

Down on the Farm

The Black Farmer

Poor, dyslexic and a self-confessed "difficult kid", Wilfred Emmanuel-Jones had an inauspicious start in life. Yet he now lives with his family in a beautifully-restored farmhouse with 30 acres of land near the Devon-Cornwall border. He and his wife also own a successful food and drink marketing agency, and Wilfred has recently developed his own range of sauces and sausages which he sells under the brand name 'The Black Farmer'.

"My Devon neighbours dubbed me the Black Farmer," says Wilfred, "to describe the rare phenomenon of a black man in British farming. I now wear the title with pride." He laughs readily, and freely admits that his neighbours have taught him all he knows about rearing livestock. His move into commercial food production was the result of his friends' "overwhelming" response to his recipes, and he's clocked up gold and silver in the national 'Taste Awards'.

"Sausages are my comfort food," Wilfred says. "I turn to sausages to put my world to rights." He feels he makes "the ultimate sausage", using a high content of "prime cuts of pork". His sauces have your mouth watering, with names like 'Creamy Tarragon', 'White Wine and Garlic', 'Rich Onion and Port', and my favourite - 'Spicy Muscovado'. When I asked how he'd managed to make them taste home cooked, he replied that he keeps a very careful watch on each stage of the process. "You must never let people down," he says.

Wilfred says he likes uncomplicated recipes. The tag line on his produce is 'Flavours without Frontiers', and he subtly combines ingredients from widely differing cuisines to create something new. A tall man, he also has a big personality, and he refuses to be confined by tradition, race or convention. The inspiration for his creations, however, is local. It's his Devon farm.

Wilfred's parents came over from Jamaica in 1961 when he was four years old. Five years later, the family moved to Smallheath in Birmingham. Wilfred has few positive memories of his childhood. "Things were always tight," he says. There were nine children in the tiny terraced house, and he remembers often being hungry. Some of his happier times were spent helping on his father's allotment where he could escape from Birmingham's concrete.

His great need for freedom surfaced again and again in drawings Wilfred used to do as a child. Unlike boys who drew mechanical objects, he would draw a house among fields. This would cheer and sustain him. "I'd always dreamed," he says, "of having my own part of England."

But it was many years before Wilfred fulfilled his dream. At school, he was told he might end up as a criminal. Once, they shut him in an old store cupboard for his bad behaviour. But they must have found him a strange child. "I'll never forget," he says "the shock on the teacher's face when he let me out of that store. I'd tidied it up."

Part of Wilfred's problem was his individuality. He wasn't keen to conform. "I was kicked out of The Merchant Navy Training Scheme after only two weeks," he says. So he joined the Paras. That lasted two years before, again, "they kicked me out. I was black, lippy, and I wouldn't do as I was told." Then came a series of labouring jobs. "I was destined to be a drop-out, and because of the poverty of my background there was a poverty of expectation for me. But I had ambitions, dreams."

Wilfred did all manner of jobs, and among them, was work in restaurants. This, he enjoyed. Then he decided he wanted to work in TV. At the time, this seemed laughable. His friends certainly laughed. He'd become fascinated by documentaries, especially by the insight into ordinary people's lives shown in the series *Forty Minutes*. He persuaded people to write letters for him - he's dyslexic, remember - and sent around 250 requests for work to the BBC.

There were no replies, but eventually, he had a stroke of luck. He'd got to know a set designer who introduced him to a programme editor on Radio 4 in Birmingham. Within 15 minutes of meeting this man, Wilfred had been taken on as a researcher. "I had enthusiasm, I had stories to tell, and I had knowledge of elements of working-class life that middle-class programme makers knew little about in those days."

From there, Wilfred went on to be a researcher for radio and TV news programmes. "But how?" I asked. "You were dyslexic." Wilfred replied: "I'd trained my memory. Dyslexics learn ways of coping, and I'd developed extremely good verbal skills."

What happened next is scarcely believable. With no academic qualifications whatsoever, Wilfred applied for a place on the BBC's prestigious graduate training scheme. Most of the trainees came from Oxbridge. Wilfred's badly-written application was spotted, however, because it had "something about it". The editor who'd first taken him on was contacted, and Wilfred found himself in front of an "aggressive" board of interviewers. He secured a place on the scheme, and his career in the media was set fair.

He eventually found himself directing BBC TV food programmes just before the cult of celebrity chefs

began, and he travelled the world making cookery programmes, gaining a reputation for toughness. "When you're on my shoot," he says, "I'm in charge." I asked Wilfred his watchword for making programmes. "Anything is possible," he said. "In the kitchen and anywhere else."

I guess Antony Worrall Thompson and Brian Turner have cause to remember a little 'holiday' they took with Wilfred. Anthony and Brian were filmed in the galley of a British Navy ship. The aim was to show how cooks cater for a whole ship's company while out at sea, and the two were to be seen undergoing the same rigours as genuine sailors. "They were sick for a week," Wilfred remembers. "There was a force 10 gale and the boat stopped for nothing." Then he grins: "I got the captain to put on a fire exercise in the kitchen."

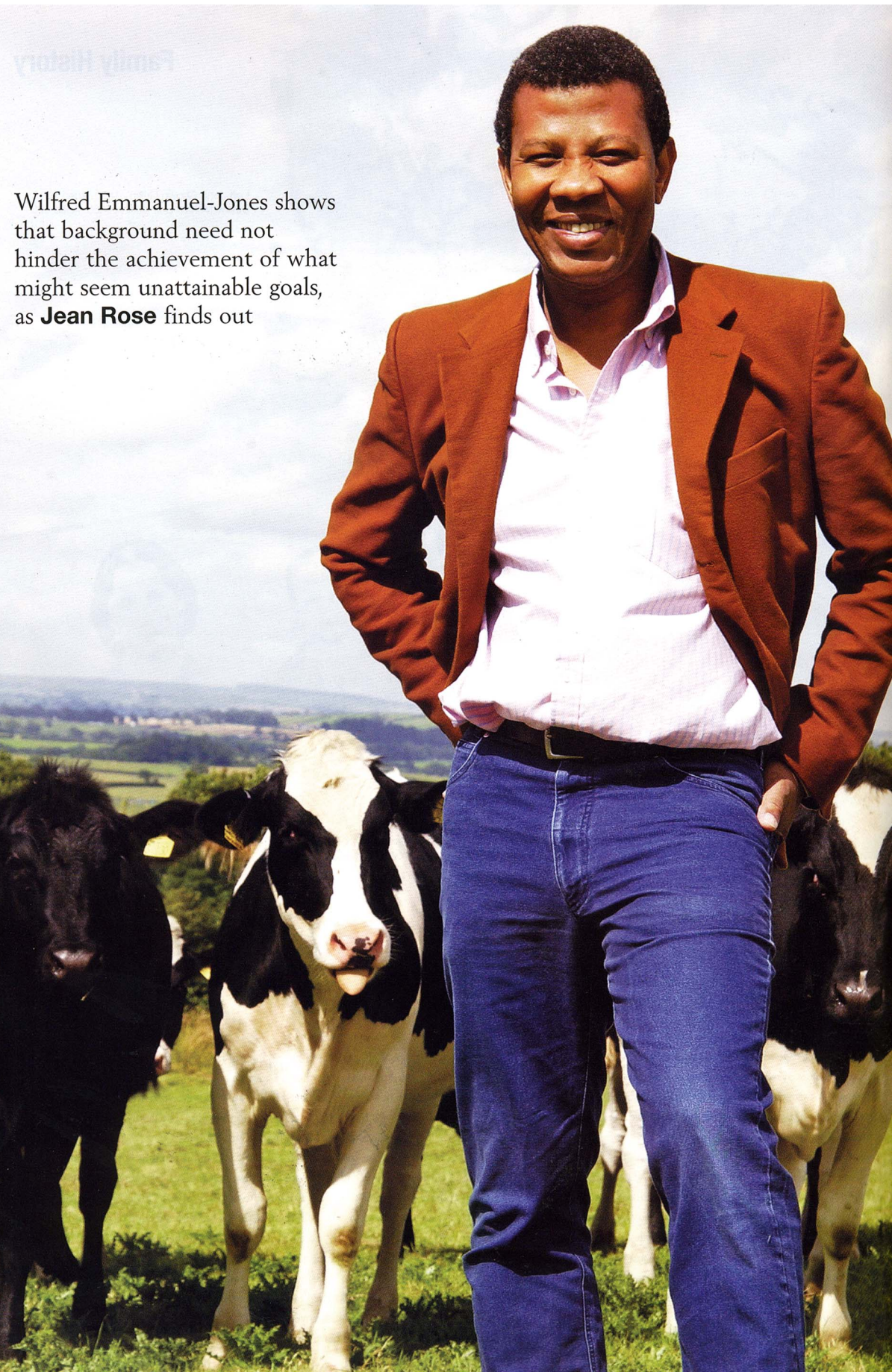
Eventually, however, Wilfred wanted to branch out on his own. Around this time, he met his wife, Michaela, and together they set up their marketing agency. "Life is all about courage," he says. When they started, they had enough money to pay the mortgage for three months. They worked all hours and, gradually, things took off.

The move to the Devon farmhouse seven years ago seems to have happened by chance. Wilfred loves everything about the Devon countryside, including the rain. He came across the house on a family holiday and just fell in love with it. Even the move into farming was unplanned. He tells how his first trip to market was a "big adventure". He wore a typical farmer's jacket and boots. His neighbour, Chris Budge, had advised him to keep things simple, to get the auctioneer to bid for him, and not to go for any rare breeds.

Wilfred especially loves his home in north Devon because it's in "farming countryside, working countryside." Having become part of the Devon rural community, Wilfred now empathises fully with the small farmer. Our current mania for choice is "killing a way of life," he says, "and we don't have anyone fighting for rural communities." He'd like supermarkets to invite local food producers to their car parks one Sunday a month to sell their own produce.

"I want excitement in whatever I do," Wilfred explains, and he just keeps on moving forward with new ideas. Michaela has helped in the production of a cookery book that will be out by Christmas. The two of them work as a team, and she's now caught the cooking bug herself. She's developing a range of tempting puddings and ice creams. Look out for the brand name 'The Black Farmer's Wife'. □

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Wilfred Emmanuel-Jones shows that background need not hinder the achievement of what might seem unattainable goals, as **Jean Rose** finds out