

This is Mark

A Devon chef is marking four decades in the industry with the publication of his first book and a party which has a very special visitor, writes CATHERINE COURTENAY



DURING our chat at his Michelin-starred restaurant and home, The Masons Arms, Mark slipped in several references to rock and pop. This is a chef with a major love of vinyl, but we never once talked about it directly. In a way though, it doesn't matter, because the most important thing to note about Mark Dodson is that he lives and breathes cooking. It would be an injustice not to dedicate every word of this interview to that which has shaped and formed him.

Mark is 60 on October 6, and is marking his landmark birthday with the publication of his first cookery book. The foreword is by Michel Roux, for whom Mark worked as head chef at the Waterside Inn at Bray for 12 years, guiding it to its third Michelin star. Mark and Michel were together for 18 years. "A good friend, a magnificent and unpretentious chef... I look upon Mark as I look upon my son," writes Michel.

The world-famous chef will be travelling to Knowstone for the party to celebrate Mark's birthday. It will no doubt be an emotional occasion. "I don't know how I'll feel... proud, I hope?" ponders Mark.

"It will be just family and chefs," he adds. "But in a way chefs are my family; it sounds stupid but they are the people I grew up with and who helped me."

Mark got the cooking bug as a teenager working on-board a North Sea ferry; he then trained in his home town of Colchester before moved up the culinary ladder. After eating at The Waterside and meeting Michel Roux (who gave him a free dessert), he applied for a job.

"In those days you had to do a day's trial, then go on a waiting list. My day was during Ascot Week - the craziest week. I was nervous, I wanted it to go well; I wanted to work there.

"To end up as head chef was beyond my dreams - even to work there would have been enough."

In 2006, after leaving the Waterside and spending three years as executive chef at Cliveden house in Berkshire, Mark and his wife Sarah and family moved to Devon to set up their own business in the Knowstone pub.

"We took the keys on Tuesday and had to open on the Thursday because there were bookings."

With just two in the kitchen and two (one of which was Sarah) on front of house

'I used to wander around the West End of London looking at the hotels' menus outside their front doors'

PHOTOGRAPHY: MATT AUSTIN

MIXED BERRY CRÈME BRÛLÉE

Serves 6

Ingredients:

6 egg yolks
60g sugar
250ml double cream.
Mixed berries, to garnish
Demerara sugar, for glazing

Method:

Whisk together the egg yolks and the sugar. Boil the cream and pour it on to the yolks, pass and reserve.

Once cooled, this mixture can be refrigerated until needed.

Place the berries into the dishes allowing four blueberries, a couple of raspberries cut in half and a strawberry cut into six or eight, per portion. Top up the dishes with the crème brûlée mixture.

Prepare a bain-marie by placing a paper towel into a deep oven tray and place the crème brûlées into the tray. Pour a little water around them but not so much as to run into them.

This method will prevent the mixture boiling during cooking, which would give a "split" appearance to the finished dish.

Bake the brûlées in a low oven, pre-heated to 130°C.

Depending on the oven and on the serving dishes chosen, check the cooking after 20 minutes. Bear in mind that they could take up to 30 minutes to cook if you choose a deeper style serving dish.

The brûlées should appear just-set when the dish is gently shaken.

Once cooked, leave them to cool and then at serving time sprinkle the tops with demerara sugar and carefully glaze them with a blowtorch.

Taken from This Is Mine by Mark Dodson.

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The crème brûlée recipe taken from *This Is Mine*

they served "a simple menu" and made canapés for the locals, who they invited in.

Looking back on those first weeks Mark recalls many rushed journeys around the Devon countryside, not just sourcing ingredients, but also making regular visits to Homebase for DIY essentials. But careful and realistic planning and the couple's sound business sense, ensured things went smoothly.

"You don't need to close a place for six months and spend half a million doing it up," he says. "Initially it was about getting it up and running. Even if the food is simple, people will be happy."

The couple brought with them a decorator, someone who'd worked for them back home. "His mission was to work around and paint the place. He did the kitchen first, then the loos - you can get away with a bit of shabby chic, but not in the toilet!"

Keeping the pub side of the business was crucial. Mark loves pubs, and values them. (He and Sarah first met in a pub in Bray - which was to become the Fat Duck.) "Locals want, and need, the pub," he says. He appreciates the luxury of an area which is purely for having a pint but he knew that at the Masons they could keep a small number of covers, a small kitchen team (it had to be as the cooking space is tiny) and at the same time allow dining table-free space in this beautiful old listed building.

Within six months they achieved a Michelin star, an accolade they've held ever since.

One of the key things Mark absorbed from his time at the Waterside was what he calls "the family atmosphere", a reference to the importance of good teamwork and relationships between the kitchen and front of house.



Escaping from the kitchen, Mark Dodson of the Michelin-starred Masons Arms with his new head chef, Jamie Coleman

“It has to be like this,” he urges. “It’s like a drummer not talking to the lead singer, if they don’t like each other the band splits.”

“It’s a huge skill in the dining room... When to leave people alone, when to approach them... People will go back to a place with great service and average food.”

As Mark reflects on his cheffing career and how things have changed he never once decries the way things are now. It’s just different, he says.

“When I started out my head chef role models were all in their fifties, they were old school who’d done their hard, bloody graft. Now if you’re not a head chef by the age of 25, you think you’re burned out.

“It’s just different now. You can progress your career very quickly because all the information’s there. I used to wander around the West End of London looking at the hotels’ menus outside their front doors. Now you can find everything online; if you want a recipe from the Waterside you can get it on BBC Food or in one of Michel’s books. Access to the knowledge and information is a lot easier.”

Mark has reached role model status; a lot of the work he does aside from his own restaurant involves helping train and support catering students at Petroc college.

“You reach a stage in your career when you’ve got something worthwhile to pass on,” he notes. “If you’ve got the knowledge you’ve

got to pass it on.” But it’s not necessarily about age, he says, it’s all down to experience.

Many youngsters have gone through the kitchen at the Masons but he recently took on his first head chef, the well-established and current South West Chef of the Year, Jamie Coleman.

“I’m not ready to retire, but it’s nice having some fresh impetus. Jamie’s come in with new thoughts and he’s a great sounding board.”

“I’ve spent my life working with 20-year-olds, but now I have the most mature brigade yet,” he adds. “I’ve gone from Radio 1 to Absolute Radio!”

Mark will tell you that for him, cooking was a learnt skill. He doesn’t count himself as one of “small percentage of gifted chefs”. But he wanted to “do it properly” so he trained and got his qualifications. He’s passionate about learning, as he tells his young chefs, “Don’t just cook great bread, understand *why* it’s great bread. Understand it, because it will help you later on.”

In typical modest fashion he’s called his book, *This Is Mine*, because “every chef has a cookery book in them”.

As Michel Roux says: “Mark does not want to grab the glory and score the goal: he just wants to cook and make people happy... A good friend, a magnificent and unpretentious chef – I wish Mark every success with *This is Mine*.” ♦