

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Prue Leith

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and I am about to have a literal excitement breakdown about how excited I am for this episode. Every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Prue Leith, of Great British Baking Challenge, where I ask her: How do you get your bake off? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited to welcome our guest, I literally can't stand it. She's someone who has been all up on my TV screen for a very, very, just good few years, but I know you've been doing things before that. But without any further ado. Welcome to the show Prue Leith, of British Baking Challenge, which has, like, two different titles I know, like, America, UK, but it's one of my favorite shows. I love you so much. Your hair looks amazing. Your house is amazing. I'm obsessed with your color choice, and welcome to the podcast. How are you?

PRUE LEITH [00:00:57] Oh, well, I love that. That's a great introduction. I'm thrilled to be here. I mean, you are apparently, and of course, I didn't know all this because, you know, I'm so ignorant and so old and so out of touch. But I didn't know all about you, but I did know about Queer Eye. And so anyway, I didn't know you did this podcast. Which you've been doing for ages.

JVN [00:01:22] I have! It just had it's six-year-old birthday, and now we just launched our TV show, Getting Curious on Netflix and we're so excited. But I have been knowing about you for a minute. I am obsessed with you. And I think that your introductory sentence was perfect that you didn't know about me, because that's kind of the theme of this episode is I want to know the woman behind the host, who is Prue Leith beyond The Great British Baking Challenge! Which, what do you guys call it in the United Kingdom? Because my husband, who is British, tells me 18 times a week, but I have, I think I've done a conglomeration of both titles in my head, and now it's never it.

PRUE LEITH [00:01:59] Yeah, in England it's the Great British Bake Off, and we couldn't use that, that word "Bake Off" in America because apparently it belongs to someone else? Some company.

JVN [00:02:10] So here's the thing I don't think people have realized, at least over here, or at least in my house. Eight novels, a memoir, fourteen cookbooks, your latest cookbook, The Vegetarian Kitchen that you co-wrote with your niece, so cute, was published in 2020. You have been busy. You are a very storied person, and I obviously have learned from Bake Off that you have a very discerning palate. Your palate is extraordinary. You're very keen with the

tastes. And also sidebar, and you guys can't see this on the podcast. But this room that you're in, what is this your office at home?

PRUE LEITH [00:02:47] Yeah, no, this is my office. Yeah.

JVN [00:02:49] It is so chic. The colors are gorgeous.

PRUE LEITH [00:02:53] It's nice, isn't it? [CROSSTALK] You see the chandelier. Can you see the chandelier?

JVN [00:02:57] Yes, yes, it's gorgeous.

PRUE LEITH [00:02:58] It was a rather pompous big chandelier. But I thought it looked too pompous. So I hung lots of extra necklaces because I collect necklaces. So it's, it's behung, festooned with necklaces and teacups because I collect teacups. Antique teacups, so it's full of teacups.

JVN [00:03:18] Have you always been obsessed with teacups?

PRUE LEITH [00:03:21] I've always, I've always loved tea cups, little old fashioned ones. And we use them for coffee after dinner, if we use them at all. But mostly they end up like that, up in a chandelier.

JVN [00:03:33] Do you know, like the oldest or, like, most storied teacup in your collection? Do you have, like, some teacup that's, like, "Oh, this one's from the 15th century and was actually used in Queen Anne's cousin's something."

PRUE LEITH [00:03:46] No, I'm not that kind of collector. I just, I just like junk, junk shops, and when I see them, I buy them and I have a sort of mental thing that I won't spend more than about 10 pounds on it. You usually get what's called a trio, a cup, saucer, and a plate. And it, and I don't want to have, I don't care about the saucer or the plate so much, but I buy the teacups and some of them are about 200 years old, I suppose, and they're very beautiful. And you know, they've got, some of them have got gold inside and then they're lovely.

JVN [00:04:18] I wonder if there's, like, someone who's obsessed with tea saucers and who has, like, a bunch of the matches of your tea cups, like, and you have, like, the most matched opposing collections.

PRUE LEITH [00:04:28] We could have a swap.

JVN [00:04:30] If anyone's listening to this and you know a tea saucer person, let us know. Can you tell us, like, you're minding your own business, and you realize that you're into cooking and food when?

PRUE LEITH [00:04:43] Well, I didn't realize about food. I mean, I was always greedy. You know, as a child, I was greedy. And you know, I think you wouldn't end up a good cook if you didn't love eating food. But I didn't really fall in love with cooking until I got to Paris because I didn't cook as a child. But when I got to Paris as a student, I suddenly realized that, you know, that people took real care about cooking and that the woman I worked for because I was an au pair, she used to make the children the supper in the evening, and she took so much trouble over it and used always fresh ingredients and took trouble about where she bought all her produce. And so I started to get interested and that was the beginning. And then I went to a cookery school. And then I started my own business.

JVN [00:05:30] So you go to France, you go to Paris and you end up at, I hope I don't say this like a sil sil who doesn't speak French? But you end up at Le Cordon Bleu, which is, like, right now how we say it, right?

PRUE LEITH [00:05:42] You say Le Cordon Bleu? Well, that's good enough. And I never went to the French Cordon Bleu. I went to the English one because I couldn't afford the French one. So I came to England and, and I went to, I did the advanced course of Cordon Bleu and I slightly had to bluff my way in because I wanted to do the advanced course because I wanted to get on and cook for my living. And I felt I hadn't got a whole year to spare. And I didn't have the money for a whole year. So I, I went to see them and I said, "Can I join the advanced course?" And they said, "You can't come to do the advanced course unless you've already done our beginners and intermediate one. Or unless you worked in a restaurant." And I said, "Oh, well, I have worked in a restaurant," which was true because I'd worked in a restaurant in Paris. What I hadn't told them was that I didn't do any cooking. I was, you know, I was washing up, and moving plates around, and I didn't do any, I wasn't allowed to cook.

JVN [00:06:45] But you were around the culture, so you probably picked up a few tips and tricks.

PRUE LEITH [00:06:50] I was being economical with the truth. So I got in, and then, and I loved it, and it was a very good course. And I did that for three months, only three months, and then I started my own catering company.

JVN [00:07:04] What was the thing, like, for me when I went to hair school, the thing that made me, like, take a mannequin head, like, off the holder and, like, want to open the window

and throw it off was learning finger waves, like, learning finger waves was, like, I just hated it. And I was, like, "When am I ever going to do this? Like is it 1929? And I just didn't know. Like, why are we still having to learn finger waves?" Was there something at Le Cordon Bleu and your education that you were just like, "Oh my God, I hate this. It's so finicky." Or like, not the whole thing, but just like a particular dish that you were like, "ah!"

PRUE LEITH [00:07:35] No, no. I think that there were things that we did that I knew that I would never, ever do again. Like stuff a mushroom. I mean, who needs to stuff a mushroom? That's ridiculous. If you want to give mushrooms another taste, or you want to put garlic in them, parsley, or whatever. Why not just chuck it all in together, you know? And stuffing a mushroom was one thing and then turning a mushroom, which meant making little patterns on the top. I guess it's like finger curling. You know, you make a little pattern on the top of the mushroom with a knife, and it's quite tricky to do and they teach it to you because it's best to develop your knife skills. But since I'm never going to turn a mushroom. And there were some things we were taught to do, which I know I'd never do because I disapprove of so much. I mean, I think God made a perfectly good job of making a radish. I don't think it needs to be cut into a kind of rose, or a tomato must look like a hand grenade. You know, some people cut it all round the edge and then open it up. And what's the point? So I, I don't do any of that. I like very good, simple food that tastes great.

JVN [00:08:47] OK, so here's, here's a question that I did, it's two-fold a little bit. Because A: on Bake Off, we see you try, like, all sorts of stuff. And my husband often gets mad at me because he's British. He's now lived in Texas with me for, like, almost two years, there's culture shock a little, you know, he's never lived in the US. And there's, like, I can't handle, like, a citrus in my baked goods. I can do, like, lemon squares or, like, lemon-flavored things. But, like, if you put, like, orange in my cinnamon rolls or, like, my Chelsea buns, [RETCHING NOISES]. The orange, I can't. Like, it's orange, orange and dried cranberries. It's very common over there, honey, but over here I feel like we just don't put that in there. And then, and then, like, we're and then Mark's like, "Oh, it's not cinnamon and sugary enough?" And I'm like, "No, it's not. There's all these, like, fruit flavors that are confusing me!" I just want, like, my I so many Chelsea buns, like, ladled in hot wet sugar icing and, like, cinnamon and sugar and, like, no fruit tastes. So is there, is there, like, a taste that you just, like, really lowkey don't like, but you have to taste it or, you know, like it?

PRUE LEITH [00:09:57] You know what, I'll tell you what I really, really hate, as you know, there's a sort of fashion for torching meringue. You know, you take a blowtorch to meringue and-, when it's still raw. And a lot of chefs do that. And I absolutely hate it. I hate raw meringue. I don't mind it if they've just given it 20 minutes in the oven so that the egg white is

a little bit cooked, and then they can torch it if they want to make it look stripy or pretty or something. But raw meringue is just disgusting. I mean, it's slimy and it's too sweet, and it's horrible, horrible.

JVN [00:10:39] I don't think I've ever had raw meringue. I've had major, like, pavlovas and I've had major, like, Eton mess, but I don't think I've ever had, like, torched meringue that was raw in there.

PRUE LEITH [00:10:48] Exactly. Well, at the moment, there's a sort of fashion for it, and I think it's just lazy because if you just give it like a pavlova, you only need to put pavlova in the oven for twenty five minutes and it'll be a little bit crusty on the outside and it'll be nice and gooey in the middle. But apart from that, there's almost nothing that I don't like to eat. I mean, you know, I love orange and cranberry and, and I like cinnamon buns and I like everything.

JVN [00:11:15] I like orange and cranberry, for the record, outside of a cinnamon bun. Like, I like it, I just don't want it, like, in my baked goods. What about, like, olives, pickles, mushrooms? Those are my three hated trio. That's, like, my, oh, and cilantro. It's, like, the pewter metal. Like, or you guys call it coriander. Yeah, this is, like, my fourth most hated thing. But you love all of those tastes.

PRUE LEITH [00:11:38] All of those things. All of them!

JVN [00:11:41] Ah! Did you ever, did you not like something when you were younger, but then like it now?

PRUE LEITH [00:11:47] I didn't, you know, I used to think I hated oysters because they looked so disgusting and they looked like something really horrible. And so I didn't eat them. And then one day when I was about 17, I was taken out to dinner by this really handsome guy that I fancied and I thought, "Oh, this is the moment," you see. And he, and he said, "Shall we have some oysters?" And I thought, "OK." And so I said, and I didn't like to say it, I couldn't eat an oyster, so I said, "Oh, wonderful, what a treat," I said. And this place, the oysters arrived. And after a little while, he said to me, "You don't like oysters, do you?" And I said, "Oh, what do you mean? Of course I love them. They're absolutely wonderful." And he said, "I've never seen anybody wrap up an oyster in the brown bread and swallow it whole before." And then he told me the reason he was taking me out to dinner was because he was in love with my best friend. And so that was a double blow. I ate oysters for the first time. And then I got told that I would I be a go between Mike and my best friend [to] go out with him. Anyways, so that wasn't a good evening.

But then years later, when I was on, about 10 years ago, 12 years ago, I was on a show called The Great British Menu, and it was top chefs, really top chefs, cooking against each other, and at the end of the first series, we had a wrap party and one of our most famous chefs who's a guy called Richard Corrigan, who owns a couple of really amazing restaurants. He appeared with a tray of wonderful oysters for us all to eat. And he went around giving everybody oysters. And he came to me. He's Irish. And I said and I said, "I'm sorry, Richard, I don't eat oysters." And he said, "What? Calling yourself a foodie. Open your mouth." It was so, he's very big man. And he just took this oyster and shoved it in my mouth. And he said "Chew, chew." He said, "Don't just swallow it, chew it." So I did, and I thought, "God, for 50 years, think of all the oysters I could've eaten." It was so delicious and I thought, I've missed, so I've been trying to make up for lost time.

JVN [00:14:16] I love oysters and I also love that story because I've heard that you were, like, supposed to swallow them whole. And my friends made fun of me for chewing them because I like how they taste. And, like I, I did though my, this girl that I owned a salon with who's one of my really dear friends. Her name is Monique. I love her so much. She really does hate oysters. And I was like, No, it's a texture thing. You've just never had them. And so then we went to this really good oyster bar, like, under the premise that she was going to try them and I, like, dressed it up for her. I put, like, the horseradish with, like, the vinegar stuff, and I was like, "Oh, you're going to love it." She literally had to put her head under the bar and was dry heaving so hard like her little feet were like. And I was like, "Oh, do not get sick in public!" And I think I was, like, and she, she kept it down, but by the skin of our teeth, like, I mean, she almost she really does hate them. So, Monique, if you're listening to this, I'm sorry that you didn't have Prue's experience. I'm obsessed with oysters, though!

PRUE LEITH [00:15:12] Well, you were trying to give her one of the great pleasures of life. So, you know, don't beat yourself up.

JVN [00:15:16] Do you like them naked? Or do you, like, like, what's your favorite oyster preparation?

PRUE LEITH [00:15:20] I just like them as they come. No salt, no vinegar, no lemon. No onion, no nothing. Just as they are.

JVN [00:15:27] We do a little horseradish here with, like, this, like, vinegar with, like, all that stuff in there, I think which I do love. Have you ever had, like, the baked ones with, like, Parmesan and, like, like, stuff on there?

PRUE LEITH [00:58:39] I didn't like them so much. I do like them and I do like the pickling things, and I occasionally do have chopped shallots and red wine vinegar or something on top. But I really prefer them just whole, and when my husband and I got married, we went, we were getting married, just the two of us, and we had two witnesses in Scotland and we went into this oyster bar before we went into the registry office and the waiter said to me he knew it was our wedding, and he said, "What are you going to have for your first course?" And I said, "Oysters." And he said, And for the main course? I said, "Oysters." So I had oysters, followed by oysters, followed by treacle tart and custard. You don't even know what treacle tart is. But-

JVN [00:16:25] Yes I do! My husband is British. He's obsessed with treacle. We talk about all the time.

PRUE LEITH [00:16:30] Okay, treacle tart and custard.

JVN [00:16:32] And also I watch Bake Off. So I've also seen, like my fair share of, like, treacle, like, treacle things being made, I feel. I also got married with just two witnesses and my husband. It was in Texas, not Scotland, but I love that. Gardening! I also hear that you're obsessed with gardening.

PRUE LEITH [00:16:46] I love it. Absolutely love it.

JVN [00:16:48] Have you always loved it?

PRUE LEITH [00:16:50] No, not when my children were little. I don't think anybody gets into gardening very much and usually until their children have gone off to school. Because while they're kicking balls into the flower beds and you need the space for the climbing frame or the sandpit or whatever it is. But once the children get, get a bit older, then, then I started getting interested because I was about 40. When I, like, I started gardening and I didn't know anything before I lived in the country. I didn't couldn't tell an oak tree from an ash tree. And now I really love it. And we just made a little film, my husband and I, for Channel Four, which is, you know, the same channel that shows Bake Off. We made a program called "Prue's Great Garden Plot." And it's all, it's all about turning a field, because we just moved house, and so turning a field into a garden.

JVN [00:17:55] When does it come out?

PRUE LEITH [00:17:57] It came out last autumn.

JVN [00:17:59] Is it a movie or is it a series?

PRUE LEITH [00:18:01] It's a, it's a series. It's a full, four series.

JVN [00:18:04] Oh my god, if it's not on BritBox, I'm literally going to have to get, like, a VPN to fool it. We have to watch it. We watch Gardeners' World a lot, like, that's, like, that's like our night. Do you watch Gardeners' World?

PRUE LEITH [00:18:15] Occasionally, yeah.

JVN [00:18:16] Have you ever met that Monty Don?

PRUE LEITH [00:18:17] Yeah, I have met him. He's really nice. Just like he seems.

JVN [00:18:20] He seems so sweet, right?

PRUE LEITH [00:18:26] He's a really nice man. [CROSSTALK] A really nice chap.

JVN [00:18:28] I can't wait to watch your gardening show, though. And is that still where you guys live? Did you? I don't want a spoiler alert, but that's it. Well, I guess I'm going to need a spoiler alert kind of. Is that where you garden now?

PRUE LEITH [00:18:37] That's the garden that I'm most interested in now. I had a big house just up the road and it was really ridiculously big, you know, it had 10 bedrooms or nine bedrooms and a couple of cottages attached, and a barn, and for two of us, it was ridiculous. And my husband also had his house still, so we finally decided we'd pool everything and we'd come and we'd build a new house. So I had a farm and I knocked down the farmhouse, which was a little tumbling down cottage and we built a modern house. And so, and, and a completely new garden, which is this house's garden was, there wasn't a garden. It was just a farmer's concrete, you know, sheds and old containers and busted machinery and rubbish and a little house in the middle.

JVN [00:19:36] So will this be your, like, will this be your second spring and summer in that garden? [CROSSTALK] Or will it be the second year? Oh my God, how exciting! This is going to be our third in our house? I don't know. I'm going to already from our first 20 minutes of conversation, I can tell you're going to be, like, this is not going to make me seem any smarter to you, but I'm going to say it anyway. I didn't know that vegetables and fruits, like, had flowers. So that's why I never, like, was into gardening because I was like, "There's no flowers. I don't really, you know, like, with fruits and vegetables." Then I married my husband. He's obsessed with gardening. Like I said, he's British for the 50 millionth time. So he's into gardens, and we garden a lot.

PRUE LEITH [00:20:18] That's great, I mean, the whole point about gardening is it's so satisfying. And it's just, I mean, I like it. The thing about cooking, I love cooking, but you know, it's over. You know you. You do it in the morning, you've eaten it by lunchtime it's gone. I mean, gardening, you plant a tree and you watch it grow for years and years. My only problem is that I haven't got years and years left, so the temptation to-, we're just planting masses of trees on the farm and new and going all organic, and we're doing all the right things. And it's, it's so tempting to go buy trees that are half grown. And, you know, it's really dangerous because they don't like being moved and you're much better off to buy little whips. So I'll never see them grow, but at least they'll be there.

JVN [00:21:08] Aww! So what's, like, your favorite, what's your favorite thing to garden? What's your favorite thing to grow, like, food-wise?

PRUE LEITH [00:21:16] Well, it changes depending on what I'm doing, but at the moment, we used to have in my old house a really big vegetable garden, which when I first opened my restaurant and I had restaurants and quite a few restaurants and a lot of catering and a big catering company and a big cookery school. And so I used to grow stuff for them. A lot of flowers and a lot of herbs. At first I grew veg as well. But the chefs used to complain that the carrots had carrot fly and that the, the asparagus was too erratic. You know, one minute there would be some asparagus, which were tiny and some which were huge. And it wasn't like going to the supermarket. And the chefs used to bitch about this a lot. So I decided I'd stick to mostly herbs and flowers. But when we moved down here, I thought, "Well, I, I'll grow our own veg," but there are only two of us and then occasionally people at weekends and so on. So we grow flowers and veg in huge cattle troughs in the courtyard and they're big cattle troughs. And last year, which, which was our first year, we grew tomatoes and kale and beans and cavolo nero, you know, the nice black cabbage, and spinach and the stuff and and, of course, lots of herbs. And you know, we still have to buy some veg, because nothing comes exactly where you want to. And next year, we'll do better. But it's just so satisfying to, to just go out and pick your own stuff. And we also grow a lot of things like not just herbs, but things like the nasturtiums, which are just so peppery and they make lovely salads and...

JVN [00:23:15] My husband's obsessed with nasturtium. He made me eat one, like, three weeks ago because like, everything was about to die because it's like and everything now is fully dead because it finally froze. I think that nasturtium that I had was, like, super old or something because it was, like, so peppery. I was like, it was the first time I ever had it. It was.

PRUE LEITH [00:23:28] Now you must have just very young little round leaves and also eat the seed pods pickled.

JVN [00:23:35] Ah!

PRUE LEITH [00:23:35] Tell him to pickle the seed pods. They're like capers, but not so strong.

JVN [00:23:42] Is it warm enough where you live to, like, grow pumpkins and watermelon?

PRUE LEITH [00:23:46] Butternut squash grows quite well. Pumpkins grow, OK. I've grown, in the old house, I grew melons, but only some years they'd work. Some years, we just wouldn't have enough sun. And this, this summer's been rubbish.

JVN [00:24:02] We have squash bore vine moths here, which had the nerve to murder my pumpkins because they, like, lay their eggs in the vines. It's a whole nightmare. But if I lived in a place where there wasn't squash bore vine moths, which I'm pretty sure they don't live in England, I think they only live in, like, the eastern US, I would be growing pumpkins, like they were just-. It's, like, there's the little flower, and then they're just like... [PLUNKING NOISE, CROSSTALK] Oh my God, they're so cute, I never knew! But actually, I skipped the part in your, in the origin story of Prue that I want to go back to that you just brought up. So you're minding your own business. You get through your training in London at Le Cordon Blue, like, London location, which I'm obsessed that there's multiple. But then you become this, like, gorgeous, entrepreneurial, like, restaurateur with a catering business. And it's very major. It's, like, very successful in the United Kingdom, which it kind of reminds me of, like, I love doing hair, and I don't get to be behind the chair, like, doing as much hair as I did, and I still do hair every day. But it's not, like, 12 different people in a salon like the way I used to. Do you ever miss the restaurant and do you ever miss, like, the catering and, and that era?

PRUE LEITH [00:25:11] You know, I don't, but I think that's more to do with my character because I'm always far more interested in what's going to come tomorrow than what I did yesterday. I wrote an autobiography about 10 years ago, and then five years later, I had to update it, because by then I had met John and remarried and, and got on Bake Off. And so the publisher said, "We need some more." So I wrote a couple of extra chapters and now, they want me to come to the states and meet all you guys and, you know, generally put myself about. And so I've got to read this book that I wrote 12 years ago, and I'm really not enjoying it. Because although, you know, it's quite, I think it's, it's well-written, and it's a good book, but I'm much more interested in writing a novel or doing something that's in the future.

And I've never really regretted anything. It took me a long time to decide to sell the business. I did it. I ran those three businesses—the school, the catering company, and there was a big banqueting business, you know, big catering company, which is what made the money—the restaurant and the school were profitable but they were, they got us all the publicity and all

the kudos. But what really made the money is bums on seats, you know, big catering jobs. And so I decided to sell because my then-husband was getting old. He was, he was turning 70, and I was about to turn 50 and I wanted to write this novel. So I said to him, "You know, why don't we sell the company, and then I'll, and then I'll stay at home and write novels." And, and he said that "But you, you know, you'll miss it, so, you know, you spend most nights in the restaurant and you're in the catering business every day and you love the school," and, and you know, I used to do all the exams for the schools and so on.

And I just thought, "No, that had been 25 years. It's enough!" So I did. I just sold it all and I didn't mind at all. Not at all. But then I was into the next thing, I was writing my novels and I did that for 25-, I think every 25 years is quite a good idea to have a big upheaval in your life. So I did. And it all that business stuff for 25 years, then I did 25 years of writing, during which time I also, I must confess, started doing, I became a kind of, it was just at the moment when big business, you know, all sorts of big public companies wanted women on their boards, and it was very difficult to find women who had a business background. And so I was just in the right place at the right time. And although the first big job I got like that was to go on the board of British Rail, which was British Railways and which was actually owned by the government at the time. And, and I thought, "I knew nothing about trains, but that'll be interesting." And of course, they just wanted somebody who knew about customers. And now anyway, so I did that. And then I started to be asked to be on all sorts of boards. So that's what happened.

JVN [00:28:37] What an interesting and gorgeous collection of experiences that you've had, and I feel like it kind of makes me want to ask about, you mentioned kids and, like, you know, you got into gardening like once your kids went off to school. And I think I also read that, like, you've done some, like, collaboration with your family with, like, cookbooks and with the production company?

PRUE LEITH [00:28:58] I love it. I wrote a cookbook, *The Vegetarian Kitchen*. I love vegetarian food. I do like, I mean, I'm a great carnivore. I don't think I could ever go through my whole life without another steak. I mean, I like meat, but I do also like veg, and I think veg gets, you know, gets a bit of a bum rap. I think it's changing now because, you know, the vegans have come along. And so it's suddenly much more fashionable to be vegetarian or vegan. But for a long time, it just seemed that people weren't taking vegetarian food seriously. They thought it was some kind of hare shirt. You know, you had to do it for the good of the planet, but nobody would enjoy it, and that's nonsense. So anyhow, my, my niece is vegetarian and she's a fantastic baker. I mean, she's a better baker than I am. So we just sort of, I just thought it

would be great, you know, it's, I like collaborating with other people, so we did that book together.

And then I made a film with my daughter. My daughter is Cambodian. I adopted her, or my husband and I adopted her, when she was a toddler, she was sixteen months. Cambodia has a horrific history, you know, after the Vietnam War, they they had the most terrible genocide in Cambodia with the Khmer Rouge killing everybody. She was just a baby then, and she was flown out of Cambodia and she came to England and we managed to adopt her. And she, she wanted to explore this, you know, and go back to Cambodia and see if she could find any trace of her original family and all that. And so we made the film, also for Channel Four, which is called *Journey with My Daughter*. And it was the most lovely film because we had two weeks together, which was rare and lovely. And it made a really good little film. She and two of her friends who are all in the film business and I have set up an embryonic, start up production company, which is also called Relish. Relish is the name of my autobiography and relish sort of describes me because I did want to call it "Greed." The publisher said, "People will think it's about banking because of greed." So, so, we called it Relish. And so now the film company is called Relish, and we haven't got our first commission yet but we are full of hope, and it's very exciting. So I'm doing that with my daughter.

And then I made this film about gardening with my husband, and he is a kind of chainsaw gardener. You know, there's nothing delicate about him. You know, you can't, he's not, you can't really ask him to pick a flower or or do anything. Picking out seedlings would not be what he'd want to do, but take a chainsaw and get rid of a whole fallen tree hill or a hedge trimmer. And what he wants most in the whole world is a tractor. That's the tractor that will mow everything, you know, bigger than a ride-on mower but not as big as a, a huge farm tractor. Not one of them. And I keep thinking this is ridiculous, we don't really need it, but I know he wants it so badly. And I thought, well, if I was married to somebody who was desperate about cars, he'd be wanting to spend hundreds of thousands of pounds on cars, so he will have his tractor.

JVN [00:32:44] So did you get it?

PRUE LEITH [00:32:46] I'm getting it. It was supposed to be his Christmas present, but there's a delay on tractors like there's a delay on everything. So the tractor won't appear until March or April, which is just as well because we have nowhere to put it and it'll be so because it'll have to have at least half the shit would have to be devoted to the tractor. He's got to clear out all his junk before we can do that.

JVN [00:33:08] Well, you're a good partner for indulging and letting him have his, you know, let him have a tractor moment.

PRUE LEITH [00:33:13] Well, he does spoil me. He doesn't mind carrying my handbag. You know, he doesn't mind going shopping. He loves shopping. In fact, in fact, I sometimes suspect he's a shopaholic because he is, if you ask him to buy a loaf of bread, he'll come back with six.

JVN [00:33:33] He's, like, "I didn't know which one you want, so I got you choices."

PRUE LEITH [00:33:37] Exactly. But anyway, he does spoil me, he's very good.

JVN [00:33:44] I'm so happy that you, that you have him in and that you guys get to do so much fun stuff together. But I would just be remiss as we're approaching the end part of our interview and you are just fingering that gorgeous fucking hair to the gods. You have such amazing hair. It is one of, I honestly think, that your hair should have its own credit page on Bake Off, like, it really should.

PRUE LEITH [00:34:07] My hair? [CROSSTALK] I'll tell you who cuts it, it's John! John cuts it. We bought one of the, he was so offended when, when I said to him, he, his hair, needed a decent haircut because he had a terrible haircut. And so he went to my hairdresser. I had a posh hairdresser at that time and, and to get his hair cut. And then he was absolutely horrified that it cost £90. He said, "But I never pay more than £9 for my haircut," and I said, "Well, it looks like it." So he then bought a machine, you know, and we were, like, [CLIPPERS SOUND]. So in lockdown, we just cut each other's hair. But I think mine's a bit of a mess at the moment, so I'm going to go and get it properly cut and then he can go on doing it.

JVN [00:34:49] So your husband's been cutting your hair with clippers?

PRUE LEITH [00:34:53] For two years, he's been cutting my hair.

JVN [00:34:54] But you've done, like, seasons of Bake Off in lockdown! Didn't the hairdresser there just, like, give you a little zhuzh or something?

PRUE LEITH [00:35:01] She did, she does, the The Bake Off one, Bambi, she does occasionally.

JVN [00:35:09] Your stylist's name on Bake Off is Bambi? That's the cutest name of all time. You had to tell her she does such a good job. Your hair from the side, the back, the front. It's the shape on you. It's just, I mean, honestly, I can. I just tell you, I'm going to tell you something you didn't even ask, but I'm going to tell you right now. Here's the thing about

Bake Off I was so attached to Mary Berry and Mel and Sue. Like, so attached, like, I, when I first discovered it, I watched it like four hours a day. I watched Nancy Birtwhistle's season, like, seventy five times. Like Nancy, when I met Nancy Birtwhistle for the first time, I almost hyperventilated and had, like, I almost passed out like I like. I love Bake Off. So when the first hosting shift happened, I was like, "No, I'm not. I can't. I won't. They won't. I can't." And then I was, like, "Actually, you of all people shouldn't be too, like, uptight about hosting changes since like I am the host on the show, the had a host change." And they gave me my career. So I was, like, "You're just-, that's like." So the first episode hooked, obsessed.

And then I met you, and three minutes into it, I was like, Holy shit, these casting people are so genius. I just fell in love with you instantly. And part of it outside of understanding immediately that you have such a grasp for everything that you're talking about on this show, like it's very clear that you're an expert in food. I didn't know exactly what your background was, but it's very clear you're an expert. But what really took me and what really just, you know, because queer people specifically like, you know, I grew up, you know, assigned male at birth, identify as non-binary. So but there's something for, like, young queer people where, like, we are obsessed with a lady who knows, like, just with, like, a knowledgeable lady who has fierce style. And you're a knowledgeable lady with fierce style. Have you always been obsessed with bright and bold colors? Did you always know how to dress so cool? When did that develop? When did that develop?

PRUE LEITH [00:37:06] Well, certainly not when I was a child, because when I was a child, kids just wore what they were given, you know. And I, I would have a pile of shorts and a pile of T-shirts, and I'd take one off the top and it just didn't matter if they matched or didn't match or anything. Whereas today children are really, at the age of two, they're fussy about what they wear, and they have to have Nike trainers and all the rest of it. Anyway, so no, I think that I began to like really good color when I was in my twenties. You know, and that was the 60s. And it was when, you know, London was sort of exploding with fashion. And it was, you know, Mary Quant's and Biba shops and high boots and top pants and, and suede colored, different colored boots and all that. And so I was into all of that at that age. And then what's helped of late is that when I was on this some previous television show, I met a wonderful woman who was given to me as my stylist called Jane Galpin, and she has a company called How to Look Good or something.

And she sort of looked at me, and she was the first person who'd ever dressed me for television that got what I liked. You know, you'd often get very young stylists who are, you know, they, they look great in little baby doll dresses with a ribbon under the bosom and the frilly and fussy sleeves with little bows and all that stuff. They look great in all that, but I just

felt, like, ridiculous. And Jane just knew at once that what I like is block colors, simple things, very bright, and a bit quirky. You know, jewelry that's a bit crazy. And, and then my husband comes along, and we married five years ago. We've been together about 10 years or 11 years, and he likes, he likes nothing better than to be in a foreign market in Mexico or in South Africa or somewhere and buying jewelry that are made out of paper or tin, you know, junk, really. But beautiful and original and lovely. So he's always encouraged me. So between him and Jane, I get, I have a great time.

JVN [00:39:38] OK, so I didn't totally plan to ask this question, but it just came to me and I'm going to, since it's almost the end. I find after spending this time with you that you have really challenged a lot of societal pressures that women have faced throughout your career, whether it was becoming a successful businessperson, whether it's, you know, sitting on all these boards, you've been a massively successful entertainer, producer, writer, author. You've done a lot in your career that is just truly unique and extraordinary. And as you talk about your husband that you've been with for 10 years, married for five, my mom lost her-. So my mom and dad got divorced when I was five. She lost her second husband when, in 2012, which was just the love of her life. Like, just, she'd had a crush on him when she was little, he was, like, 11 years older than her. She fell in love with him, and just, they had such a great marriage and such a great relationship. And watching her lose him is probably, like, one of the most, just, sad things I've ever seen in my life to watch her go through such a loss. And I think that for so many women, after they experience a loss. I feel like it's, we don't see it in the press, we don't see it in entertainment, I feel like people talk a lot about second marriages for women after, if they've had a partner, if they've lost a partner.

PRUE LEITH [00:41:01] It's so, It's so, it happens a lot. I mean, I have a lot of friends who have fallen in love late in life. And I think what young people don't understand, I mean, I think they find it embarrassing, you know, old people are not meant to do any of that, you know. But the funny thing is that they will find when they get older that they feel exactly the same as they did when they were young. I mean, when I fell in love with John, it was exactly like when I fell in love with my first husband. You know, I would do all those things you do when you're in love with somebody, you know, you panic that they haven't rung you. You look at your phone all the time. You think, "Shall I text? Or will that look as if I'm being too pushy? Shall I..." Your heart starts beating too fast. And, and all of that goes on. And why wouldn't it? So, and also, the other thing I think women, I want to sometimes shake women because I get letters from women who say, "You are, I so admire you. You're so brave. Because I mean, I said, I used to wear great, wonderful colors like you when I was young. But I mean, I'm over 50 now. I can't

wear red." And I think, "Why not? That's when you need it!" You know, when you're 17, you can get away, you can look invisible and you will still be visible because-, but women seem to think it's their duty to be invisible after they're 50 or 60. And I think that's nonsense. And my other thing I'm always on about. I mean, the two, I have a necklace range, and this is one of them. This one, you can't see it. This is a crazy necklace. [CROSSTALK] And I have a specs range. I mean, if you can see there are lots of colors. [CROSSTALK]

And I have these two ranges. And it's because I think that women spend a fortune on shoes and handbags. And wear do shoes and handbags sit? Under the table. You never see them. You see somebody's high heels when they walk in. She's incredibly, they're very uncomfortable. She can't wait to get them off, and then they're under the table. And then the handbag goes under the table. Well, your glasses are right on your face, they're never under the table. And the same with your necklaces. Well, I have about 20 pairs of glasses and growing. You know, I probably got about 40 by now because I think I like the different glasses with different things. I often start the day thinking, "What'll that necklace be? What will the specs be?" Then get everything else around it.

JVN [00:43:37] That kind of reminds me of, like, Bobby's outlook on home design. He always thinks you have to start, like, a room with your most favorite thing and then, like, design around that. [CROSSTALK] And so that's kind of how you are with your glasses and your accessories. So it's, like, "Normalize more colorful accessories" is Prue's message. This my final question, and then I'll let you go, I swear to God. Usually, I end my podcast with it's like your moment to say anything that you want to say, and we can still do that, of course. But I am just struck by wanting to ask you, what is your advice for people, for anyone, who has to deal with the internal, has to deal with the messages that we're given, like from the world, but you still want to do whatever it is you want to do. How have you dealt with your internal self-doubt?

PRUE LEITH [00:44:27] Well, I think I probably lack the imagination to have self-doubt. I probably never thought I wouldn't do it. I've always been optimistic. I think I've been very lucky because I've had a sort of optimistic nature. And of course, things have sometimes gone wrong. At one point in my catering company, I decided that I wanted to do all the catering in the parks, in the public parks, you know, like, in Central Park is what used to be a good restaurant. Not now, but at least Central Park had, had a really good restaurant at one point and I thought we should have one in Hyde Park. And I failed utterly because I had misjudged the I mean, the British public were just not ready for a glass of chardonnay and a plate of smoked salmon sitting by the water, you know. They, they were, they wanted slimy burgers in a bun and, and cheap tea, so it didn't work. And, and my, but my attitude was always, "If something fails, I don't dwell on it." I just think, "Well, that didn't work, I'll try something

else." Or, I think, "That didn't work, but it should've worked. It was a good idea. So I'll have another go at it." But I'm always thinking about the future, not the past. I think if you can just switch your mind to stop thinking about the past is past, past is gone. It's history. Think of the future.

JVN [00:45:54] Can we end on a better note than that? I don't think so! What's next for you? What are you excited for? What do we must watch? What's on the horizon? Where do we need to be following you, following your work?

PRUE LEITH [00:46:06] Oh goodness, well, I'm well. What I'm really looking forward to is, I mean, we're about to do another Bake Off, which will be fun. And then in the autumn, I think, with any luck, Paul and I will come to LA and New, and New York. And that'll be fun because I haven't been to the states since before the pandemic. And for me personally, I'm hoping my little television company with my daughter will be good, if that can take off that, that'll be fantastic.

JVN [00:46:42] I'm sure it will.

PRUE LEITH [00:46:44] I hope so. I don't see why it shouldn't. And then, you know, and then I've, I've been one, one thing I'm looking forward to, but it, but it's rather private, so you won't be able to follow. It is that. I love fishing, fly fishing, and I love Scotland. My husband is a Scot. And so for my, what was supposed to be my 80th birthday, which was two years ago, we were going to go to Scotland and to fish in the Naver River [River Naver] for a week and takes, you know, 10 friends and then take a little boat and trundling around the Western Isles and in a steam boat. And so that was canceled because of COVID, and then it was canceled again because of COVID. And so I'm going to do it this September, and I'll be 82, celebrating my 80th birthday. It'll be good fun.

JVN [00:47:38] The look on my face for the last three minutes. Is that: you're 82?

PRUE LEITH [00:48:45] Yeah. I'll be 82 in a month. I'm 81 and something or other.

JVN [00:47:53] Lady, you don't look a day over forty five, what is your secret? What, what skin care are you using? You look, you are, you have more energy than me! What is, what is your secret? Do you not drink soda?

PRUE LEITH [00:48:07] No, I drink everything, mostly alcohol! Now I do know what it's interesting about skincare because I, I, I'm often asked this. I'm quite lucky that I, that I have quite good skin for my age, but I don't. I don't have any secrets. All I do is I wash my face with

soap and water, and then I put on any old cream from the hotel, you know, body lotion or whatever there is.

JVN [00:48:38] Also, I have an American pitch for you. I have an American pitch. OK, you ready? OK. Just for, just for a showstopper. [CROSSTALK] We have this thing here. I don't think you've heard of it, it's very tacky and hideous, but I think the Brits would be obsessed: a piecaken.

PRUE LEITH [00:48:55] It's a pie...cake...

JVN [00:48:57] Piecaken. It's, like, a pie pie with a cake inside of something. I have to Google it, but we stand by two seconds and then you can go. I swear.

PRUE LEITH [00:49:07] Is it pie, P-I-E, cake? Pie? Cake? In?

JVN [00:49:17] Yeah. I think it's yeah, it's like. It's, like, a pie and cake mash up, and you, like, you have to, like, they can pick, like, their own, like, flavors, and it's just like a big ass behemoth, like, triple layer American Nightmare.

PRUE LEITH [00:49:31] I mean, if I Googled it, I'd find it. Yeah.

JVN [00:49:34] Yeah, yeah, yeah, I just Googled it to find it. Yeah, because my friends made it. And it's delicious.

PRUE LEITH [00:49:38] Okay. I'll tell them.

JVN [00:49:42] Prue Leith! Thank you so much for taking your time to talk to us. I'm so obsessed with you, but I can't apologize for it, cause I love you too. It's not my fault that I have good taste.

PRUE LEITH [00:49:49] Honestly, I have so enjoyed it. It's been lovely fun, and maybe I'll see you when I get to the states.

JVN [00:49:56] Oh, please, fingers crossed! Oh my God. Thank you so much. You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Prue Leith. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend - please show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Middle Seat Digital. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.