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RUE Leith's gripping new autobiography is packed with stories of opening the coolest restaurant in Swinging Sixties London, kitchen disasters among superstars and royalty, plus moving accounts of adoption, love and loss.

Unfortunately for Prue, cookery guru, CBE and all-round national treasure, it's her revelation that she spent 13 years as the late Rayne Kruger's secret mistress before she became his wife that everyone wants to talk about.

everyone wants to talk about. When 21-year-old Prue met the love of her life he was already married to her mum's best friend, actress Nan Munro. "Poor Nan." Prue writes in her candid new memoir Relish: My Life On A Plate. "She had no idea what a serpent she had allowed in her nest." When I sak about the affair with

When I ask about the affair with Rayne, a South African writer and later her business partner, Prue looks distressed. "It was 40 years ago," she sighs, "but I don't think I could have written a book without putting it in. It would have been a

could have written a book without putting it in. It would have been a very shallow affair."

She isn't the only one dealing with fallout from her revelations. Her son Daniel, 37, who runs an arts charity and adopted daughter Li-Da, also 37 and a film-maker, have had to cope with the public confessions about their father, who died in 2002. "My children were unhappy about it but they've said it's your life, your story.

"I've not enjoyed the questions about the affair but it's the price I pay for putting it all in the book."

Has she forgiven herself for betraying Nan, who showed her nothing but kindness? "That's a difficult question," says Prue.

"I don't think I behaved morally or correctly but I can't pretend that I wouldn't have wanted to fall in love with Rayne because for 30 years he was the centre of my life.

'In the Sixties I was slogging my guts out'

but when my friends' husbands leave them for someone else I still feel indignant on their behalf.

I think 'bloody men'."

Born in South Africa to a well-heeled family, Prue describes a happy childhood with two beloved brothers, a glamorous actress mother and adored father.

actress mother and adored father.
She left to study in Paris at the
Sorbonne where she had a series of
startling adventures, most notably
attending an orgy thinking she had
been invited to a party.
"It was just amazing with
humping bodies all over the floor,"
she says. "I took my clothes off
because having them on attracted
so much attention. The only way
to be invisible was to be naked. It
was only hilarious in retrospect.
I was so embarrassed."
She was much more sanguine

She was much more sanguine about unexpected mealtime experiences. When the steak experiences, when the steak tartare her flatmate had been serving up for supper turned out to be horse she didn't turn a hair. "I've liked horse ever since," she says. "It's quite healthy and has a sweet flavour. We're prepared to eat a slice from the bum of a cow, why not from a horse?"

Moving to London to attend Le Cordon Bleu culinary school, her neighbours were supergroup Crosby, Stills and Nash.

"We were all young. One came in and said they were nervous they were going to get raided and where could he put his hash that wouldn't look suspicious? I kept herbs in jam jars so I just added a jam jar." Prue knew food was her

From mistress to happy marriage



LADLED WITH LOVE: Prue recalls happy days with Rayne and baby Daniel in the Seventies

future and in 1969 she opened Leith's restaurant in London's Notting Hill Gate while only 29. She caught the spirit of the age

with velvet-covered swivel chairs, turquoise carpet on the ceiling, relaxed service and fresh vegetables. It was a new kind of

vegetables. It was a new kind of restaurant, Michelin-starred and drop-dead fashionable. The area went from shabby to chic as chef Albert Roux taught Prue how not to waste food while Vanessa Redgrave, Diana Rigg, Alec Guinness and The Rolling

Stones helped beat a path to her

Stones helped beat a path to her restaurant door. Prue confesses she didn't always recognise the stars. "My staff would have to point out who these people were. "I was so dumb! I didn't recognise half of them. Many times very, very famous people have said to me, 'I used to eat in your restaurant all the time' and I've thought. "I've never heard of you."" thought, 'I've never heard of you'.'
She did recognise The Beatles.

"One night they were ordering fry-ups and George Harrison told me not to put greenery on top. He was sick of people decorating his breakfast with parsley. Lulu was delightful, she used to light up a

delightful, she used to light up a room because she was so friendly." All very glamorous but the truth is most of the decade passed in a blur of pure graft as Prue worked to build up cateers Leith's Good Food, then the restaurant. "People think of the Sixties as just swanning down the King's Road but I was slogging my guts out," she says. "I was used to sleeping in three-and-a-half-hour snatches." One them running through her

One theme running through her

memoirs is her knack for success. She rewrote the restaurant rules with Leith's, founded Leith's School of Food and Wine in 1975,

sand reinvented the British Rail sandwich in the Eighties. Her cookbooks are bestsellers, her work on boards and charity projects tireless and she was 1990 Business Woman of the Year. She

Business Woman of the Year. She even led the School Food Trust until 2010 to improve school meals after Jamie Oliver's TV campaign. Prue had been warning about food in schools for 20 years, so was she miffed when Jamie's Dinners galvanised Downing Street? "For that 1.0 mixtee but the contract of the provided by the school of the provided by the pro about 10 minutes but I soon got over it," she laughs. "He woke

over it," she laughs. "He woke people up."

The most compelling passages in her book are about people she has loved, the passion and admiration she felt for Rayne, whom she married in 1974, the instant love for Li-Da as a baby rescued for adoption from the Cambodian killing fields and most recently her "geriatric romance" with

industrialist Sir Ernest Hall.
In 2006 she fell in love with
him. "It was like being 16. Feeling
sick and wanting the phone to
ring, it's all the same." The relationship lasted three years

'I've never been a fanatical foodie

but ended when Ernest's bipolar disorder proved too much to cope with. At 72 Prue is alone again in her Cotswolds home. She misses Ernest but it is Rayne's absence

Emest but it is kayne's absence she still feels so keenly. "I miss my husband," she says. "I always know when it's seven o'clock because I used to have a drink with Rayne or if I was in a taxi I'd ring him. Friday night at seven is the worst moment of the

seven is the worst moment of the week. Til come home from London and the house is empty,"

Now a judge on the BBC's Great British Menu, Prue says she has "never been a fanatical foodie", "I don't think talking about food is half so much fur as acting it L'd half so much fun as eating it. I'd much rather have a conversation

much rather have a conversation about a novel or politics:

She's now put aside cookbooks to focus on fiction and has six novels under her beit. "I thought unless I stop writing recipes I'll never write a novel." She doesn't need to look far for inspiration. "In my novel Sisters I had the caterer cooking for Princess Alexandra getting locked out. That happened to me. I write about cross-cultural adoption and a glamorous South African actress like my mother. I am too lazy to do the research so I write about what I know."

Luckily she knows a lot. The extraordinary Prue Leith still has more stories to surprise us with.

• Great British Menu is on BBC2 on April 9. Relish: My Life On A Plate (Quercus, £16.99) is out now

Interview by SHARON WRIGHT