

# Shining star

Fat Friends actress Gaynor Faye is presenting the prizes at this month's Yorkshire Life Food and Wine Awards. Tony Greenway went to meet her  
Photographs: Justin Slee



Gaynor Faye at the Malmaison Hotel, Leeds

FOR a woman with a four-and-a-half-year-old son and an 18-month-old daughter, Gaynor Faye looks remarkably awake. In her house, the school holidays are in full swing and sleep is at a premium.

Yet when she strides into the foyer of the Malmaison Hotel in Leeds - all cascading chestnut hair, big smiles and wedge heels - Gaynor looks (in the words of that annoying advert) like she's just stepped out of a salon (whereas we, also battling kiddy-induced sleep deprivation, look like we've just stepped out of a saloon). She orders a cranberry juice with fresh lime (very healthy, lots of vitamin C) then settles back in a plush sofa for a chat, and watches politely while we slurp our coffee (very unhealthy, lots of caffeine) and rub our eyes.

We're here, ostensibly, to talk about Gaynor's role in this month's Yorkshire Life Food and Wine Awards. She'll be presenting the prizes to the winners and donating the money raised during the evening to When You Wish Upon a Star, a charity specialising in making dreams come true for children with life threatening diseases.

And so does she have any culinary credentials?

'I think I've been asked to present the Food Awards because I'm a Yorkshire girl through and through,' says Gaynor. 'And I'm a real foodie. I've been to a couple of Yorkshire Life lunches in the past - I went to one recently at Woodlands, and I was going on and on about how good the food was. And I love alcohol.' She pauses and smiles for

clarification. 'WITH the food, obviously. At Woodlands there was a wine-tasting, too, and I was probably overheard enthusing about the whole thing.'

Chez Faye, Gaynor's estate agent partner, Mark Pickering, does most of the hot-stove slaving. 'Which is fine by me,' says Gaynor, 'because, after a full day, I'm happy to let him take over - although, I do love to cook and, occasionally, I'll get in the kitchen. If I have a signature dish, I suppose it's Thai. I'm quite good at that. And it's very good for you, apparently: there's something in the chilli that's supposed to be anti-carcinogenic... so I've heard. And it's easy to do, which is another plus.'

Shame, though, that she can't get Thai or anything else for that matter, down her daughter Lily at the moment. 'It can be a nightmare feeding children,' she groans. 'Oliver's currently eating for England, but I can't get Lily to eat anything. It's a constant battle.'

Oliver and Lily are the reasons why you haven't seen 34 year-old, Leeds-born Gaynor on your TV of late. For the last 12 months, she has taken time off work to be with them. 'I love acting and I'm very career conscious,' she says. 'I want to do great work, but I also want to be a great mum. But I'm not a fool. I know I NEED to work. I'm a creative person and being a mum doesn't fulfil every need that I have... so now I'm ready to get back to it again.'

'Yet, as a parent, you can't be selfish and you have to get your priorities right. And taking time off is hard in a lot of ways because (as an actress) you can be quickly forgotten about, and someone

else is always there to fill your shoes. But, at the end of the day, work isn't as important to me as my children. And it never will be.'

Gaynor has had a charmed career, she admits. After setting up a touring theatre company with a friend (which they dubbed 'Not Quite Hollywood'), she broke into TV, appearing in everything from the Roy Clarke comedy *The Sharp End* ('Gwen Taylor was in it and I was like "Wow!"') to *The Chief* and *Peak Practice*. Stage work (from Shakespeare to John Godber) is also a big part of her CV.

Yes, she struggled occasionally in the early days, had knock-backs and periods of unemployment. But, as an actor, who hasn't? And ever since she became a hugely popular *Coronation Street* regular in the mid-1990s (playing Judy Mallett), she hasn't had any time off at all, so her holiday is long overdue. Starring roles in *Playing the Field* and *Fat Friends* - created by her prolific and award-winning scriptwriter mother, Kay Mellor - were top-rated successes; and, as a bonus, Gaynor also wrote scripts for both series and is now busy creating and writing her own TV drama (she is, however, careful not to give away the plot). '*Playing the Field* was the first thing I had ever written for television,' she says. 'I had edited a lot of my mum's work, and I'd also written a first draft of *Fat Friends* when she was ill. I was pregnant with Oliver at the time, so it worked out well.' She laughs when we point out that showing scripts to Kay Mellor would be a waking nightmare for most writers. 'It is hard showing her



scripts I've written. And, if anything, it makes it harder that she's my mum because the whole thing becomes more personal... but it's something I've always done. The family production company, Rollem (Mellor spelt backwards), currently has four projects in the pipeline.

Acting, says Gaynor, is a funny old business; one that she both loves and hates. 'I love it when I'm working. I love the buzz of it, the adrenaline, and the interaction with different casts and crews. But I hate the reliance actors have on other people to get jobs; and the ruthlessness (of those in power) who can change your life.'

Being Kay Mellor's daughter hasn't always been easy, either. When Gaynor first became an actress, she was annoyed to discover that casting agents and directors were very keen to talk about her mum - but not so keen to talk about anything else. 'At auditions it was all: "Are you Kay Mellor's daughter? How's she doing?!" We look very alike and I was using my real name - Gaynor Mellor - so it was a dead giveaway. Thing is, I didn't get the jobs; and they were roles I knew I'd be perfect for.'

'My mother had warned me about the pros and cons of this business and has supported me 100 per cent. And there have been some fantastic times in my career. But she also had to see me struggling - and it was hard for her when I wasn't getting work because I was her daughter.'

The result: Gaynor changed her surname, became 'Gaynor Faye, jobbing actress' and was successful at her very next audition. It was just easier that way.

These days, being Kay Mellor's daughter can cause different problems, mainly in the newspapers. She pulls a face. 'Critics go on and on about the fact that I appear in my mum's productions. But I don't feel as though I need to justify myself. *Playing the Field* and *Fat Friends* were great TV dramas - and I'd have been foolish to turn the scripts down simply because they were written by Kay Mellor. This is work which most actresses would love to do. When I left **Coronation Street**, I made the decision to go straight into *Playing the Field*. My mum wasn't writing the scripts at that time, although she was Executive Producer... but I loved the series, I loved



the actors on it, I loved the story and it wasn't something I could have done when I was in the Street. So I thought: "That's what I want to do."

Which is when the knives came out.

She can still hear them being sharpened, occasionally. 'If I write a script, and then I appear in it, I'll immediately be criticised,' she says, matter-of-factly.

Why?

'Because I will. Because that's just how it is. The critics will be out to get me. There'll be cries of "it's ego!" and all of that. Ricky Gervais does it brilliantly by taking the mickey out of himself - and by sticking two fingers up and not really caring what the critics say.'

If Gaynor is irritated when talk turns to *Coronation Street* (she did leave the soap six years ago, after all) she doesn't show it. But then she knows that landing the role of Judy Mallett (RIP) was a defining moment in her career. 'She was a brilliant character. I liked the whole Judy and Gary relationship and the fact that she was a bit rough around the edges and loud. And, personally, I was ready for Corrie. I was in my twenties and I wanted a bit of security. I wanted a house and to put down some roots. It came at the right time for me.'

Then Judy changed. 'She had the babies and I thought: "Hmmm, I don't want to do baby stuff for years and years." And, also, the time was right to leave.' To the horror of the nation, the *Coronation Street* scriptwriters killed Judy off. When she was hanging out her washing, if we remember rightly.

When you are a successful soap actor,

you have to plan your exit strategy carefully. Leave too early, and no-one will remember who you are (Adam Rickitt, anyone?). Leave it too late and audiences won't accept you in any other role (two words: Ken Barlow).

'It's a timing issue,' agrees Gaynor. 'I remember someone telling me that, with soaps, there's a five-year benchmark you shouldn't exceed because, if you do, it will be very difficult to get work afterwards.' She takes a sip of her cranberry juice. 'But that was then. It might be very different now. Soap stars are like royalty these days.'

We get the impression that the fame part of Gaynor's job is something she could quite happily leave behind. 'Yeah, I could. It's never bothered me when people come up to me in the street and say: "Ooh, it's YOU, isn't it!" At the same time, I'm not someone who craves attention. I didn't go into this business because I wanted to be "a star". I got into this business because I wanted to act.'

After the Yorkshire Life Food and Wine Awards, it's back to a hot word processor for Gaynor, where she will continue to develop her TV script. Which, we notice, she's still not telling us anything about. 'In an ideal world I'd get up early and write,' she smiles. 'In reality - hey - I've got two kids! So I write when Lily goes to sleep.'

When Gaynor Faye finally gets some shut-eye is, therefore, anyone's guess. But something - be it the work, her family, or the cranberry juice - obviously agrees with her.

Big time. ■