

Roux with a view



Often credited with revolutionising the British food scene with his elder brother Albert, French chef Michel Roux has been a source of inspiration for young chefs throughout the world, estimating himself that he has personally taught more than 1,000. Roux has collected more than 40 awards, distinctions and prizes for his culinary creations, including such prestigious accolades as the Meilleur Ouvrier de France, the Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur and an honorary OBE.

With his son Alain now running the celebrated Waterside Inn at Bray, Roux now devotes his time to being a culinary ambassador, travelling and demonstrating around the world. He shared his thoughts on the curse of celebrity chefs with Dave Reeder.

Michel, you're well known for your stand against the idea of celebrity chefs. Do you think the focus will make it harder to attract the right kind of youngsters into the profession?

Oh yes, it already has. The message is not what it should be – too many people think that becoming a chef will lead to celebrity and money.

But it must be good for chefs now to be respected?

Well, we went through a phase like that. There used to be a time when people turned their backs on chefs and now everyone wants to sit on my lap! But we have a totally false situation and I'm not very happy about it. Respect is good but the scene in the UK – and I'm talking now with a global perspective since I travel extensively – is now completely off track, just totally over the top.

Yet there was a time in the UK when chefs got respect without all the current fuss. I'm thinking back to London in the 1980s when chefs like Nico Ladenis, Anton Mosimann, your brother Albert and yourself, for example, were well-known figures. What went wrong?

The reality is that most name chefs back then were foreign – we're French, Anton is Swiss, Nico Greek and so on – but suddenly, suddenly, there were British chefs. British! And we got so much flag-waving and people banging on about London being the best city in the world.

Perhaps I should just remind you that the word 'chauvinism' is French...

Ha, very good! But the point is that the British were able to shout about their own people at last. Wonderful cooks, of course – Gordon and Marco-Pierre, all the way through to young Jamie. Extraordinary but the frenzy that has attached itself to them is crazy. Look, do we have 100 or 200 chefs in Britain of the calibre of Ramsay? No, we do not. The situation is different in France. Can you eat badly in France? Of course, but the expectation is that you can eat well in most towns and cities. And the problem is this: by creating such celebrities, there's not enough focus on raising the general level across the country.

But you have admiration for many of these celebrity chefs?

Of course. Heston, for example – I'm full of admiration, he's quite extraordinary. These leaders of our industry are doing exceptional work, but the problem for me lies in developing the talent for the future.

You suggesting that this problem is somehow unique to Britain?

Yes. Look at Spain – Ferran is a true professional and the Spanish look up to him as a leader, but his fame is at a different, more professional level.

Let's move away from chefs and talk about food a little. Apart from French cuisine, of course,

what other national cuisines do you enjoy?

I love Thai food, but I think Italian food in terms of the regional base of real food in Italy is my real love – I could eat that every day. I also enjoy the food of Northern Spain. I like food cooked from the point of view of a chef who loves to eat. The gourmet has to lead in this profession!

Many chefs now seem to take inspiration from Japan...

I think it's too clinical in a way for me, too much precision. I was surprised by much of what I ate in Tokyo but the food is not really for me. Again, I don't mind fusion elements in one or two dishes, but I'm not too keen on it.

Any food-related secret about yourself?

Well, there's no food yet that I didn't like but, strangely, neither my brother nor I can chew coriander leaves! I don't know why. The taste is fine, no problem, but the leaves on the teeth...

Do you think classical French cuisine will maintain its premier position in the fine dining world?

No, not a central position. The world is moving too fast and the position of French classical food has been declining for a century now. How far and fast it will slip I'm not sure. What will remain, however, is regional French food, dishes based on good produce and seasonal. Peasant food, if you, rather than modern bourgeois. Yet the basics, the techniques of French cuisine I think are vital – a good chef must have worked on the classics.

And the future of fine dining?

Of course, the economic position now will affect all of us. What people don't understand, I think, is the sheer cost of running a three-star establishment – the cost of produce, the numbers of staff and so on. If the general public can no longer afford our kind of prices then we'll have to rely more on foreign tourists and the corporate clientele.

But you still love what you do?

Of course, but without my son to take over the Waterside Inn, you know I would have stepped away by now. What we do is very hard, very demanding – the hours, the precision. And it's not just the work in the kitchen – the whole establishment is there.

Are you tempted to try something less demanding than three-star cuisine?

No. I don't think you can cook to get a star, it comes because you have given the process your best shot, but then keeping it is the challenge. To lose a star puts you in a different place.

Which brings to mind, of course, the tragedy of Bernard Loiseau...

Did you know him? Did you eat at La Côte d'Or ever?

Many years ago and I was astonished at the

The bio bit

Early years – Born in Charolles, Saône et Loire, France. At the age of 14, apprenticed as a pastry chef then as a pastry cook at the British Embassy in Paris, where his brother Albert was working as a sous chef.

Early career – First Commis de Cuisine and then Chef to the Rothschild family, following Albert to England in 1967 to open Le Gavroche when food in England "so awful at the time". Five years later, the brothers opened the Waterside Inn, in Bray, Berkshire.

Great success – In 1981 the Waterside Inn was awarded "Restaurant of the year" by Egon Ronay and by 1985 it had garnered its third Michelin Star, which it has maintained ever since, and by 1989 its third Egon Ronay Star. Between 1979 and 2008, Roux received an impressive 37 awards, including a host of lifetime achievements and medals from the most prestigious culinary bodies in both the UK and France. He has also sold more than 15 million copies of his ten books.

Eminence grise – For a quarter of a century, Roux has led a team of culinary consultants on a regular basis for British Airways In Flight Catering, for the first class and club world cabins as well as Concorde when it was in service. He also created the Roux Scholarship and is co-chairman with his brother Albert. Now in its 25th year, it is widely acknowledged as the top UK competition for young chefs and there are currently six Michelin starred chefs amongst the past 25 winners.

food. He did, I recall, a vegetable tasting menu that was so simple, yet so profound.

Bernard was a good friend of mine. He was hard, you know, hard like a potato, but he couldn't take the downward path. But if you put in the effort for the higher steps, then you have to be able to take the knock. He was a purist, just a perfect person but you can't sell yourself and then be yourself. You know what he should have done? What he would have been exceptional at?

Running an auberge?

Exactly, exactly. But you know the key to all this – it lies in having the right team, the right people but, to return to where we started, today people just move on so fast. In my day, you stayed and learned and developed; now, three months and – poof! – they've gone. Filling the CV so they can start their own restaurant...

You still get pleasure from cooking?

Oh yes. Last night my sous-chef and I did a five-course meal for 70 covers at Vu's here in Dubai. Let me be honest with you, it wasn't a three-star meal but I think it was a good two-star one. Visiting as a chef and cooking like this is lovely, refreshing.