

You should try the ahi. It's brilliant." Appropriately, those are the first words uttered by James MacDonald as he slides into the booth across from me at Montreal's Le Phare Restaurant in a trendy district of Ville-Marie. He may embrace the celebrity title—sauntering into the restaurant in faded jeans and mirrored sunglasses that make the most of movie star good looks—but he's quick to remind me that he is first and foremost a chef. When talking about anything food related—his six restaurants in Britain, the televised cooking show he's currently judging in Canada, even his years of eighty-hour weeks in some of London's toughest kitchens—his vibrant blue eyes light up. Clearly, this is a man who loves what he does.

And no wonder. In an industry nearly as cutthroat and competitive as show business, Scottish-born chef James MacDonald has made his mark. His gastropub in London's trendy Notting Hill neighborhood, The Hart and the Hound, announced him as a rising star in the London food scene. His next two restaurants in Knightsbridge and Covent Garden—whose menus have been widely hailed as focused, accessible, and elegant—marked him as a fixture in nouveau British cuisine. But it was his jump to the small-screen, with his BBC cooking show, that turned MacDonald into a household name. And face.

Only a few minutes into our interview, a leggy Québécoise blonde stops by the table to inquire if he's really James MacDonald. He chats easily with her in French for a few minutes, smiles intimately enough to make her blush, then sends her away with an autograph and a quick kiss on both cheeks. It

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doesn't take too much imagination to know which farewell she's most likely to remember.

But then he's back to business, talking about his plans for opening a restaurant and renovating his family's hotel on the Isle of Skye where he was born. “I wanted to do something for myself, something to go back to my roots.” When questioned if this means he's abandoning London, where he resides most of the year, he laughs. “I love London,” he says. “She's a bit like New York. If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere.”

It may be my imagination that

his accent deepens a bit then, raising the question of how much of the polished London restaurateur is truly acquired and how much is affected. MacDonald has always identified most with his Scottish upbringing, though he has equally deep roots in England. His mother is Marjorie Pierce, heiress to the Pierce industrial fortune and well-known London socialite. When asked if his family background had anything to do with his meteoric rise to success, the charm slips into annoyance.

“I've worked seven days a week for the last fifteen years. The kitchen is the last true meritocracy. It doesn't matter who you are, what your family background is. You show up and cook, every day, for years.” MacDonald is quick to point out he worked his way up, just like everyone else. “If you're good, you succeed.”

Then the smile that surely weakens most women's knees returns, and one gets the feeling

there has never been a situation or a question MacDonald couldn't charm his way out of.

Ask him about his ill-fated relationship with English film star Cassandra Sinclair, however, and the handsome face shutters. It's clearly not a topic with which he's comfortable, and one he's staunchly avoided discussing with reporters for the last two years. Still, it's hard to ignore a relationship

that once received as much attention as Brad and Angelina: the Scottish bad-boy restaurateur, tamed by Britain's favorite silver-screen sweetheart, only to be thrown over for the one of the few English stars with more wattage than MacDonald himself: Philip Kane.

For someone so open with his personal life, he has remained surprisingly tight-lipped about the break-up that stunned Britain and America alike and threw tabloids into a frenzy. Still, anyone who has followed the gossip pages knows

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he's wasted no time moving on. He's been consistently seen with young models and actresses around London, though few have made repeat appearances, leading to rumors that it was his infidelity that led to the dissolution of their engagement. Even though MacDonald has staunchly denied the accusations, he hasn't offered any explanation for the sudden split.

“Sometimes relationships don't work out. You don't quiz your chemist over his divorce, dissect it piece by piece. The media seems determined to intrude on a private matter.”

When it's clear he will say nothing more on the subject, we move on to the more obvious questions. With more Michelin stars to his name than his higher-profile celebrity colleagues, six restaurants, three best-selling cookbooks, and a top rated BBC cooking show drawing in millions of viewers on both sides of the pond, what's next? Another program? A second chance at love?

“Not love,” he says definitively. “If there's one thing I've learned about this business, it's that it's tough on relationships. I'm married to my career.” ●

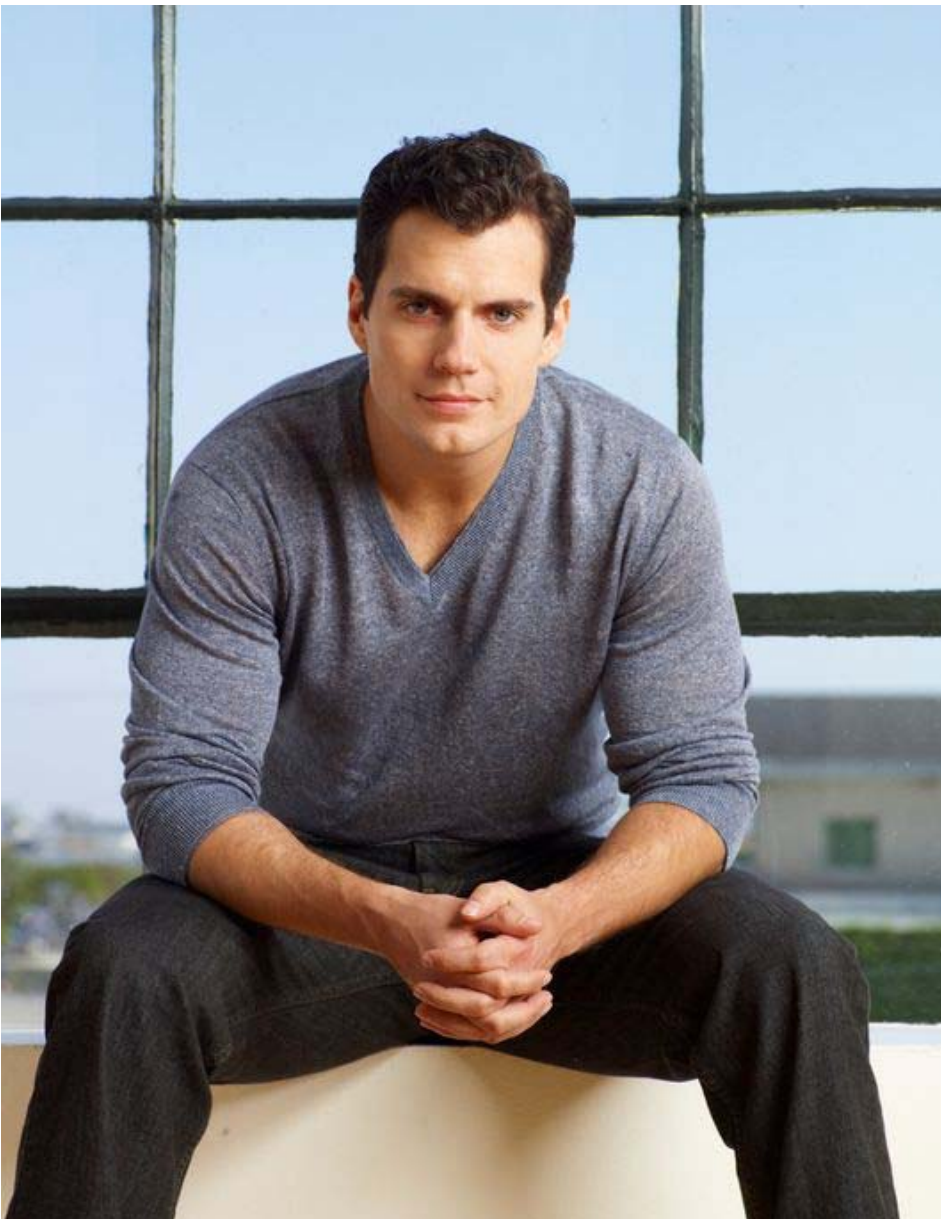


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