

A BRIEF CULINARY HISTORY

Paul Cunningham.

Well, I suppose that my culinary background started with the simple love of food. Not good food I might add, just food in general. I was a little, rather round young man with a healthy appetite and a passion for almost all things edible. My Mum's oven baked onion soup remains a favourite and my Nan's Sunday lunch was a cracker – slow roasted, meltingly tender topside of beef, three or four vegetables from the garden and gravy. Alongside were always three types of potato – mashed, boiled and roasted. Baked rice pudding often adorned the table for afters – we started first and my beloved Grandad finished from the serving bowl, skin and all.

My school years passed and seemed rather un-exciting – drama, art and drawing classes were all that seemed to interest me. With hindsight it was maybe here that the creative, culinary genes were kicking in, struggling to reach the surface. My weekends were often spent picking ripe blackberries or scrumping in the local orchard – this was far more fun. During the summer holidays my folks and I travelled the coastlines of Cornwall, exploring the secret corners of darkest Devon and the simple life of delightful Dorset - life was one enormous Cornish pastie, with an extra helping of strawberries and clotted cream for good measure. The idea of holidaying with my friends in Ibiza or on the Costa del Sol ignited no sparks for this would be gastronomie. The rock-pools, coves, hills and valleys of southern England were scoured, pausing only to taste the wares of local fishermen, bakers and butchers. Bliss.

My Dad was and still is a great lover of farm shops and roadside sellers - purchasing anything from fresh, still warm new laid eggs to homemade jams & marmalades, breads and seasonal vegetables. My home county of Essex overflows with such wonderful organic home-grown products. Many a happy hour have I spent picking the juiciest strawberries in the fields of Tiptree, the home of the world famous preserves.

My early working life comprised of many tasks, wood staining of clock housings, a stint with a television production company - which may I add was not as glamorous as it sounds. I also had a stint within the employ of a wholesale potato company at the old Spitalfields market in the east end of London, a most knowledgeable position of which I would have much use for in later life. Cooking professionally came at the age of nineteen when I was approached by my little sisters friend's father who was about to purchase a country pub. The Fleur de Lys in the little village of Widdington, near Saffron Walden, just south of Cambridge. He was in need of a chef and would I like to try - I thought I'd give it a whirl. Instead of sketching on paper, porcelain would be my new canvas, food and flavours my medium.

I spent exactly a year at the pub, blundering my way through cookbooks & handwritten recipes from earlier chefs. Surprisingly enough I also pleased the guests (I never killed anyone anyway.) I was hooked; I was bitten by the culinary bug. I said to myself that now it was time to learn from scratch – kitchen management, health & hygiene and all of that bumpf. One and a half great years were spent at the University Arms in the beautiful city of Cambridge, where I studied and learnt the basics from amongst others, a Mr. Mark Broadbent – rather imposing figure of a sous-chef from Rugley (he left a most distinguishing mark on my character). I also completed a very enjoyable year and a bit at the catering college Thurrock Tech. under my first mentor, Mon. Serge Bossen. Working my way from commis to senior chef de partie at the U.A. made way for my next move – Kent and Chilston Park Country House. Open fields, trees, fresh clean country air and really good food. A most satisfying stepping stone, in more ways than one.

After a while I was westward bound. I headed for Buckinghamshire and Danesfield House, a beautiful hotel of great reputation on the banks of the River Thames. During my time at Danesfield I spent almost all of my free hours working around and visiting other restaurants in able to gain as much experience as possible. I spent time in the kitchens of the Michelin starred Chewton Glen, Lucknam Park & Gravetye Manor – although the chef at the time left a lot to be desired! A most influential stage came whilst holidaying in Devon at the then home of Keith Floyd, the Maltster's Arms in darkest Tuckenhay, Devon. Real food with real flavour cooked by a real man – an experience never to be forgot, the man is a natural talent, a genius.

Never also will I forget a very short stage in kitchen of Marco Pierre White at Harvey's in Wandsworth. Inspirational - Mr. White is undoubtedly, the most influential figure to my generation of British cooks – there are a lot of people out there that owe more than they would initially own up to, to that man. Respect is due.

After Danesfield, a trip to the Cotswolds was embarked upon. At the Greenway in Cheltenham I met Chris Colmer, a most overlooked talent. He influenced me immensely. I was also sous-chef for Clive Dixon at Lords of the Manor, Upper Slaughter. Of all the chefs that I have come in contact with over the years, I think that my style is most likeable to Clive's, strong, sharp but rustic and natural cooking, food that tastes. For that I am proud and will forever be in Clive's debt. A star from Guide Michelin was awarded after just nine months. During this time I also frequented the now double starred Le Champignon Sauvage. David and Helen Everitt Matthias still remain a great inspiration. I just wish that I could see more of them.

Whilst at The Greenway I met a rather lovely Dane. In the spring of '94 we moved to her homeland. For the first few months I worked as a gardener at the local tennis club whilst I explored this new country. In the October of the same year I started as chef de partie at the previously Michelin starred restaurant Søllerød Kro which lies to the north of Copenhagen. During the next couple of years I learnt the language, worked hard and kept my head down – I did though, gain a few prominent contacts within the seemingly high walls of Danish gastronomy. I was honoured to meet amongst others the infamous restaurateur Jan-Kurt Christensen, the great Jan 'Cocotte' Pedersen of Babette's Feast fame and the enfant terrible of the Danish art world Jens-Jørgen Thorsen. I also met my mate TB.

In 1996 I was appointed as chef des cuisines of Søllerød Kro. After just nine months, we were awarded our first star from Guide Michelin - the hard work had paid off, the restaurant was again added to the list of only six others with stars in Denmark. I felt enormously proud to be in such a position in this foreign land. The next two years were very professionally most profitable - I left the restaurant in the autumn of 1998.

A chance telephone conversation led to me to travelling to the other side of the globe and discovering the delights of Hong Kong – what a super city. Truly amazing food, fabulous markets and the most lovely of people. By the use of fresh, simple ingredients I was able to express the way of life that I have experienced throughout my few years of living in Denmark. The first promotion at the Hong Kong Country Club was a great success and I was honoured to be invited back a year later, this time to the Hong Kong hotel, home of restaurant Tai-Pan . The promotion of 'modern Danish cuisine' proved very popular, packing the restaurant at lunch & dinner, this would have to be repeated.

Back in Denmark, from the Christmas of 1998 I stood in the kitchen of Vesterbrogade's Formel b. We had much success with the restaurant gaining top ratings within all of the major news publications of Denmark, along with very positive reviews from the guides of both Denmark and abroad. The mighty Christian was born on March 3, 1999 – to that day, my greatest challenge, to date.

On my return from Hong Kong - April 2000, an offer was laid upon my table - the famous Hotel Plaza in Copenhagen was to be restored to its former glory by the French group Accor and I was asked to head her kitchens, an offer I graciously accepted. Plaza, the restaurant would open her doors for business, August 2000 with a new team, new food and a new, bright future within the hotel of Sofitel Copenhagen. The glory of 'Plaza Copenhagen' was unfortunately most short-lived.

Private dining followed along with a short stagè with Michel Michaud at his restaurant Marie Louise. August 2001. The infamous building that once housed Gericke's Anatole was free - restaurant Coquus would shortly be conceived. From day one we received rave reviews, one of our first phone calls....on our first day, a food journalist had eaten, we received our first review, it turned out to be a good one, a very good one. We were on our way - five months into the project, it all went very wrong. A direction meeting resulted in my immediate departure from Gothersgade 35. Coquus R.I.P – for now at least.

That very afternoon a now good friend handed over the name and address of a certain man that was director of a certain garden in the centre of Copenhagen that had a certain idea regarding the gastronomic future of said park. A conversation with Lars Liebst resulted in a stroll through Tivoli. On 11 April 2003 after many a day of hard work and much speculation The Paul opened. After seven months of operation we were awarded a star from Guide Michelin. The Paul also holds three stars and a sun from the Danish Restaurant Guide – Den Danske Spiseguide & three plates from Smag og Behag's guide, Denmark's Bedste Spisesteder.

My first book Madjournal was published in the September of 2003.

Lene and I took delivery of little Valdemar on May 20 '04. A beautiful day. Since those days The Paul has grown from strength to strength. A great deal of the original personal are still within the walls others, to pastures new – some have even gone on to run starred restaurants of their own. Proud I am.

During the hectic summer season of 2004, we managed to write and to photograph our way through another book. A collection of eleven menus – all of the dishes that were presented throughout that year. A summary of a complete seasons work. All of the appetisers and snacks, the shellfish and fish dishes, the meats, cheeses and desserts. We completed the book with a selection of our p4's and chocolates. The Paul – a cookbook was published in June 2005.

In January of 2007 I was most proud to able to take part in the now infamous Northcote Manor Festival of Food & Wine. I cooked alongside the greats of my generation. Our humble little inclusion garnished a week of culinary delights from the likes of Pern, Blanc, Roux, Caines, Howard and not to mention Mr. Haworth himself. Utter Lancastrian luxury my humble thanks.

Mauritius called also this year – the Festival Culinaire Bernard Loiseau. A memorial festival for the late, most great chef. Truly a breathtaking experience. Mauritius was, a very paradise on Earth. The people are most beautiful and the island most lovely. I do hope to visit again soon.

March '07 came along too, together with the new Guide Rouge. We proudly regained our star – and our colleagues at noma have gone to two. Bloody well done René. Most superb it is to cook alongside chefs of this calibre in a town like Copenhagen with its constantly escalating gastronomic reputation. But as they say in the movies...'You ain't seen nothin' yet.' The next instalment to your collection of culinary literature is now out and is actually in its third print – a publication of somewhat masculine cooking, 'Incognito Royale'.

'Pauls Grill' is also now finished, published and out - and my travel food book of culinary tales & photographs will grace the shelves of your local bookshop ready for Christmas 2009 – 'Around the World in 80 Dishes – The culinary world, according to Paul'.

Warm regards you lovely people – Paul.