

SOPHIE CONRAN IS A VERY MODERN LADY WITH A BURGEONING BUSINESS EMPIRE – BUT IT IS ONE BUILT ON CORE FAMILY VALUES OF COOKING AND EATING, AS LUCY DENVER DISCOVERS



Sophie's world

It's a bright but freezing cold morning, and Sophie Conran is running late. But when she finally whirls in, apologising, with cheeks glowing, hair flying and eyes sparkling, it's impossible to feel too cross.

The 40-year-old only daughter of Sir Terence Conran, sister of Tom and Ned and half-sister of Jasper and Sebastian, is a busy woman. The pottery that she's designed for Portmeirion has just won an *Elle Decoration* Style Award, she has just brought out a cookbook on the subject of her favourite pies, and she is working with property mogul John Hitchcox on a project in the Cotswolds. She also finds time to write a food column for parenting bible *Junior* magazine, and designs for her dad – in fact she's got a presentation to put to him this afternoon.

"I really like new projects," says Sophie. "The time division isn't something I really think about – I just do things as they come along and work through until they're finished. When something's urgent, something flashes in my head, saying 'do this!', usually 'right now!'." This seemingly haphazard method seems to work.

Sophie first rose to serious fame in her own right back in 2004 with the launch of her gourmet pie company Sophie Conran Pies. She had been working full-time on the fashion team for her brother Jasper, employing a nanny to help look after her children Felix, 12, and Coco, 10. Long late hours meant that she didn't get home until after her children were in bed, so she started



making pies late at night, putting them in the fridge for the nanny to feed to the children the following day. A "eureka moment" came while Sophie was having a 5am bath one morning, when she realised there must be other working parents in a similar situation who would love to feed their children good, wholesome comfort food. Sophie Conran Pies was duly launched, went on to win four medals at the 2005 food equivalent of the Oscars, the Great Taste Awards, and won a devoted following among the well-heeled shoppers of Harrods and Harvey Nichols.

But Sophie's original intention, to make her pies accessible to all working mothers, remained, and she has just relaunched the pies into Sainsbury's top 80 stores. Sadly they no longer come in a ceramic dish, but the flavours are just as enticing – look out for a beef and red wine pie and a Moroccan-style chicken pie.

"I always wanted to do the pies in the supermarkets," says Sophie. "We've developed a ceramic dish that we're probably going to give people for a reward. So the foil that the pies come in fits into this lovely ceramic dish made by Portmeirion."

Ah yes, Portmeirion. Sophie recently started a collaboration with Portmeirion, and launched her first pottery collection for the company in March. The pieces are practical white, robustly made and pleasingly non-symmetrical.

"I wanted to make something imperfect, wobbly – I wanted to get across a feeling of something that had come from the earth," explains Sophie. "I wanted each piece to have an individuality – so it was very much a natural product rather than something that was churned out and didn't have any character at all."

Sophie doesn't throw the pots herself, but she works with a potter, a "really lovely guy" called Kevin, who makes endless samples from her sketches until a satisfactory result is produced. They're currently working on a gravy boat which is on "about the 50th sample"; there's also a children's tea set in the pipeline.

Sophie's children are seamlessly incorporated into her working life. As well as inadvertently inspiring her pies, they also feature in her writing – Sophie has extolled the virtues of cooking and eating with children in *Red* magazine and *Living Etc.*

Family is constantly at the forefront of Sophie's mind. In her latest collaboration with John Hitchcox's Yoo team, she is one of three designers – the other two are Philippe Starck and Jade Jagger – working on the interiors of eco-lodges on a 1,000-acre site centred around some wildlife lakes in the Cotswolds. Sophie's design is "very much a family home".

She has included side access to a utility and shower room, for "muddy kids", and inside has replaced the big block of a staircase with a spiral staircase to open up a large play/living area. She has also reworked the orientation of the rooms so that they all take full advantage of the views of the lake. All the beds look out over the water "so you can sit up with a cup of tea in the morning and see this fabulous thing".

And her architectural leanings are not confined to commercial projects – she is constantly making alterations to the large house she owns in Bayswater. The most recent addition was an attic room, to give her children their own bedroom each, and a while ago she opened up the wall between the kitchen and sitting room to bring light flooding into the house. She admits she gets an architect to do the drawings for her, but that she has strong ideas of what it is she wants – much like with the ceramics range.

When you think about everything she has on the go, it's a wonder how she packs it all in. She may be running a few minutes late, but this is one woman who has definitely arrived.



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