

THE TIMES

MAGAZINE

FOOD SPECIAL

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Really
easy
summer
recipes

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THE MODEL WHO LIKES HER FOOD

Tim Teeman meets
Robyn Lawley,
size 16 cover star
– and food blogger





This page: top, £40, Clements Ribeiro for Evans; knickers, £20, Hanro; earrings, Bulgari. Opposite: jacket, Tom Ford; swimsuit, £78, Seaspray; necklace and ring, Graff; cat ears, Maison Michel



**'I'M NORMAL SIZE.
WHY AM I CALLED PLUS SIZE?
THE SKINNY MODELS SHOULD
BE CALLED MINUS SIZE'**

When Robyn Lawley is not gracing magazine covers, she writes a food blog and fights the corner for "plus-size" girls in the fashion world.

By Tim Teeman

STYLIST Jane Taylor-Hayhurst PHOTOGRAPHS Mary Rozzi

Robyn Lawley, 23, is a 6ft 2in model often described as “Amazonian”. As compliments go, it’s a misleading one. True, she is stunning: beautiful, athletic, tall. But there is nothing masculine about her. Yet because she is a size 16, she is classified as a “plus-size model”.

Lawley, who is funny, sharp and intelligent, as a teenager starved herself and did all she could to conform to the skinny ideal of her profession. Now she is determined to change the modelling world from within.

To this end, she has her own food blog, Robyn Lawley Eats, a gastronomic tribute to recent meals that she’s enjoyed in restaurants and cafés around the world and favourite recipes cooked in between cover shoots and advertising campaigns. No egg-white omelettes or raw food here. Rather, close-up pictures of chunky chips topped with mayonnaise, Nutella banana pikelets, wedges of Battenberg cake, slabs of steak. The blog’s tagline is George Bernard Shaw’s famous phrase: “There is no love sincerer than the love of food.”

Her boyfriend, a law student “who’s very much in love with my body”, suggested she start the blog. “He’s my number one fan. He doesn’t understand the headlines about plus size; to him, I’ve got the greatest body alive.” It helps that he’s 6ft 7in. She jokes that they stalk the streets “like avatars”.

Growing up in the suburbs of Sydney, Australia, Lawley’s hero was Jamie Oliver. When she tires of modelling, she aims to open a restaurant in New York or Sydney serving desserts and cocktails. Her favourite pudding? Mulberry tart: “It takes seven bloody hours to make, but it’s super yummy.” She’s already had offers to present her own food show.

“I’m a normal size,” she says. “I wish we could all be known as models, rather than ‘plus-size’. It’s skinny models who should be called ‘minus size.’” Lawley, who now lives in the hipster haven of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, is not the first famous plus-size model – recall Sophie Dahl and Lawley’s hero, Crystal Renn – but while they have lost weight dramatically, she tells me she will not do the same. It seems to be working: in the past year she has been on the cover of French *Elle* and *Marie Claire*, Steven Meisel shot her for the cover of Italian *Vogue* and she was *Vogue* Australia’s first plus-size cover star. For *The Times*, she is modelling Clements Ribeiro’s new range for Evans.

Lawley’s family is “close, blue collar”. When she was born she looked six months old, she says, a dislocation that continued through her childhood. “I used to envy little girls. I wanted to say, ‘I’m 6, too,’ but I was bigger than them.”

She was 15 the first time she went to a modelling agency. “I didn’t feel pretty enough. I was so self-conscious about my weight. I was always sporty, with these big thighs, shoulders and arms. I was in every sports team. The other models were smaller than me in every possible way. They were so narrow in their

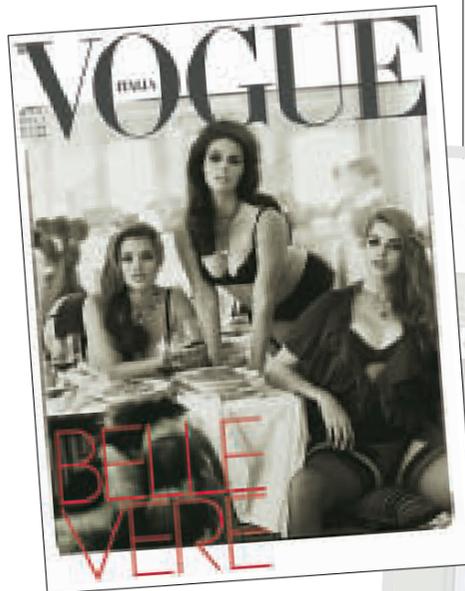
shoulders and hips, but I couldn’t just shrink my bones.”

Lawley swiftly decided that her only option was to lose weight. “I was already a strict vegan and then started counting calories on top of that. I was 6ft and trying to eat 1,000 calories a day.” She shakes her head. Did she develop an eating disorder? “Yes.” Binge eating, making herself sick? “I did a little bit of everything; not too drastically. For me it was ineffective and it’s the dumbest thing a girl could do. I did everything very much in secret. I’d run at night.” She lost “a lot of weight”, 15-20kg, and shrank down to an Australian size 6.

But it wasn’t enough. “To be a model you needed to be a size 4, so I’d still go to castings and fittings and nothing would fit. I couldn’t control the hunger: being that hungry, you’re growing and starving yourself. You’re ravenous. So I started eating again, but the weight came back on and within six months I’d be back where I began. It was infuriating.”

Her agent at the time told her to watch her weight, “but I think they thought I was no hope. I wanted to prove them wrong. I wanted to show I could whittle down my weight to the same as those other models. Face-wise, I was fine; it was just my body that sucked.”

How did Lawley feel during this period? “So much guilt. You feel tremendous hate for your body, you try to detach yourself



Left: top, £60, Clements Ribeiro for Evans. Opposite: Italian *Vogue*, June 2011; images from Lawley’s food blog

from it: it’s who you are and you hate it, and unfortunately this thinking consumes your thoughts all the time. Such self-hatred.” Still, Lawley modelled and didn’t tell friends or family about her emotional turmoil. She scoffs when I ask if she thought about therapy: “Not where I’m from.”

At 18, Lawley quit modelling (“I was trying to lose weight, then gaining it back, and didn’t want to be starving myself all year round”), returning a year later when an art director suggested she pursue the plus-size route. “At first I was so offended and said, ‘Are you kidding me?’ But then I saw the money they were paying and realised it could be a proper job. Also, I thought, ‘I can’t battle it. I can either model at this size or not model at all.’” She met, and was inspired by, plus-size models from the US. Her career grew.

She doesn’t mind when skinnier models stare at her: “They’re being controlled by other people.” Are they being told to starve themselves? “All the time,” Lawley says. “If they say they’re not, it’s absolute b****s. I once heard anorexia was ‘the look’ that season. What message is that sending to young women? To starve themselves. It is shocking that we are still having these discussions. Everyone by now should be more accepting of different body types: endomorph, ectomorph, mesomorph. It’s pure science, and still most people are blaming themselves for not getting the body they want.”

For Lawley, the tokenist fashion spreads featuring plus-size models “are magazines trying to say they are good deep down and not fuelling the problems that are being created. The reality, whether *Vogue* likes it or not, is that we’re getting bigger. But the sample sizes made by designers are for smaller girls. They could make them a little bigger. How can magazines shoot bigger girls if nothing fits them? I’ve been on shoots where designers have been asked if a \$3,000 dress can be cut to fit me.”

Major designers should endorse plus-size models, she says. Renn was a face for Chanel; Lawley would love to be Prada’s, her favourite designer. Are magazines and designers encouraging eating disorders and worse? “Yes, they are, they’re saying, ‘You’re not good enough unless you’re this skinny.’ Girls have enough to deal with when they’re teenagers without that. The images are so unrealistic. By photoshopping images, you’re saying, ‘Good luck, you’re never going to attain this.’ Skinny girls are made skinnier, clearer, longer. I’ve seen retouchers stretch out legs... Photoshop

‘I used to feel so much guilt about my body. You feel tremendous hate. It’s who you are and you hate it and this thinking consumes your thoughts’

EVANS.CO.UK; STOCKISTS: HANRO AT FENWICK, 02077629 9161; BULGARI, 02017872 8868; TOMFORD.COM; SEASPRAY, FIGLEAVES.COM; GRAFFDIAMONDS.COM; MAISON MICHEL, COUTUURELAB.COM

is fine for getting rid of blemishes, but I've seen pictures of myself where I haven't recognised my own body. I have fans who ask why I'm not plus size any more when I am, who wonder why I gain and lose weight when I don't – I've been basically the same for the past four years. I'd like for magazines to go Photoshop-free in the most extreme ways they use it."

She grimaces as she recalls a recent set of castings in Milan for designers such as Alexander Wang, Zac Posen and Marc Jacobs in which Lawley's face photo "sold me", but her size disqualified her "over and over again. It was really frustrating. I have not done a show season since. They were like, 'Keep at us, keep trying.' I'm not going to get down on my knees: that's not my idea of a bloody fun day. Come on, they have 20 seamstresses. Are you telling me they couldn't sew one frock for a larger person? How hard would it be to add a few inches of material?"

Renn and Dahl lost weight after becoming plus-size pioneers. Would Lawley do the same? Diplomacy flashes across her face. "You don't know why someone loses a lot of weight. Was I disappointed?" She laughs. "No, it's more work for me. A lot of people were disappointed in Crystal and it would have killed me to have received the insults she had. She's an amazing model at any weight." Would you lose it, I repeat. "I'm this size for good," Lawley states resolutely. "I have a personal trainer, I'm a good, healthy weight. I eat like a normal person. I have a food blog for God's sake. I love food. I eat right, exercise, indulge occasionally, but never eat fast food."

Lawley confesses to still having body hang-ups: she gains 8lb in winter and loses it in summer. "I notice celebrities when they get targeted: Miley Cyrus was deemed too small a few months ago, then too big. Come on, it's so degrading to women. Jessica Simpson was deemed too fat when she was pregnant: give the girl a break. But now she has to sign an endorsement with Weight Watchers to lose it all." She sighs. "I wish those publications could focus on women scientists and soldiers."

This bluff, hearty sanity – operating as a normal-sized human being in this looking-glass world – is put down to "strong older sisters". Her dad, Christopher, is a retired fireman; her mother, Janne, a food technologist who works part-time with the disabled. She is the youngest of three girls. Her oldest sister, Jennifer, 29, is an architect, Shona a 25-year-old paramedic. Lawley was a "wild child", catching trains by herself at 7, starting work at 13 at a cinema and fast-food restaurant: "I didn't like the idea of being dependent on anybody. I wanted to be self-sufficient."

Now she's fast becoming that rare phenomenon in her business – a successful, sought-after, instantly recognisable plus-size model. Nevertheless, there is a world outside



Dress, £45, Clements Ribeiro for Evans

'Skinny models are being controlled. They're being told to starve themselves'

fashion shoots. "I want to do so much in my life. I don't want my time taken with detox-dieting and juicing," Lawley says. "I look up to people who are talented and don't care what others think, like [rock star] Peaches." Lawley is a volunteer for a New York homeless charity ("If you don't have empathy, you're a robot") and an ambassador for the Australian Ovarian Cancer charity. The impetus for this was her father, who for the last two years has been fighting cancer of the salivary gland.

"He's had radiotherapy; we're waiting to see if it comes back. It's been heartbreaking to see him so thin. Not to be around when a parent

goes through that is so hard. Everyone knows someone who's gone through cancer. You could be my age and get it; it doesn't discriminate."

To every 16-year-old girl wanting to model, she says: "Not everyone can do it. If you do, eat right, exercise and don't be too hard on yourself." As for her future, she would love to model for *American Vogue*, work with Steven Meisel again – and create the perfect filet mignon for her food blog. ■

The autumn/winter 2012 Swan by Clements Ribeiro for Evans collection will be available from September 1 at evans.co.uk and in store nationwide