

Smoke alarm

Charlotte Reather's pants are on fire, but she vows to kick her puffing habit for good this time

MAKING New Year's resolutions and promptly breaking them is an annual cliché. This year I have vowed to give up the cancer sticks for good. After a commitment of more than 16 years I feel it is time to close my smoky chapter and wave goodbye to the halitosis and sore throats that have been my constant companions.

My longest stint of freedom from the 'bines was (save my pre-teen years) when I underwent a tonsillectomy at the age of 25. I managed five days without smoking. I can boast other fresh-air breaks including one after severe food-poisoning, the other after an attack of acute bronchitis brought on by sucking on too many roll-ups, pipes and hubbly-bubblys as a student. It's a poor record but on the flip side it displays tenacious sticking power. I have never been a quitter – until now.

As I type this column I have been smoke free for the past nine minutes. I think that's the point when your blood pressure returns to normal. Personally, I have always liked a puff on a Camel. High Tower, my Royal Marine "pen-friend", says, "It's a well-known fact nine out of 10 men who try Camels prefer women." He enjoys Marlboro Lights, especially after six months of smoking Afghan cigarettes. I sent out several packets of Philip Morris' finest and a large receptacle of 46% proof Highland "mouthwash" to help him through his final months on tour. Helpfully, whisky and original Listerine are the same colour.

Since High Tower's return to Blighty I have supported him by being his smoking partner. I see it as my patriotic duty. Some of the other things he's encouraged me to do with him I don't think are particularly patriotic but after six months of practising international diplomacy he's good at arguing the toss. Several months of smoking like a chimney has left me weakened, so, at the ripe old age of 28, I am finally done with fags.

Besides, I don't want to become one of those sallow old lady smokers. My mother once had a secretary who was in her late forties and puffed on 60 a day. She looked 75, had the skin of a dyed kipper and ravines on her face that

would have tempted many a pot-holer. Her husband once joked, "Sue doesn't have periods anymore she has a monthly soot fall." This quip remained seared on my brain.

I became, aged 13, vehemently anti-smoking and regularly sabotaged my father's king-size chokers by sticking pins in them so the smoke wisped out of the sides. Sadly, a few years later I fell into the pit of temptation and took a drag on my first fag. I experienced a "head-spin" and new found "street cred" that brought me friends for the first time. It was worth the gamble of cancer and emphysema to banish the crippling loneliness I had endured for most of my childhood. Ironically, I'm now faced with a different dilemma – what if people don't like me as a non-smoker? If smoking's a risk, not smoking might be an even bigger one?

Expulsion was a very real threat at school, but we wheezed in the face of authority. In

the cut of my jib. Mrs D had a soft spot for me because of our shared love of Jeremy Paxman.

She sniffed the air again. At the same time I felt a searing heat coming from... I looked

“ My knickers were on fire. I bundled Mrs D out, dropped my standard green apple catchers and extinguished the flames with shaving foam ”

sixth form, five of us would crowd into a tiny loo at our boarding house, trying to blow smoke up an air filter the size of a matchbox. We all stank and so did that part of the house.

I felt this loo situation was rather unhealthy so I took to smoking in my room. One evening my housemistress burst in. I blocked her way with the washbasin cupboard door, quickly knocked the cherry off my newly lit cigarette, stuffed it down my knickers, splashed my face with water and opened the door blithely pretending she'd just caught me preparing for bed. "It smells musty and fusty in here. Were you smoking?" she bellowed. "I've just finished a history essay, written an Italian sonnet and had choral practice – you could say I've been somewhat on fire," I replied. I was lambasted for being glib but I could see she liked

down, my knickers were ablaze. I was minutes away from a devastating forest fire. I bundled Mrs D out of the room, dropped my standard green apple catchers and extinguished the flames with shaving foam. I never put anything combustible down my knick-knicks again.

I will miss my 20-a-day habit (of cigarettes). I fondly remember the time I went beating for a season and my ability to smoke untipped Gauloise and drink pure ethanol enabled me to be part of the hard-core Gloucester beaters' gang. The thought of crossing over to be a smoke-free, Lycra-clad Liberal Democrat rambler is giving me the fear. I think it's time for one last cigarette. ■

Charlotte Reather loves picking up and stick-and-balling internationally



Gimme shelter

Charlotte Reather has played host to some rather unsavoury creatures over the years. They've all met the same end – out

THE other day I discovered a partridge hiding under my coffee table. He must have tiptoed in while the front door was open and decided to have a quick look round. Living between two shoots, friendly pheasants and inquisitive partridges are common but I've never had one come in for tea before.

Pete the partridge must have been there for a while as he'd re-sprayed my window sills and danced his mess all over my oak floor. As I went to grab him, he flew around the room and repeatedly into the window. I told him to calm down and this time, when I pounced, I grabbed his little red legs and held him upside down until he stopped flapping. I then took him outside, turned him the right way up and he flew off, buzzing like a vintage Vespa.

Pete started me thinking about all the other unusual or uninvited guests I've had in my residences over the years. Last year a lovely man called Robin came to stay with Comb Over Man (COM) and me. He was a gentle fellow with twinkly eyes and made a great impression on me. Sadly, a few weeks later he died. As we took in the news of his passing, a robin flew into the dining-room and chirruped as if to say goodbye. I cupped the bird in my hands and it gazed into my eyes, unafraid. As I let him out of the window I felt sure the little bird was Robin's soul soaring to the next life.

However, I haven't always been sentimental about "animals" I've let out of the window. This includes a Chelsea under-21 footballer from Italy, whom I accidentally brought back from London, and a diabetic Swedish chef (DSC) whom I invited to my house because I'd run out of cigarettes and he had a packet of B&H.

Unfortunately DSC didn't have any insulin so he became aggressive and started yelling at my friend Bungalow (there's nothing upstairs) about how he was cooking our midnight snack of tiger prawns "all wrong". As he hijacked the kitchen, he removed his jumper to reveal a tattoo on his arm which we all took to be his prison number. It was, in fact, an indication he had type 1 diabetes. We spent most of the night cowering in the corner convinced he was going to chop us up and turn us into soup,

until he finally called a friend (with insulin) to come and take him home.

I have also had my fair share of rodent visitors (not all male). A few years ago I had a terrible mouse problem. Every night I would set three traps. Every morning, the bait had disappeared. These weren't ordinary house mice, they were super mice. One night, something woke me. I turned the light on and there, sitting on my chest, was an ugly brown mouse. I shrieked like a Spice Girl and expressed my fear and loathing for this critter with an impromptu Broadmoor-maximum-security-style dance. I was half tempted to enrol at the Yossarian School of Pest Control, but as I reached for my Beretta I remembered that lead shot really marks the furniture. In the end I needed rat poison to despatch them; nothing else worked.

But no rodents compared to the specimens my university flat mate, Bonkers Brianne,

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used to bring back. This 22-year-old RuPaul look-alike from Wisconsin was an over-sexed, over-fed, over-refreshed animal. There'd always be a bouncer in her bed the next morning; so she knew which club she'd been to.

I was nervous about taking people home as she'd shock the bejesus out of even the most liberal-minded of people. One evening, I invited a well-known comedian and his friend back for a drink after a gig. The house was empty. It was also dry. Bonkers had drunk everything, even the crème de menthe. I sheepishly offered Del a cup of tea. As I uttered the immortal words "More tea, Vicar?" a howlingly drunk Canadian fell through the door. "Why are you drinking tea?" She slurred. "Hello boys. Wanna see my toys?" Del and his friend's eyes popped out on stalks as she



dropped her dress. I bumped into Del several years later and the first thing he asked was what had happened to my psycho flat mate. I told him that weirdly we hadn't stayed in touch.

When, finally, I had the courage to oust Brianne from my flat after six months of hell I was left with panic attacks and agoraphobia and needed several MRI scans to convince me I didn't have a brain tumour; it was just stress. The final straw had been when she and her boyfriend asked me one evening if I wanted to "join them". As I frantically bolted and barricaded the door, I affected an air of calm: "That's really kind but I've got an important essay to write." I didn't leave my room for two days until I was sure he had gone back to Canada.

After that experience, I'd rather have partridges, robins or any vermin in my house than some of the human wildlife that's out there. ■

Charlotte Reather loves picking up and stick-and-balling internationally

Rank taxis...

... but **Charlotte Reather** puts her trust in the drivers and they reaffirm her belief in the human race

I SHUDDER at some of the risky situations I've put myself in over the years, from getting into a stranger's Porsche in Hollywood because I thought he looked like Batman (and therefore was a force for good) to letting a butch Glaswegian crack my bones at Hogmanay because, even though she was dressed as a fairy, I still believed she was an accredited chiropractor. Apparently it was a miracle I wasn't paralysed. Batman turned out to be a narcotics-addled cartoonist with a penchant for black leather and a disturbing teenage girl's giggle. Luckily he was as gay as a daisy in May.

Most of my stupid moments have occurred in London. I think it's something to do with being a country bumpkin. Country folk are inherently more trusting or at least tend to give people the benefit of the doubt. I am therefore an utter liability in a city. I grin inanely at people on the tube and share jokes in queues.

One golden rule in London is to avoid minicabs. However, some of my most interesting journeys ever have been in illegal taxis. I've learnt about Eritrea, taught a Nigerian to map-read, and even helped a Somalian change a tyre at 4am. One night I was with two girlfriends from university, when we all thought it a brilliant idea to go to a house party with our middle-aged minicab driver, Mohammed.

We walked up the stairs to a flat somewhere in North London. The room was full of Moroccan and Algerian men – illegal immigrants, as we later discovered. One of the men, an elderly Moroccan with white, wispy hair and beard, skin like leather, piercing green eyes and only one tooth (cue central-eating gag), passed me the hubbly-bubbly.

Thinking it would be rude not to, I inhaled deeply. Mohammed asked if we were hungry. We were starving. He went into the kitchen. I suddenly felt intense pangs of prep-school guilt. I jumped to my feet and heard myself utter the immortal words: "Can I do anything to help?" as if I were back in Gloucestershire and not at the flat of a stranger who had driven us here in an uninsured minicab. He accepted my offer readily and we made falafel together, which was not only surreal but also educational.

Mohammed drove us home to Surrey in the small hours. My friend had left her bracelet at his flat. A few days later he drove it back, reaffirming my optimism for the human race and bolstering my commitment to push the boundaries further in the future.

My most significant transgression of personal safety in an urban environment happened a few years ago. It was 2am; I was over-refreshed, swaying outside McDonalds in Leicester Square, dressed in my polo kit. I had just come from performing stand-up as my alter ego, Henrietta Arden-Bibby. As I stuffed my face full of chips, I was slowly surrounded by six hoodies intrigued by my riding boots and hand stick. "What's that hammer ting?" asked one hoodie, who was a dead-ringer for Akon. "It's a mini polo stick," I replied. "Polo? Innit a car?" he said. "Yes, and a game on horses. You know how you're part of a gang?" He nodded. "Well

“ ‘You know how you're part of a gang?’ He nodded. ‘Well I belong to one in the country, it's called Edgeworth Polo club,’ I added ”

I belong to one in the country, it's called Edgeworth Polo Club," I added.

He smirked and our banter continued until I was warned that a sullen-looking youth leaning against the wall had a gun. Emboldened by the wine still coursing through my veins, I approached him. "I hear we've got lots in common. I shoot, too, you know. What gun do you have? Mine's a 20-bore Silver Pigeon."

"Is this chick for real?" He eyeballed me menacingly. "The only difference between you and me," I said conspiratorially, "is I eat what I shoot." They all laughed and even sullen guy let out an involuntarily snigger.

Akon pressed something into the palm of my hand. "Der's an eighth of da best skunk. You is sick [cool]." I high fived him, bumped knuckles and wheeled my suitcase off into the

night. "Marijuana. What an original house gift," I mused.

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I finally found a minicab driver who would take me to my friend's house in Putney for

£20. I looked the driver straight in the eye. "Are you a rapist or a murderer?" I asked. "No," he said, stunned. "Are you sure? Because if you are planning to attack me take a look at these polo player's forearms." I flexed.

He assured me he wouldn't be a danger so I climbed into his scratched Passat. By the time I reached my destination we had become firm friends. I promised to visit him in Eritrea. He waited to ensure I made it safely into the house.

I will not be taking any minicabs again – I'm way too sensible now – but I believe if you give people trust and positivity, you reap what you sow. Thanks to me, you don't need to place yourself in harm's way to work this out. ■

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Cooped up

Charlotte Reather finds herself getting on a plane dressed as Mr T for a hen do – this time he has no choice but to fly

I HATE hen dos. Especially now I'm not having one myself. Unfortunately, I recently had to release Comb Over Man (COM) back into the wild. One sunny day I walked him into the woods, turned tail and legged it, shouting: "You're free! Run with the animals!" But COM didn't want to run with the animals and kept coming back. In the end I resorted to subterfuge, chloroformed him and put his sleeping body on a boat to Europe.

So, while I was still pining for COM and trying to locate his cargo vessel which was now in the hands of Somalian pirates – apparently, when he came to, he swapped boats and was now in imminent danger – I had to pretend to be all jolly for a ruddy hen do. But it got worse. Cleavage, the bride from Battersea, thought it would be fun to have a long weekend in Marbella. As a bridesmaid, I had to be there. As if a weekend on the Costa del Crime weren't bad enough, we all had to dress up as members of *The A-Team* and I was Mr T.

The girly emails flew back and forth about the hilarious time we would have and all the games we could play – like Mr and Mrs or Truth or Dare. "We're 30, not 12," I protested. I'd known some of these girls for years but in that moment I realised I didn't know them at all. I only had social snapshots of them during my visits to London and while I was doing proper outdoor activities in the Cotswolds they were fussing about nails, fashion and shoes. Suddenly, I wanted to be a man (but not Mr T). I wanted to go on a stag do, not for the dwarves and strippers, but for the shooting in Scotland or hunting in Ireland or even go-karting. But no, I was stuck being a girl who was now weirdly compelled to dress up as a black man. I consoled myself that it beat going to a pottery café and painting chickens on teapots, which I was forced to endure last year.

I told a polo friend about Cleavage's hen weekend. As luck would have it, she'd worked with the real BA Baracus on a chocolate advertisement. The next day she sent me the full Mr T costume. As I took out the combat trousers, T-shirt with gold chains, several real medallions and the *pièce de résistance* – a skull cap

with a Mohican, I experienced a sinking feeling worse than running out of wine in the middle of the night. I grimly decided to try it on. Typically my mother burst in at the same time: "There's a lost dog in the field, I've been trying to catch it all morning. You've got to help me," she yelled.

There was no time to explain my outfit. The dog, a husky, still had a red lead attached to his collar. I climbed over the wire fence – I was determined to rescue this dog but where were the rest of my team when I needed them? Probably in London, damn fools. I looked at the dog and said: "Listen up sucka! You is a fool if you keep on runnin! You know what I'm sayin?" He didn't and as I moved closer he legged it again. I trailed after him. Suddenly episodes of *The Littlest Hobo* and *The A-Team* merged.

I spent three hours trying to catch the husky. As the sun beat down, I removed my

“ We all changed at the airport. I donned my Mr T kit, complete with drawn-on facial hair. Passport control didn't bat an eyelid ”

Mohican, gold chains and rounds of plastic ammo and sat down in the middle of a field, beaten. "You damn fool – you can stay lost," I yelled. "You're in trouble with a capital Mr T!" I walked back towards the house. Colin the gamekeeper was driving along the lane. I flagged him down and told him about the husky. But Colin wasn't listening, he was shaking with laughter. "Look, I know I look like a butch lezza in combats but I'm Mr T and a husky's in trouble," I said. Eventually, with help from another local, the dog was rescued and reunited with his owner. What a happy ending.

However, I still had to fly to Marbella dressed as meat-head with a neck full of gold. I gritted my teeth and went for an extra dark spray tan. If I was going to do this, I was going to do it right.

On the morning of the hen do, I took a train to the airport. A huge black woman sat down next to me with bare arms the size of Mike Tindall's thighs. In a moment of madness, I

compared my orange arm with hers. She looked me up and down indignantly. "What you doing?" she asked. "I'm going to Marbella dressed as Mr T," I replied weakly. She gave me a WTF look. I pretended to need the loo, long-jumped over her and switched carriages.

We all changed at the airport. I donned my Mr T kit, complete with drawn-on facial hair. Passport control didn't bat an eyelid. The hen do was fantastically tasteless and, I'm loath to say, great fun. And, although I may not be taking my wedding vows any time soon, I do vow one thing. I will never, ever go on a hen do again (unless guns or horses are involved), for ever and ever. Amen. ■

Charlotte Reather loves picking up in the Cotswolds and Soho



Ladies who lunge

Charlotte Reather may not have had the Gallic garlic treatment but train track tangling wasn't great, either

WHEN it comes to the art of seduction we Brits are clumsy amateurs compared to the professionals on the Continent. How anyone manages to pair up in this cold climate is a miracle. The French slickly spot their prey and hypnotise them with their eyes while making special Gallic noises. They breathe garlic on their quarry and compare the length of armpit hair before frantically making love for hours.

The Brits, on the other hand, awkwardly make conversation to the friend of their prey because eye contact is impossible and it's less scary to talk to the fat one. When he finally tries to speak to the person he fancies all speech and motor skills temporarily vanish and the Brit is reduced to a gibbering version of our London Mayor. Alcohol eventually surmounts the problem but results in a boost of confidence that leads to an inappropriate late-night lunge. At this point one must be taken home.

I have been on the receiving end of many a misjudged lunge, such as the time Beaufort Brian came at me with his tongue from 3ft away even after I had forced him to watch four episodes of *Blackadder* in an attempt to dampen his ardour. I must confess, I had led him on a bit by bouncing Maltesers off his bald head throughout dinner.

But when I turned into the lunger I got it spectacularly wrong. It was a classic rebound scenario. I was lonely, vulnerable, desperate and drunk. I had enjoyed a day's shooting in the south west and the fresh air made me frisky. All I remember of my botched lunge was chasing an ashen-faced gentleman, called Derwent, about my room at 3am. "Just a little kiss and I'll leave you alone," I bargained. He headed for the door. I tripped him up and jumped on him like a Thelwell pony. He struggled. "Aren't we having fun?" I giggled. "No," he replied. In my mind I was Diana the huntress and Derwent was my prey. "Wait! I just think we should get to know each other better," he gasped as he came up for air. "What are you, 12?" I laughed. He fled for his life.

As rebounds go this was tame. In fact, it was perfect. I had acted like a total psycho but

thanks to Derwent scaring easily I had not raised my "field number" nor gained a new, significantly embarrassing anecdote. Unlike the time my friend Bungalow (there's nothing upstairs) ended up with a dwarf girl from Toulouse with special piercings or when Baked Bean was trapped in a rampant Geordie nurse's house for 46 hours as she chased him with a bridle, attempting to tack him up and "ride him like Seabiscuit".

But nothing compares to when Henrietta pulled a skinny, bearded ferreter. "We were going at it like whip-pets," says Henrietta. "Only problem was I started to sober up halfway through and suddenly realised I was in bed with a troll who was hung like Gollum. But these things happen when you're getting divorced."

The British tradition of segregating the sexes at school also impedes our nation romantically. All I was told at school was that

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boys were dangerous, full sex was to be avoided at all costs but a "mutual feel" from time to time never harmed anyone. We had a misshapen elderly sex education mistress who, every week, would expound on the recent depravity she had sampled with her husband. She grossed us out so much that my entire class abstained until university.

But it wasn't Miss Hole (we also had a stationery monitor called Mike Hunt) who put me off boys for so long. My first kiss was one of the most traumatic events of my life. I was 13 and at a house social. After hours of standing around ignoring one another, followed by a weird group dance to *The Time Warp*, the staff finally left the room and a game of spin the bottle ensued. The bottle stopped at me and a boy who became known as Rob the Raper. I

begged for another spin but my fate was sealed. We were to go to the music room and snog. Now this was the period when boys kissed like washing machines on full spin - it

was a full-on oral assault. Rob the Raper, who had eaten a lot of Marmite sandwiches beforehand, went in for the kiss.

Our game of tonsil tennis was short-lived: matron had to be called to try and separate our entangled train tracks. After a fraught quarter of an hour my mad elderly house-mistress thought it was time to call the fire brigade. "No!" Rob and I pleaded, eye-balling each other. Dribble poured down his chin. It was the first time I had experienced pure hatred. Eventually Pam from the San was called, armed with wire-cutters. Forty-five minutes later we were free and I was on detention which is, on the whole, better than being French. ■

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Knicker twist

Charlotte Reather is caught with her mother's sizeable pants down in an attempt to give her a present with a twist

AS my Granny used to say, "When times get tough, get creative." Well, actually, she didn't – that would be far too Nineties-speak for her – but she was a wise old bird who didn't need lessons in dealing with austerity.

Like many country girls, I've had plenty of horses but never much money, let alone a silver spoon up my left nostril. I grew up in a household where every morning my father burnt the toast and told me it was Marmite. So thinking up an ingenious but inexpensive gift for my mother's 60th birthday was easy.

I would steal a pair of my mother's capacious pants and get Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen to sign them. Genius. She'd had this weird, inexplicable crush on LLB ever since he first minced on to our screens, flicked his hair to one side and smugly surveyed the scene of devastation he had exacted over some poor unsuspecting's house. Mother thought he was appalling and fascinating at the same time.

As luck would have it, I'd recently visited Laurence and left my coat behind at his Gloucestershire abode. (Yes, yes that old wheeze, but it's my mother who fancies him, not me. He's far too young and effete for my tastes. Personally, I prefer my men with strangler's hands and a heating allowance.) Anyway, I collected my jacket and presented my mother's cotton high-legs with a note and a chunky marker pen to LLB's assistant. Yes, I even provided the pen. That was more than six months ago and I still haven't heard back.

On my mother's big day, I was forced, empty-handed, to reveal what kind of surprise was in store; that the self-avowed popinjay of daytime TV was signing her pants. She was devastated, mortified and enraged. Thanks to me, she could never go to Cirencester ever again and Laurence definitely wouldn't fancy her now and couldn't I have found a smaller pair of her knickers – "I've lost a lot of weight since then? You've totally ruined my life."

I thought this somewhat of an overreaction. "Calm down," I said. "Don't get your knickers in a ... Look, they're only knickers, for goodness' sake! She replied: "I'm a 60-year-old

woman! You can't go round giving people my underwear."

I looked sheepish. Oh dear, what had I done? I'd given a pensioner's pants to some stranger off the telly, that's what. And to make matters worse he'd taken her "smalls" hostage and, despite several phone calls, it seemed that he wasn't intending to give them back.

I soothingly suggested that maybe Laurence hadn't thrown them away in disgust or exhibited them on some new show called "The Price of Fame" but had, in fact, lovingly turned them into a pair of Roman blinds.

"For a dovecot?" she asked, eyeballing me steadily. "More likely for a massive barn conversion or a stately home – there was a lot of material." She started to snarl. "OK, I'm sorry," I blurted. I really was, so I did what any caring daughter would do – I set up a group on the social networking site Facebook, entitled: "Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen, for the last time, give my mother's knickers back!" (If you see her in Waitrose, best not mention this.) As yet

as a means of getting rid of stuff he doesn't want to eat or drink. A typical starter *chez* Bungalow is smoked salmon trimmings, followed by a casserole of freezer-burnt pheasants (circa 2001) washed down with Tesco's

“It's my mother who fancies Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen, not me. I prefer my men with strangler's hands and a heating allowance”

there has been no joy in retrieving her undies but I remain hopeful.

By way of apology, I made mother some delicious whisky marmalade and copied out an obscure poem by Stevie Smith which I passed off as my own work. This is a good tip. Copying a poem or even composing your own can make a lovely gift – just make sure your verse includes a smattering of unusual words such as chordee, gynotikolobomassophile or retromingent. Most people will assume it's good without ever realising it's a veiled attack on their character.

Another great way to save money is to follow the example of Bungalow, so named because he's got nothing upstairs. However, what Bungalow lacks in brains, he makes up with cunning. He views a dinner party wholly

finest Boite du Vin which he'll endeavour to pass off as a decent claret by arranging empty bottles of Château Méaume in the kitchen.

Bungalow's craftiness is hereditary. His mother, Lady B, is renowned for turning party games into odd jobs around the family pile. If she has a problem with vermin in the barn she'll encourage her guests to bring their terriers so they can play her new game Zap the Rat. Given the family's aversion to waste, we expect to see them served at Bungalow's next dinner party, well sauced – unlike his guests.

Charlotte Reather is winner of the Gloucestershire Glamour Award 2008