

# Cooking and Commensality after COVID: *Together: Memorable Meals Made Easy*

**Abstract:** The focus of this essay is the COVID and post-COVID food media output of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver. Through a close reading of his cookbook *Together: Memorable Meals Made Easy* and its accompanying TV series *Jamie Oliver: Together*, the essay explores how forms of commensality are mobilized in these food media texts to establish a post-COVID

“new normal,” with an emphasis on sharing food as a way of making and banking memories for a still uncertain future. The essay concludes my two-part exploration of cooking and eating together as responses to a crisis, drawing out common issues shared with my earlier essay about commensality after the Grenfell fire in London (Bell 2024).

THIS ESSAY EXPLORES THE ways in which commensality is represented in a cookbook and associated TV series, both called *Together*, made in the UK towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, and fronted by the well-known British food celebrity Jamie Oliver (hereafter called simply Jamie, in keeping with his media persona). These food media texts were produced as we emerged from the pandemic, and emphasize the renewed value of sharing food in post-COVID times, and I discuss them alongside Jamie’s TV output during the pandemic. I explore how commensality is represented through these texts, as a way to return to “normal” life after COVID. I provide a reading of the book and series set in dialogue with emerging research on the impacts of COVID on cooking and eating, exploring how a prominent food media celebrity framed both pandemic and post-pandemic domestic familial food practices. This essay is the second in a two-part series focusing on a recent cookbook called *Together*, and is written to be read alongside my discussion of *Together: Our Community Kitchen*, published by the Hubb Community Kitchen in the aftermath of the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in London (Bell, 2024). At the end of this essay, I draw some common threads together from across the two discussions.

The decision to write twin essays arose from my desire to give enough space for a full discussion of each central text and its broader context; to try to combine analysis of the two *Togethers* would necessitate a much shallower engagement and would not enable me to develop both the specific themes of each essay and their shared themes. Both essays are embedded in broader discussions of commensality—the sharing of food. In the previous essay I briefly sketch some key elements

of the literature on commensality, but I do not repeat that here—the material discussed however has relevance for my reading of both texts and their respective contexts, and key motifs from this review are picked up wherever they are put to work in either essay (for a review of the “expanding research field” of commensality studies, see Jönsson et al. 2021).

## Jamie, Cooking, and COVID

During the UK’s first period of COVID lockdown (shelter-in-place), Jamie made a TV series called *Keep Cooking and Carry On* (Oliver 2020), twenty episodes broadcast over four weeks, with one half-hour episode aired every weeknight at 5:30 p.m. beginning March 23, 2020, on the UK’s terrestrial TV station Channel 4. The series first appeared on the very day that then UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson told the nation in a TV broadcast that everyone must stay at home in measures that came into legal force three days later. The aim, Jamie says in the first episode, was to make a show in “these unprecedented times, where everything is changing around us [and] the world outside is so uncertain,” and to “use food to help lift the spirits” (Oliver 2020: ep. 1). The show’s title echoes the British World War II slogan “Keep Calm and Carry On,” which has been frequently repurposed in recent years as a call for “patriotic stoicism” (Martin 2021: 361). Featuring what Jamie calls “bendy” recipes—recipes adaptable to suit whatever viewers have on hand—in early episodes he cooks dishes using store cupboard and convenience store staples, and then encourages viewers to share the results of their cooking with neighbors in need.

As lockdown rules tightened, the show moved from a “staged domestic” setting to something much more “real,” with footage from episode six onward filmed by Jamie and his wife Jools on their smartphones, with their children either acting as sous chefs or interrupting the filming, reflecting common experiences of combining working from home, home schooling, and feeding the household under lockdown restrictions (Philippe et al. 2022; Lewis et al. 2024). This new material is mixed with repackaged footage from Jamie’s TV back catalogue (and some guest appearances) that also meet the “bendy” brief.

Talking to smartphone cameras throughout, often in close-up and without flattering studio lighting, Jamie emphasizes the common experience that he and his immediate family share with us as viewers (though the extent of the shared experience is contestable; Hollows 2022). Episode introductions give a daily update on how Jamie and his family are doing, the state of his pantry, and the national picture. The new material uses the “cook-along” format that Jamie has previously deployed in shows like *30 Minute Meals* (Oliver 2010), with minimal editing, showing how to cook the dish in real time in a somewhat ad hoc kitchen. The scheduling of the program at 5:30 p.m. aligned it with many viewers’ evening meal preparation time, encouraging us to cook along and, by 6 p.m., have a “bendy” Jamie meal ready to share with our locked-down household. The quality of the smartphone filming and the limited set dressing and styling gives the material a homemade feel, contrasting vividly with the archive footage that is professionally shot and styled, scripted and edited.

Cooking became a key activity for lots of people during lockdown, either as a distraction from the pandemic or as a source of ongoing stress about procuring ingredients and keeping those we were living with well-fed and happy (Lewis et al. 2024). This led to an upsurge in online content produced by people in lockdown, both professionals and amateurs, sharing their food tips and recipes, and discussing the new reality of cooking and eating in COVID times (Bascuñan-Wiley et al. 2022). The volume of food-related material on old and new media platforms during COVID attests to the central role of cooking and eating together and to the creative ways people found to continue doing so under the particular conditions of the pandemic. Unable to share food in person, people instead shared it at a distance, swapping recipes and cooking and eating together via mediated “co-presence at a distance” (Bascuñan-Wiley et al. 2022: 392). Online cooking classes and “cook-alongs” were widely offered during lockdown, connecting users to places, people, and food in “new pandemic-specific foodways” (376). The community cookbook, discussed in my previous essay, also enjoyed

a renaissance online, as fund-raising recipe collections appeared to give pandemic cooks inspiration, and to express solidarity, connection, and community beyond those with whom we were locked down at home (Givens 2023). *Keep Cooking and Carry On* can be seen as an attempt by a national terrestrial broadcaster and one of its stars to capture some of this upsurge, and reflects the necessary innovations that media providers adopted in order to produce content in lockdown. It also testifies to the role that broadcast television took on in the pandemic, as a way to structure daily life and as a focus for togetherness whether at the scale of the household gathered around the screen or at the scale of the nation brought together by the schedule (Hermes and Hill 2020).

In a study of eating during lockdown in France, Estelle Fourat et al. (2021) explored the forms and meanings of commensality that emerged as people adapted to sheltering in place. They detected three patterns of commensal eating in the households they surveyed: (1) reproducing normative meals as a form of reassurance, (2) inventing new forms of commensality, and (3) rejecting the enforced commensality of lockdown. In the first case, pre-COVID ways of cooking and eating together were maintained, even if in some cases this meant breaking lockdown rules (by sharing food with neighbors, for example). In the second category they describe an “ersatz of commensality” (208) based on remote or virtual togetherness. In the last type, they found people in shared households rejecting commensality as oppressive, opting instead to eat alone. In terms of *Keep Cooking and Carry On*, the first two patterns are repeatedly enacted: while the show itself is an ersatz of commensality as we “cook with Jamie” at a distance, he is also offering cooking and eating as a form of reassurance, of normality. While the show sometimes jokingly alludes to the “oppressive forced commensality” of lockdown, there is no attempt (on screen at least) to abandon it and seek out “spaces of freedom” (Fourat et al. 2021: 210).

The real focus of my discussion here is Jamie’s post-COVID book and series, *Together*. As its name suggests, this is all about being able to enjoy commensality again as lockdown eased and a post-COVID “new normal” emerged. The show also foregrounds food as a way to thank those who have kept things going, with episodes featuring frontline workers as guests in Jamie’s home.

### *Together with Jamie*

When all is said and done, incredible food is merely an excuse to bring loved ones together and create precious memories. That’s all that really matters. (Oliver 2021d: 296–97)

*Jamie Oliver: Together* (2021a) was first broadcast on Channel 4 in September and October 2021, with six one-hour episodes, plus two Christmas episodes shown in December 2021. The accompanying cookbook, *Together: Memorable Meals Made Easy* (2021d), came out in September that year, carrying a dedication “to the NHS & keyworkers for looking after us and keeping the nation going, enabling us to get back together” (Oliver 2021d: 2–3). The setup of the TV series is explained by Jamie in the title sequence repeated at the start of each episode: “People everywhere are finally coming back together, so it’s time to celebrate some of the friendships, love and amazing moments we’ve all missed out on, and what better way to show people that you care than by bringing them around a table for some delicious food? [...] This is saying ‘I love you’ through food” (Oliver 2021a). Echoing the book’s subtitle, in the opening sequence of each episode is a clip of Jamie’s dad saying, “Life is about memories—and today we made a memory.”

In the introduction to the book, Jamie writes, “*Together* feels more poignant in 2021 than ever before,” somewhat euphemistically continuing: “What we’ve been through, collectively, is very unusual, and I think a lot of us have realized that perhaps we took some of life’s simple pleasures for granted. Being together is precious.” The recipes in the book, he continues, are “an excuse to reconnect with those you’ve missed seeing, in the intimacy of your home. Celebrate the power that food has to bring people together, remember the immense joy it can bring, and, more than anything, bank those memories with your loved ones” (Oliver 2021d: 4). Focusing on the “intimacy” of home entertaining works as a reminder of lockdown experience and how that might have affected our experiences and ideas of home, perhaps including the rejection of commensality (Fourat et al. 2021). So, in this immediate post-lockdown context, we can reimagine home as again open, a space of freedom in which to “reconnect” with guests that were recently prohibited (and in some cases construed as a threat) and to *choose* to spend time with those we were recently compelled to spend lockdown with. In this regard, Jeffery Sobal (2000) differentiates between commensal circles—those people we are likely to eat with—and commensal units, meaning those we share a particular meal with. During lockdown, the commensal circle shrunk to the size of the household we were locked down with (virtual dinners notwithstanding), and this commensal unit was unchanging, day after day (Fourat et al. 2021).

Meanwhile, the comment above about banking memories feels like a gesture toward the fragility of togetherness experienced at this time: that we come out of lockdown with a heightened awareness that in everyday acts such as eating

together we are “making memories” that we might need to help us through the new normal of post-COVID living. This repeated refrain in *Together* resonates with David Sutton’s (2001) discussion of what he calls the “polytemporality” of food memories, and particularly his notion of “prospective memories,” which involve “plan[ning] in the present to remember food events in the future” (19). Food memories for Sutton connect past, present, and future, with past food events remembered in the present, and present events crafted as future memories. In the post-COVID context, this polytemporal memory-work feels almost like a comment on mortality, on the presence of death and living in its shadow.

*Together*, the book and series added a new angle to Jamie’s oeuvre: the recipes and meals are designed such that much of the preparing and cooking can be done beforehand, so when guests arrive, the cook can spend time with them rather than remaining in the kitchen: “To make the most of the precious time with those we love it’s all about getting ahead,” Jamie says at the start of each episode (Oliver 2021a). Here, rather than cooking being a performance carried out in front of assembled guests (enabled by the opening up of modern kitchens; Meah 2016), it is done before guests arrive, and the food appears on the table with only minimal last-minute finishing and plating by Jamie. Time together has become too precious to spend in the kitchen.

Another recurring motif across each episode is aerial footage of a table laden with the food prepared in that episode, with guests handing round dishes and serving themselves. Here, the proximity of the guests and the sharing of food vividly captures mundane practices that were reshaped during lockdown, when those outside our immediate commensal unit were constructed as potential sources of contagion, making practices of sharing space and sharing food fraught with anxiety. Here, post-lockdown, the casual easiness of pre-COVID commensality returns, though in its return it is freighted with heightened significance and value, no longer a simple pleasure taken for granted. While hand washing and cleaning down seem more present in the series than in Jamie’s earlier output, no other obvious signs of “what we’ve been through” appear on screen—no masks or hand sanitizers. In fact, hugging, kissing, and being in close proximity are center-staged and celebrated by Jamie and his guests repeatedly (though in two behind-the-scenes videos posted on Jamie’s YouTube channel, we do see off-screen personnel wearing masks [Oliver 2021b, 2021c]).

Other than the introduction, *Together* the book barely references COVID, and is organized instead around a series of meal events—laid-back feast, picnic love, cozy indulgence—with each recipe for the meal divided into three

stages: get ahead, on the day, to serve. This format repeats the idea of being organized so as to maximize time with guests, and each menu is accompanied by a double-page spread of photographs of the cooking and eating with a short, encouraging statement running along the bottom: “Anything goes at brunch [. . .]. Gather your favourite people together. Be hospitable, be generous, and above all, be happy” (Oliver 2021d: 10–11); “when your best mates are coming over you want to be in the thick of it, having fun, not slaving over a hot stove” (118–19).

On his YouTube channel, Jamie explains the “story behind” *Together* the book and series: “Together today means something very different than a year ago, and I feel that everyone feels the same [. . .] it just *feels different*” (Oliver 2021c). He continues: “When we went into lockdown [. . .] we were just as scared as everyone else,” and this is intercut with scenes from *Keep Cooking and Carry On*, reminding us of what we have all experienced. As we adapted to lockdown, he says,

it was filled with more optimism, but still you weren’t allowed to have your family *in your home*. Now the vaccination programme’s kinda doing its thing, *Together* the show, *Together* the book, is about maybe, just *maybe*, the idea of having people round your house, and maybe that’s worth a little bit more this year than last year. (Oliver 2021c)

That repeated “maybe” reminds us that the show was conceived at a time when transition out of lockdown was not yet guaranteed, and there’s a provisional feeling to the scene. The video includes footage of Jamie’s house busy with his production team and his family, intercut with him talking to camera about *Together*. He reveals a further twist and a classic gesture of hospitality: “for the first time ever, I’ve invited complete strangers into my home, and we’ve got teachers, we’ve got doctors, nursery teachers, midwives, volunteers” (Oliver 2021c). Echoing the dedication at the front of his book, the series places heavy emphasis on key workers, with three of the six non-Christmas episodes following this format of invited “strangers” being welcomed into Jamie’s home and fed by him. As one guest says: “I’ve been so excited. It’s just the fact of just enjoying really nice food round the table. When was the last time you really could do that?” (Oliver 2021c).

Jamie says in the YouTube clip of this aspect of the show: “I know it’s only a small handful of people that represent millions, but it feels right, it feels a pleasure, and I’m certainly grateful for all of them for what they’ve done for us. It’s all quite emotional really.” Toward the end of the video, we see a different Jamie appear, a more politicized voice:

I think a lot of people have, like, had enough . . . and, erm, actually the simple things in life . . . a cup of tea . . . a bit of cake . . . So, for me, like, I can only really talk about this in the way that I’m, y’know, allowed to, really, which is through food, and I think food is just the most incredible excuse to get people together. (Oliver 2021c)

That comment about talking in the way he’s *allowed to* feels like a reference back to Jamie’s tussles with the UK government over issues such as free school meals, the “sugar tax,” and Brexit. In this seemingly unscripted piece to camera, Jamie re-politicizes what might otherwise be seen as the straightforwardly celebratory tone of *Together*.

As noted, the six episodes of the series (excluding the two Christmas specials) are split between shows that bring together family and friends (episodes one, three, and four) and those where the guests are key workers invited to eat with Jamie. The series kicks off with family and friends, establishing the narrative and setting. We are in Jamie’s home, in a well-equipped, well-provisioned, well-curated kitchen, on a summer’s day, with Jamie’s wife Jools and their children around and involved—a relaxed, domestic scene. Jamie introduces the theme of the episode, which is a “celebration feast” with a “festival vibe”:

Over the last year none of us have been able to celebrate those really important family moments. So in our household we’ve had two eighteenth birthdays, we’ve had graduations, I’ve had my mum and dad’s retirement, me and Jools have had our twentieth wedding anniversary—in fact our twenty-first wedding anniversary as well—and we haven’t been able to do that. So now that we can get back together again I’ve created this incredible celebration meal that will hopefully just bring everyone together, [for] fun, laughter, joy, the whole thing. (Oliver 2021a: ep. 1)

Jamie calls on his son Buddy for assistance, saying that his children did “a bit more cooking in lockdown”—Buddy says, “Yeah, it was fun,” in an allusion back to *Keep Cooking and Carry On*, which regularly featured Jamie’s younger children helping (or interrupting). While Jamie talked about working from home and home schooling with a mix of sentiment back then, here post-lockdown he remembers the children helping out with fondness, as does Buddy. This comment chimes with studies of changing food practices and competencies in lockdown, which show members of households picking up new skills and new moralities, with households redistributing tasks and expecting different members to pick them up, and expressing a desire to maintain positive new food practices post-COVID (Carolan 2022; Philippe et al. 2022).

The “getting ahead” prep and cooking at the heart of *Together* can in itself be seen as a post-COVID competency and morality, as it speaks about what’s valuable in terms of spending time with guests, giving tips on how to maximize that time. In this episode, once the prep has been performed,

focus shifts to the guests arriving and the feast itself, with Jamie popping to the kitchen to quickly finish the dishes and plate up. Jamie's parents arrive, and his dad asks him, "Where've you been?" Everyone hugs, sits down to eat, food is passed around, there's lots of chatter. The episode ends with a toast from Jamie: "I've been dreaming of this moment for a long, long time," and his dad's comment about "making memories" (Oliver 2021a: ep. 1). So here we see the renewed intimacy of close family and friends relishing being together after the isolation of lockdown, and the celebration of missed milestones all brought together in a scene of relaxed conviviality, dining outside, up close, sharing food and sharing space together. The "new normal" here echoes the old, pre-COVID normal, the return to normative commensality (Fourat et al. 2021), but the meaning attached to the scene is heightened, banking memories for an uncertain future. Hugging becomes a motif across the series: in the Christmas party episode (see below), Jamie's mentor and friend Gennaro Contaldo says to him, "At last I can hug you," and later, giving a toast, "It's such a joy to be all together again. Come on, you know, we've been nearly one and a half years, two years, we couldn't even shake hands, and now we can hug each other. It's Christmas!" (Oliver 2021a: ep. 7). (This celebratory tone masks the ongoing infection rates at the time of broadcast.) Across the episodes that center on friends and family, the basic message is about enjoying being able to be back together, sharing food, with Jamie enjoying being able to host and cook for his guests, especially as his "get ahead" approach means he's liberated from the kitchen once the guests arrive, putting the food work backstage and the hosting work frontstage.

### "These Guys Were in the Thick of It:" Jamie's Special Guests

Three of the episodes shift the focus from family and friends to stage meals where invited guests representing key workers come to Jamie's home. Key workers were widely celebrated in news and popular discourse during lockdown, in new traditions such as the UK's weekly doorstep "clap for carers" (Wood and Skeggs 2020). The first of these episodes, in the second week of the series, centers on volunteers—people running food banks, working in vaccination centers, or running neighborhood support groups:

I'm gonna do a thank you dinner tomorrow, and I think it's a beautiful thing, cos we've all been grateful for things in the last year—friends, family, people local to us that have done dear things, and to cook for them is a beautiful way to say thank you. The people that I've invited, they're frontline workers but they're not paid—they're volunteers. So these are people that have stepped up in their

community and set up food banks for people that're vulnerable, these are people that've been sewing PPE like the clappers, vaccinating all of us. (Oliver 2021a: ep. 2)

The "dear things" that the volunteers have done were widespread during the pandemic, and the reliance on volunteering and mutual aid has been widely celebrated as essential to keeping things going. Jamie sings their praises and positions them as inspirational:

they are really the ultimate human beings, right, cos they're not getting paid for doing the job, they're using their common sense to step up in their community, look at what's needed, and help. Like, that is what it's all about. So, when I meet those people, they always inspire me, they always wanna make me try a bit harder and do more myself, and it kinda gives me hope that [laughs] human beings are amazing people. (Oliver 2021a: ep. 2)

While he stops short of commenting on the fact that we *had* to rely on volunteers given the underfunding of public services, his "heroing" of the volunteers (a favorite Jamie verb) and their "common sense" has a faintly political ring to it, at least in terms of reminding us of their vital contribution and perhaps encouraging us, like him, to repay that in some way. The guests arrive, shaking hands with Jamie, all excited to be in his home, being served his food by Jamie himself. He raises a glass to them in a toast: "I think what's extra special about you lovely people around the table is, volunteerism just feels like the most wonderful gesture of citizenship and community spirit and all of that stuff" (Oliver 2021a: ep. 2).

Episode five features National Health Service (NHS) workers invited for a "curry feast": "Whether in GP surgeries, busy wards, A&E, or delivering babies, these guys were in the thick of it when the pandemic hit," Jamie says, adding, "I look forward to looking after you guys a little bit after you've been looking after everyone else" (Oliver 2021a: ep. 5). The episode follows the same structure, with Jamie "getting ahead" so he can spend time with his guests. Like the volunteers above and the teachers below, they are a multi-ethnic mix of people, clearly relishing being there, talking excitedly about the food. This is followed in episode six by a meal for a group of teachers: "If you think about it, they were there from the very beginning, like, keeping our kids at school, so, y'know, your frontline workers could go to work, keep the country going, and of course they've helped us get back to work and get back to some kind of normality" (Oliver 2021a: ep. 6). After Jamie gets ahead with preparing the meal, the guests arrive and chat across the table. Jamie says:

Isn't it nice, this, being together? I think it feels different, this year, doesn't it? Like, we're so much more grateful now, and, y'know, we've all had a bit of a slap and had some of the things we took for granted maybe taken away, it's like, hopefully people around the country will be doing a bit more of this. (Oliver 2021a: ep. 6)

The pandemic is here euphemized as “a bit of a slap,” and again there’s hesitancy in the “maybe” and “hopefully,” showing that the series was filmed when the post-COVID future remained quite uncertain.

Across these three episodes, Jamie foregrounds the role of particular key workers in public service roles, whether paid or unpaid, and the mood is one of gratitude. There’s admiration for what they did, but no anger or sadness about the way that frontline workers were kept on the front line, often in unsafe conditions. Like the doorstep “clap for carers” that took place in Britain, such “heroing” could be critiqued for sidestepping problems with working conditions that exposed key workers to risk. It’s also worth noting that Jamie uses a narrow definition of key workers here, omitting another important group who kept working through COVID: food workers. Supermarket staff, delivery drivers, food producers, and many others in the food sector had to continue to work, while restaurant staff moved between working and being furloughed, depending on lockdown rules (see Jacques 2020; Lippert et al. 2021). But in *Together* we are presented with Jamie the domestic cook, not the restaurateur. While he could have “heroed” food workers in *Together*, the only time he comes close is in the volunteers episode, with some of his guests having helped out in food banks. Nevertheless, in these episodes Jamie emphasizes the collective debt to key workers for which his meals offer a gesture of reciprocity.

### “We’re Going Forward Now:” The New Normal?

Following the series, two Christmas episodes were broadcast back to back on December 13, 2021, the first featuring an informal drinks and nibbles party for twenty-plus friends and family, the second a family-centered Christmas dinner. The repeated refrain here is expressed by, among others, Gennaro: “It’s such a joy to be all together again” (despite the presence of the Omicron variant of COVID at this time), and the idea of making and banking memories recurs (Oliver 2021a: ep. 7). Looking back to the previous festive period under lockdown, Jamie remembers: “Last year Christmas, of course, Christmas was pretty much written off, right? We couldn’t have the parties and the gatherings that we normally have,” reminding those assembled (and us at home) of those people, like his mum and dad and Jools’s mum, who had spent last Christmas on their own (Oliver 2021a: ep. 7). This theme is echoed in the Christmas dinner episode: “Most of us couldn’t get together with the people we loved last Christmas, and that’s what makes this Christmas even more special than ever.

Definitely, we won’t take anything for granted anymore” (Oliver 2021a: ep. 8).

As the dinner gets underway, Jamie’s dad makes a toast: “Twelve months ago, Sally [his wife] and I were at home, and what we missed, we missed our family. It’s lovely to be back together. Here’s to our National Health” (Oliver 2021a: ep. 8), and there’s a nice double meaning to that last phrase, capturing both the National Health Service and the idea of the nation’s health, our collective well-being. As Jamie’s mother-in-law says, in reference to lockdown, “Never mind, that’s gone. Finished. We’re going forward now” (Oliver 2021a: ep. 8). So *Together* ends on an optimistic note, about going forward with the pandemic “finished.” With hindsight, this celebration might have been tempered, given that COVID was in fact far from finished; the tone of the series reflects the immediate post-COVID context, with the impacts of the pandemic very fresh in everyone’s minds (and still ongoing). Writing from today, the “new normal” feels in some ways far different from how it feels in *Together*, yet researchers agree that “the long-term consequences of the pandemic in relation to commensality [are] a topic that deserves attention” (Jönsson et al. 2021: 14).

Declaring the pandemic “finished,” however, gestures to an absent presence in the series, one that you can see if you look closely (and with the benefit of hindsight). As revealed in a UK newspaper interview in August 2022, widely picked up across the news media, Jamie’s wife Jools has been suffering from “long COVID” since contracting the virus in 2020:

Jools has been poorly of late, [Jamie] reveals. “She’s had bad Covid and long Covid, so she’s been really affected by it, sadly. She’s OK, but still not what she wants to be.” Jamie doesn’t usually talk about his wife publicly, so this is an exception. “It’s been two years. She finds it deeply scary.” So does he, by the sound of it. “We’re all over Harley Street like a rash, but no one really knows anything. The data on long Covid is still piling in. She’s been an absolute superstar.” (Moreton 2022)

Jamie also revealed that COVID had led him to a “massive rethink on life,” reprioritizing family, taking a step back from active campaigning. Meanwhile, in 2022 Jools appeared on the *Spinning Plates* podcast. Jools confessed to the host that she had hated filming *Keep Cooking and Carry On*: “It was stressful because [Jamie] was really enthusiastic, and he was treating it like I was a producer and I was a camerawoman and I knew everything. There were so many times I’d be crying and saying, ‘I don’t want to do this. And he’d just go, ‘get on, do it now’. This was just not natural to me.” She later tempers this by saying: “It became quite fun, the kids got involved. We got used to it, so I quite enjoyed it actually. It was all right in the end” (in Ellis Bextor 2022). Rewatching both *Keep Cooking*

and *Carry on* and *Jamie Oliver: Together* in light of these revelations gives both shows a different feel, another behind-the-scenes view that is even more “real” than what we see on screen, a particular take on how gendered food practices (and food TV practices) were reshaped by COVID (Hollows 2022). Jools’s comments here also point to a divide in the Oliver household between the visible, public forms of domestic care work undertaken by Jamie for his family and for viewers on-screen, versus the invisible, private forms of care work undertaken by Jools behind the scenes, off-screen. Here we witness the hidden costs of “the work of working from home” during the pandemic, even for a celebrity chef and his family (Lewis et al. 2024).

*Together*’s mode of address, on both screen and page, offers viewers and readers reassurance, a sense of the “new normal” being not that far from the “old normal,” but with some rethought priorities. The home moves from being a site of confinement to a space of freedom, a site to entertain and make memories, and guests are celebrated, be they close family or “strangers.” In this sense, it also tells us to keep cooking and carry on, and that by doing so through COVID and lockdown, we have learned what’s really important, as Jamie reflects in the interview above. Being together will never be taken for granted again, so while the pandemic is “finished” (in some respects, at least), there is both continuity and disruption in the question of how to eat together after COVID.

### *Together and Together*

In this final section, I want to bring my discussion of Jamie’s *Together* into dialogue with the Hubb Community Kitchen’s (HCK) *Together* from my previous essay (Bell 2024), to explore the forms, meanings, and values of togetherness they center. Both books are very particularly located in the context of states of emergency—the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire and the COVID-19 pandemic—and both are associated with a well-known celebrity, though the role of that celebrity is markedly different: Jamie’s *Together* is very much his project, despite the involvement of his extensive “team,” whereas Meghan Markle’s role in the HCK’s *Together* is less central. She used the Royal Foundation to support the production of the cookbook and her royal standing to give it considerable media coverage, and she is a presence throughout the book, but the recipes in this *Together* are contributed by named individual members of the HCK (Meghan did not contribute a recipe). This aligns the HCK’s *Together* with other community cookbooks, while also grounding it in the aftermath of the

Grenfell fire, and in Grenfell Tower as a particular place to live before the fire, as well as offering food as a way to celebrate the Grenfell community and provide some “normality” after the devastation of June 2017.

Jamie’s *Together*, by contrast, sits in the genre of the celebrity chef cookbook, very much in line with the rest of his output. The focus of this *Together* is domestic food work, but here a singular cook-writer (with a distinctive style and a celebrity profile) shares recipes with his audience in a book and series that tries to transcend its immediate post-pandemic context (which is much more evident in the accompanying TV series). Beyond its dedication to NHS and key workers, Jamie’s book is coy about COVID, perhaps echoing Jools’s mum’s statement about the pandemic being “finished.” The TV series has more to say about COVID, lockdown, and immediate post-lockdown life, not only in the episodes that feature key workers coming to Jamie’s home to share his food but also in the comments made by guests, whether “strangers,” friends, or family, about the renewed pleasures of eating together post-lockdown. There is a sense of continuity between *Together* the TV series and his lockdown show, *Keep Cooking and Carry On*, with the later series speaking back to the earlier one. While *Together* the book is relatively context-free, its subtext locates it in emerging post-COVID times, in “what we’ve been through, collectively” and our collective desire to “reconnect with those you’ve missed seeing, in the intimacy of your own home” (Oliver 2021d: 4).

A central theme in both books (and Jamie’s series) is exactly this value of home as a site for coming together through food. In the case of the HCK, there is the immediate context of emergency food provisioning to feed survivors of the fire, and then the longer-term aim of reconnecting people with a taste of home, meaning both the Grenfell Tower community and the homelands that many of the residents came from. The HCK provides this for those who use it, and the cookbook extends that hospitality to its reader-cooks. For Jamie, there is a recalibration of the meaning of home in the end of lockdown, from a place of confinement to a place of openness and freedom, a place to once again welcome guests. Here, he leads by example, encouraging his readers and viewers to make meals (and memories) as a way to reclaim the home from COVID and lockdown. No such reclamation is possible for Grenfell residents displaced by the fire, but food here is used as a way to feel something more homey, to “provide a sense of home—wherever you may be in the world” (HCK 2018: back cover).

Another shared theme is domestic feeding work (DeVault 1994). In *Together: Our Community Cookbook*, the narratives that accompany the recipes speak of the work of feeding

families, and the book encourages reader-cooks to use the recipes to feed their own families, in an act of sharing not only recipes but an understanding of the value of such work. The book emphasizes feeding as women's work, in that all the contributing HCK cook-writers are women, and in common with other community cookbooks it celebrates women's role at the heart of family and community. The HCK itself is also represented as a site of feeding work, through the photographs of writer-cooks and the narratives about feeding the community. Jamie meanwhile foregrounds himself as domestic cook, endeavoring to be relatable as an ordinary home cook rather than a celebrity chef and restaurateur. His home might not be like the homes of most of his readers and viewers, but his familiar mode of address and his emphasis on the doability of his recipes gives a sense that our homes are not so different, or that we can live a little more like Jamie if we cook with him. This is a recognizable part of his oeuvre, but in *Together* Jamie adds a new twist in his emphasis on preparing as much of the meal beforehand as possible, freeing up time to be with guests when they arrive. Here, feeding work is acknowledged as time-consuming, and the aim is to time-shift the prep work and to move it backstage, so that dishes appear almost magically for guests in Jamie's convivial company. (The hosting and conviviality-making is not presented as itself a form of work, but as a pleasure—something not all home hosts might agree on, especially in terms of the gendered division of different aspects of feeding and care work.) Domestic space here becomes the site of entertaining, for widening one's commensal circle.

This reclaiming of domestic space and domestic work is depicted by Jamie as a return to normal, and "normality" is another recurring motif in both *Togethers*. This takes us back to the context of states of emergency as times when normal ways of life are suspended or destroyed, freedoms withheld, and new rules introduced. With COVID, this became a global state of emergency, with new strictures about how to live brought in rapidly. Now, in a post-pandemic world, there is both a desire to get back to the "old normal" and the realization that we in fact are experiencing a "new normal," and this shapes the everyday business of cooking and eating (Carolan 2022). In the case of the Grenfell fire, the same applies for those directly affected, and the HCK's *Together* repeatedly speaks of the importance of a sense of normality for survivors—normality that can be achieved through food. There is a broader impact of the fire, however, manifest in the report of the public inquiry—meaning that life "after" Grenfell is not just a local question: without wanting to disembel the impact of the fire from its local community and immediate locale, the scale of the devastation was felt way beyond.

Normality is encapsulated in two idioms in both books. One is about home—home as the place to be and feel normal. As the introduction to *Together: Our Community Cookbook* says: "A love of cooking and sharing food brought us together after the Grenfell fire. Swapping family recipes and moments of laughter gave us a sense of normality and home" (HCK 2018: 10). Of course, this romanticizes home (and kitchen) as a restorative place, a safe space away from an uncertain world, but given the strength of such a discourse it is not surprising to see it tapped into here. In the HCK's *Together*, it is loss of home and the need to recover a sense of home that is articulated in the recipes in relation to both the fire and histories of migration. The introduction imagines those affected by the fire settling into their new lives and homes, and suggests that cooking will help those lives and homes feel normal. In Jamie's *Together*, home has recently been an abnormal place—during lockdown—and so needs to be made normal again, where normal opens that home back up, welcoming others and returning pleasure to the task of hosting (and guesting). The enforced commensal unit of lockdown is replaced by the expanded commensal circle of life after COVID (Philippe et al. 2022).


The second idiom about normality concerns looking forward or going forward. Jamie's mother-in-law speaks clearly of this in the Christmas dinner episode, and Meghan's foreword talks of recipes that "allow us to [. . .] look forward" (HCK 2018: 6). Both put emphasis on what's behind us and what's in front of us: a bad, abnormal past and a good, normal future in which hope and normality have been restored through shared dishes. This is countered, however, by the role of memory in both *Togethers*. A number of the cook-writers from the HCK speak fondly about Grenfell as a community, remembering their lives there. There is a sense of loss of that community, with those being rehoused after the fire often finding themselves in new neighborhoods, displaced from their former neighbors. There is a clear desire to keep those memories alive, and again this is achieved in part through food. It is also achieved in the space of the HCK, which brings former Grenfell residents back together, whether as cooks or as guests. So, there's a balance struck here between forward momentum and the importance of the past, of remembering. Memory plays an interesting if rather different role in Jamie's *Together*, in the very idea of making "memorable meals." Prospective memories here are seen as something we need to make and to bank, as a bulwark against future states of emergency: a resource for times ahead when we might need memories to see us through (Sutton 2001). The recent past is remembered, whether that's the role of key workers or the difficulties of lockdown, but what is more



important is the making and banking of good memories in the present — memories of sharing memorable meals. As noted earlier, there's a back note about mortality and a sense of the provisional present in this focus on making memories, of the importance of remembering that which might soon be lost, or taken away again.

Care is a further central shared theme, with the idea of showing people you care through food a repeated notion. Care is scaled, too: it moves from the most immediate, intimate context to a much broader scale, in part due to the imagined commensality that connects cook-writers with reader-cooks (or viewer-cooks for Jamie's TV series). Caring takes place in the immediate domestic context, but an ethic of care ripples outward. Recipes are offered for us to cook at home, to share with those around us, to show them that we care; but in cooking these recipes we also turn that care back to the cook-writer who gave it to us, to show that we share that ethic of care, that we are all connected by the recipe. Of course, reciprocal care is literalized in the HCK's *Together*, since (as the book's cover tells us), "All profits from sales will help support communities through cooking and sharing food" (HCK 2018: front cover). This is a charitable cookbook, and buying it is a charitable act. That charity, however, extends to the offering up of recipes from cook-writers, and the act of reader-cooks making them as expressions of connection and care. For Jamie, care is also scaled, and this is exemplified by the three groups he invokes: his immediate commensal unit of family and friends; the wider commensal circle of guests he shares food with; and the imagined commensals who read his books, watch his series, cook with him, and enact care through food. In both cases, commensality extends through food media beyond physical copresence (Bascuñan-Wiley et al. 2022).

Of course, buried within these themes of care, love, normality, and so on is an absent presence, and that is trauma. While Jamie's mother-in-law might feel able to insist that COVID is "finished," and the HCK emphasizes the future and the value of sharing food, both books are shadowed by the significant trauma that birthed them. As Solorzano et al. (2020: 44) write: "Our foodscapes suggest that in uncertain times, we use food to express conviviality. We are hungry to care for one another." The states of emergency around Grenfell and COVID and the very real losses and trauma experienced by those affected hover somewhat in the background of these books, too painful to be made more explicit. This shows us the limits of what a cookbook can do as a form of cultural production, perhaps — we reader-cooks want the recipes and to participate in both the direct commensality of those we cook and eat with and the imagined commensality that we feel in engaging with the stories behind the recipes, but

without too many reminders of the horrors implicit in these calls to come together. 

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