

Michel Roux Chef



Michelin starred chef Michel Roux (OE 1976) took time out from his busy day running one of London's most famous restaurants 'Le Gavroche' to talk to us about school dinners, marathon running and his plans for the future.

What did you like best and least about school?

I always really enjoyed sport. When I attended Emanuel the school was very sport-orientated and it was a very important part of the School curriculum. I played a lot of rugby and also really enjoyed cross country. Marathon running is very important to me and it is certainly possible that this started at school. The teachers always made it very enjoyable; I remember one sports teacher wearing a bright purple track suit which I thought was really cool at the time.

I must be a bit diplomatic about what I liked least. It would be easy to say the food; I don't have any really strong memories of school dinners but I do remember thinking they weren't very good, especially the puddings. I hated the swimming pool as the water was always freezing.

Were you ever in trouble at school?

Me? Never! No, of course I was and I certainly did a few detentions in my time.

You went straight into kitchens and training after Emanuel, would you have any advice for our current students thinking about doing vocational training?

It is completely down to the individual; if you have an idea of what you want to do at an early age then you should go with your feelings. If you are not 100% sure that further education is for you then don't do it, do something else: learn a craft, do an

apprenticeship. It can be more fulfilling doing something that you really enjoy than sitting in a class trying to learn.

Being part of the Roux family meant you had a very clear career path if you chose to pursue it, but were you ever tempted to break away and try something different?

No, never. I always wanted to be a chef for as long as I can remember.

Your daughter has also chosen to be a chef. Did you encourage her?

We certainly did encourage her, yes, but we never pushed her. She has always said she wanted to be a chef which is fantastic so we have helped her on her way.

Did you ever resent the pressure that came with being part of the Roux family?

Resent is not the word but I certainly felt the pressure. There was a lot going on and you have to appreciate that responsibility and deliver exceptionally high standards.

Do you ever feel there is a kind of tension between trying to deliver that consistently high standard whilst also trying to be innovative?

That is a very valid point. You have to put your own mark on what you are doing and yet respect the past. It is a very fine balance, a question of evolution, also not trying to change everything overnight and not trying



to impose different ways too quickly but doing it over time.

When your father and uncle first set up their businesses in this country the British had a terrible reputation for food. Do you think we have managed to change this?

Most definitely, Britain is in a far better place culinary wise than in the 60s and 70s. People have so much more knowledge and appreciation of food now and this also pushes the bar up for potential restaurants and upcoming chefs. It is a sign that there is a real food heritage developing in Britain which is wonderful.

Some years ago you presented a programme which focused on service in

Britain, trying to encourage young people to choose it as a career as is common on the continent. Do you think we have moved on at all or is there still negativity attached to the profession?

We have come on, but the majority of front-of-house staff are non-British. There are a lot of Eastern Europeans who are taking on the jobs as well as French, Italians, Spanish and Portuguese. There are still not enough British boys and girls who are taking up front-of-house positions and seeing this as a career, which is a shame, but it is changing and the more people talk about it the better. Immense pride can be gleaned from working front-of-house and delivering great service. You can climb up the ladder very quickly and work your way up to a very good salary. We still see

the imbalance now on television which is full of chefs but very rarely do you see the front-of-house staff.

On many cookery programmes there is a lot of emphasis on local sourcing. Is this achievable for us cooks at home who might be living on a tight budget?

It is relevant, it is definitely the way forward to stop eating industrialised food, food that has been prepared en masse and by that I don't just mean ready to eat but intensively farmed food. Where possible we should encourage small farmers and small holdings, and sometimes it might be more expensive but the quality is so much better. We don't need to eat chicken every day of the week, we don't need to eat protein every day of the week,

we can eat very happily with only one roast chicken per week but it has to be a damn good roast chicken. There are savings to be made and that just comes from knowledge. People are afraid to buy cheaper cuts because they don't know how to cook them properly. This kind of knowledge comes from having a food heritage, recipes being passed down from one to another, but it does take time.

Do you think that a lot of the cookery programmes we see on television can be a bit daunting for some viewers?

They can be but a good programme should be inspiring and encourage people to experiment in the kitchen.

As we mentioned earlier your daughter has decided to go into the profession but there are still very few female Michelin starred chefs. Does the industry need to work harder to encourage women into the kitchen, or should they just accept that the conditions are tough?

There certainly are far more boys than girls in the profession but that is not to say that boys are better than girls in the kitchen. If you take 'Le Gavroche', for example the head chef and the two sous chefs are female so the place is run by women. It is a shame that there are not more women but I suppose nature, and it is nature, plays its part: women will have children and so it takes them away from their work and takes them away from their career. But this doesn't mean they have to stop cooking, it doesn't mean they have to stop doing what they love and what they are good at and 'Le Gavroche' has proved that. With the opportunity and with a sympathetic boss it is possible. It's a tricky one but I don't think it is because it's a tough working environment. Long gone are the days when you would have to carry great big pots and pans, it is not as physically tough as it was thirty years ago. Girls have their place in the kitchen and we should champion that.

Will we be seeing you back on our screens with any other projects?

Yes, I am currently filming two projects. One involves young children in a cooking competition and the other is about people with learning disabilities and helping them to achieve something in life through cooking.

Do you have favourite chef yourself other than your dad?

My uncle! We definitely keep it in the family!