I knew much more about horses in general and

stallions in particular, and I assured them that I could make it work for every horse on every farm. Darley agreed that I could try, starting with a few of the quieter horses in the UK.

“Of course, it was out of the question for the stallions to come to the studio – the studio would have to go to them! We devised a set up that we could take to every farm, construct in a barn, run sufficient power to, and be large enough to accommodate a 16 hand horse that would not stand still. In the end, we used two 26x26ft canvases and reflective paint, which we could easily air freight to each location. Ironically, in the event, the stallions weren’t bothered by the flash or the set, and to a man were remarkably well behaved.”

Photographers’ agent Abby Johnston has represented Reardon for more than five years, after meeting and working with him at IPG. She describes him as one of the most creative

photographers with whom she has worked.

“I will get a call from a client requesting John”, she says, “and after a few seconds relaying the client’s brief to John, he will come up with the most incredible ideas at breakneck speed. It still fascinates me that he is so extraordinarily creative, and daring too.

“Clients love him, and he is always an absolute pleasure to work with. One of my fondest memories is of a shoot for *The New Yorker*, with Claudia Roden and a live goat in a studio. That the goat was chomping on half the set and dropping little parcels around the studio was all par for the course for John.”

Abby Johnston is launching a new website this month. Most recently Reardon has shot highly energetic ads for restaurant and bar Camino, which will be on billboards shortly.

**Simon James**

[www.abbyjohnston.com](http://www.abbyjohnston.com)