

SMEWALES

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ISSUE 6

WHY I LOVE WALES AND ITS' FOOD

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH
LEGENDARY MICHEL ROUX JR

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The Legendary

MICHEL ROUX JR

WHY I LOVE WALES AND IT'S FOOD

Editor's Exclusive by Gary Baker

MICHEL ROUX JR ADMITS HE DOES NOT GET ACROSS TO WALES OFTEN ENOUGH.

He was here a few months ago to enjoy a shark-fishing trip off the Carmarthenshire coastline, but our nation and its food is never too far away from the mind of the renowned Chef or, for that matter, from the table at his two Michelin starred restaurant, Le Gavroche, in London's Mayfair.

The clatter of pans and knives ring out down the phone as we speak, signalling another busy morning of preparation for a lunch service of exceptional quality at Le Gavroche. Nothing but perfection will do for Michel, as has been the case throughout the gastronomic dynasty of his legendary family, which includes father, Albert, and uncle Michel Roux, both of whom have been described as 'the godfathers of modern restaurant cuisine in the UK'.

"I love Wales," said the 54 year old, who has become known to millions of people through his appearances on cuisine television programmes over the years. "It is one of those places I love to visit and I don't get to enough.

"It has so much to offer. The people are lovely and they are very welcoming. I love Scotland as well and it is just great that we have so much on our doorsteps in Great Britain that you don't need to go to far-flung places."

Michel understands first hand how passionate Welsh people are about their food in all its guises, from cafes and restaurants to farming and dairy producers.

He said: "I have recently finished a food-based week I have every year in Henley-on-Thames at their festival and every year we get students from Bridgend College to help us for the week. They work their backsides off. They are kids who are 17 or 18 years old and are full of enthusiasm.

"Wales has fantastic food. I love the Gower Peninsula cockles, the shrimps and the seafood. Then there is the Welsh hill lamb, which is revered all over the world."

But, as fantastic as these foods are, there are many other products which make Wales great in gastronomic circles.

Michel added: "You have wild sea trout and other freshwater river fish and there are other products that Wales is less well known for, like Welsh Black beef."

Food, however, is a business and from the volume of people who attend Food Festivals across the Principality, such as Cowbridge, Cardiff and Abergavenny – three of the biggest of the year – there is no doubt of its popularity in Wales.

But even Michel seems surprised to hear how important it has become to our economy. Welsh Government figures show that all the sectors that make up the food and drink industry here account for 230,000 jobs and, in generating £6.5bn of sales revenue each year, it has become our largest combined industry for employment.

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Yet, as much as this is incredibly good news for the SME markets, the 'service' sector of the food industry – cafes and restaurants – are paths to be trodden with extreme care. Start-up cafes and restaurants have one of the highest first-year failure rates of any business sector in the country, so sinking your teeth and cash into the dream of opening an establishment needs careful business consideration, acumen and planning – as well as some bravery.

Michel agrees and believes he knows why.

He said: "Most definitely. That's the failure, I suppose, of our industry. We make it look so simple that people think they can get away with just making good food; but they need to know about business as well. I would say, do your homework first."

If, though, there is one business issue that Michel cannot fathom it was one highlighted during another fishing trip to West Wales in 2013. After returning to shore, he spotted local fishermen landing their catches.

Michel said: "I was in Milford Haven last year and I was on a shark-fishing trip. Milford Haven used to be a fantastic fishing port. What shocked me one morning was that there was a batch of about 10 tonnes of whelks which were being landed from around the waters. They were put onto refrigerated trucks and driven to the North East of England to be processed and then sent across Europe.

"That's crazy! They only cost about two-and-a-half pence each but were being transported across the country. Surely it would be far better to have a processing plant nearby to do this?"

Food and its production have become box office these days, but with many thousands of jobs already in situ across Wales and the UK as a whole, does the industry have room for more culinary entrepreneurs?

"There is definitely room for more," said the legendary Chef.

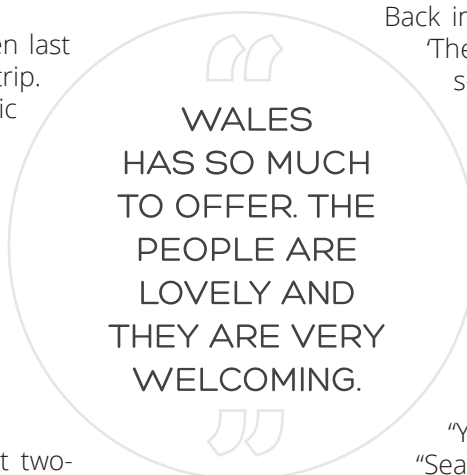
Fishing is one form of relaxation Michel enjoys away from the heat and the steam of the kitchen but another passion he shares with the Welsh is a love of rugby union. He is an honorary member of English Premiership side Harlequins but agrees that stadium food at matches throughout many sports – the burger, pie and chips and sandwich vans – could be improved so fans could enjoy a better experience.

Of course, nobody is suggesting placing plush restaurants or gourmet outlets at football or rugby stadiums, but certainly supporters deserve something more tasty than multi-pack burgers and fries? Maybe pasta, pizza slices or even Asian street food, for example?

Michel agrees that the average fan deserves better.

He said: "Yes, I definitely think so. I am lucky enough to be invited into hospitality at games I attend. The food there is very good. However, in my opinion, on the terraces and in the rest of the stadium it is money-led and just cheap and not that great. I have yet to come across what I regard as a decent burger or hotdog.

"One of the best stadium foods I have had was at the Nou Camp stadium in Barcelona, where they grilled chorizo with a decent bread. Even at a cheap price, food should be good and wholesome."



Back in Mayfair, Michel's team needed 'The Master' back before midday service. The food needed to be checked for presentation and quality at 'The Pass' to ensure that every plate was perfect for the diners at Le Gavroche.

So, does Welsh produce make it onto the menu for lunchtime City diners in London?

"Yes, of course," said Michel. "Seafood, crabs, mussels and wild salmon to name a few."

But the finest meal with Welsh produce must come from a leg of Welsh lamb that falls off the bone?

"Not a leg," said Michel. "A slow-cooked shoulder is outrageously good. I also love leeks as a veg."

There was so much more to ask Michel but time was ticking away for lunch and it was back to the prep work.

But, with such a rich and diverse food and produce industry around Wales, Chef friends like Steven Terry at The Hardwick and Shaun Hill at the Walnut Tree, two amazing Welsh restaurants near Abergavenny, and some more fishing to be done in the 'clear waters' off the West Wales coast, don't be surprised to see Michel Roux Jr eating our great Welsh food here again soon when he is able to make another trip to our fantastic culinary nation.

