

Father and son culinary dream team
Michel and Alain Roux, who teamed
up to cook for patrons of Royal Ascot's
Panoramic Restaurant this year

MICHEL ROUX

THE ORIGINAL AND THE BEST

Fiona Collins speaks to one of the world's most acclaimed and respected chefs – French culinary genius Michel Roux – who has maintained a coveted three-Michelin-star status for an incredible quarter-century



Waterside Inn, Bray



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very month it seems, a new celebrity chef comes to our screens,

promising to revolutionise the way we think about food, and extolling the virtues of healthy eating and home cooking. Entire television networks are now dedicated to the subject, while the more famous of these culinary gurus have created entire business empires by trading on their names alone.

One man for whom success has come the old-fashioned way - grafting from the age of 14 in a French patisserie, and creating such a stir that he was invited to become head chef for Cecile de Rothschild in Paris at the age of 22 - is the man considered by many to be the godfather of modern British dining: the great Michel Roux.

While publishing deals and television appearances have brought him something of a celebrity following of late, this is still a man for whom a basic passion for food, and a striving for culinary excellence, is the main driving force.

"It's a kind of love," Roux says of cooking. "You have to look at yourself everyday and say, 'Am I still there? Am I still hungry?', because the day you're not hungry anymore, then it's time to pack it in. It's bad news. You must always question yourself and push yourself a bit further."

In 1967, Roux moved from his native France to the UK, to open London's Le Gavroche restaurant with his brother Albert. Le Gavroche marked the beginning of a gastronomic revolution in the UK, introducing the best of French cuisine to the British palate, at a time when England's culinary

landscape could be described as bleak at best.

With luminaries including Charlie Chaplin, Sophia Loren and Robert Redford attending the glittering opening night, the Roux brothers guaranteed themselves headlines, but the hype was immediately followed by culinary success. Le Gavroche became the first restaurant in the country to be awarded one, then two and finally three Michelin stars.

"We had an instant success," Michel Roux says of Le Gavroche, which within months of opening had earned a reputation as 'the' place to eat in the capital; its tables bursting with London's high society.

Catering for such prestigious clientele was not new to the Roux brothers though. Albert had formerly acted as private chef to the Cazalet family (Major Cazalet was horse trainer to the Queen Mother), while Michel had performed a similar role for the Rothschilds in Paris for the five years preceding Le Gavroche's opening.

"At the age of 22, I was cooking for the 'who's who' of France and England. I cooked for whoever was visiting the

Rothschild family; Greta Garbo, Marie Bell, Pompidou, Picasso..." Roux reels off a jaw-dropping list. "People don't give you a job like that if you're not amongst the best in the world at what you do."

In 1972, Michel Roux left Le Gavroche to open the Waterside Inn in Bray, Berkshire. Success was again quick to follow. The Waterside gained its first Michelin star in 1974, when the guide was initially issued. Three years later, it was awarded a second star; and in 1985, the restaurant gained the ultimate culinary accolade when its 'exquisite

French cuisine and matchless service' were awarded three Michelin stars. Remarkably, the Waterside Inn has retained its three-star status ever since, representing an incredible quarter-century of supreme culinary excellence and achievement.

"It feels like a marathon, and any marathon which goes on for 25 years is a very long marathon!" Roux says with a laugh. "When we were first awarded the three stars in 1985, well, it created a lot of excitement. It was a bit like winning an Olympic gold medal because

you never really think it will happen.

"And every year in January [when Michelin publishes its new list] we hope the news will be good, but we never really know – there is always that anticipation; that question mark. But in fact, if we were blasé, and were thinking that success was guaranteed, then it would be time to pack up and get out of the game."

Despite his incredible success as restaurateur and chef, it is Roux's nurturing of the younger generation which he holds most dear. The Roux →

The lovely waterfront terrace at Waterside Inn



Scholarship was set up 27 years ago by Michel and Albert, to foster young cooking talent in this country. The annual competition has gone on to become one of the most prestigious contests for young chefs in the world.

"For me personally, if I have to single one thing which I'm proud of, that would be it," Roux says in his deep baritone voice, no less heavily accented for his forty years in the UK. "It is essential to my wellbeing because I feel so good to be able to help and further young people; and for them, it's more than a turning point, it's like suddenly someone switches the light on.

"My current scholar is flying back from the US where he was

with Thomas Keller at The French Laundry, the three-star Michelin restaurant. [When the scholars travel overseas] they learn the customs, they learn the markets, they see the ingredients, the spices, the herbs, they see new methods, and they are like a sponge; they absorb so much."

It is a glowing testament to the success of the project – which offers the victor a chance to cook and train under the supervision of a leading three-star Michelin chef – that six or seven of the scholarship's previous winners now hold Michelin stars in their own right.

But it is Michel's own son Alain who is perhaps his greatest and proudest success story. Undaunted

by the successes of his father and uncle, Alain was determined to pursue a career as a chef, and spent eight years working in top restaurants in France before he was invited to join the team at Waterside Inn as demi-chef de partie, aged 23. Now, aged 42, he has taken up the reins from his father as chef patron at Waterside Inn.

Although it must have been difficult to let go, Roux Snr concedes that Waterside Inn is now Alain's ship to sail. Roux remains executive director of the restaurant though, and following a move to Switzerland in 2008, now takes on an overseeing, ambassadorial role. "When I travel, I like to tell people: 'You must go and see my son, and enjoy a lunch or dinner there – go and meet him and visit his kitchen...' and so on," says Roux.

However, Roux Snr returned to the kitchens of Berkshire this year, when he teamed up with Alain to produce a stunning summer menu for guests of the Panoramic Restaurant at Royal Ascot. It was an opportunity he relished, particularly because the

event is so local to the Waterside Inn. For the past 35 years, he has regularly popped down the road to enjoy a flutter on the horses.

So did he get an opportunity to enjoy the event this year, or was he just toiling in the kitchen?

"Well firstly, we were there to look after the guests," Roux says. "But it was Alain's show really; he brought his sous-chef and key people, so when I saw that the show was moving nicely, then I took a break to enjoy racing."

"What, and left Alain alone to cope with the stress of the kitchen?" I ask.

"Absolutely, yes!" Roux says with a deep laugh. "The way it should be!"

Finally, I ask the greatest chef of them all for a stand-out moment in his distinguished 55 year career. Cooking for Picasso? Spearheading the gastronomic revolution of the UK?

"I think it was when the son of Her Majesty the Queen asked me to cook for her 70th birthday.

That was, well, magnifique!" Roux says with relish.

"And since then, I have cooked for her on quite a few occasions, and it's never too many. She's a great lady, and in my opinion one of the... well, it's what Britain stands for."

And as for the future? "The young are top of my list," says Roux. "I'm often asked to give lectures in universities around the world. I'm also a prolific writer and I love writing, and I can write and do new dishes in my house in Switzerland, or in the south of France.

"And I have to say, when I'm by myself, I love nothing more than just going to the market and buying a few things, then going back home and single-handedly just knocking off a dish with two or three or four fresh ingredients. Simple and delicious!"



The Waterside Inn, at the Panoramic Restaurant, Ascot

SEA BASS EN CROUTE WITH MOUSSELINE SAUCE

By Alain Roux

Serves 6

Ingredients:

1 sea bass, about 1.6kg
100g fresh tender fennel fronds
(ideally)
or a few thyme sprigs
900g classic puff pastry
4 herb crepes, optional
8 large spinach leaves, blanched
for 20 seconds and wrapped in
a damp tea towel
Eggwash (1 egg yolk mixed with
1 tbsp milk)
A little clarified butter, to glaze
1 quantity mousseline sauce



Method:

If you haven't persuaded the fishmonger to do so for you, prepare the sea bass. Scrape off the scales with the back of a knife and cut off the side and dorsal fins with scissors. Lay the fish on one side and, using a filleting knife, open it up through its back to the belly, gliding the knife over the bones. Repeat on the underside of the bones. Use the tip of the scissors to cut through the backbone close to the head and tail. Pull out the whole backbone; the guts will come away with it. Place the tip of the scissors inside the fish and remove the gills, then trim the end of the tail.

Rinse the sea bass under a trickle of cold running water. Sponge it inside and out with kitchen paper, then season lightly with salt and put the fennel fronds or thyme into the cavity. Cover the fish with cling film and refrigerate.

Preheat the oven to 200C/Gas 6. Lightly flour the work surface and roll out 40% of the pastry into a rectangle about 50 x 15cm. Roll the pastry loosely round the rolling pin and unroll it onto a chilled 60 x 40 cm baking sheet.

If using crepes, lay two along the centre of the pastry, overlapping them slightly so they cover almost the whole length. Cover with 4 blanched spinach leaves, lay the sea bass on top and bring the sides of the spinach up over the fish. Cover with the rest of the leaves to wrap the fish completely in spinach.

Now bring the crepes up over the fish and fill any gaps with pieces cut from the remaining crepes. Don't overlap them more than a mere fraction; the fish should be enclosed in a single layer of crepe. Brush the puff pastry around the fish and eggwash. Roll out the remaining pastry into 55x20cm rectangle, roll it loosely round the rolling pin and, starting at the head, unroll it over the fish towards the tail to cover it completely. Leave to rest in the fridge for 20mins.

With a very sharp, small pointed knife, cuff off the excess pastry around the fish, leaving a 2-3 cm wide border. Press lightly all round the border with your

finger tips to seal it. Brush the whole surface of the pastry with eggwash. With the knife tip, make very light incisions on the pastry to look like fish scales. Draw eyes on the head and mark rays on the head, tail and all round the border. Bake for 10 minutes, then lower the oven setting to 180C/Gas 4 and cook for another 25 minutes.

Use a wide palette knife to slide the parcel carefully onto a wire rack. Leave to stand for 5-10 minutes before serving. Brush the pastry with a little clarified butter to give it an extra shine. Present the fish whole on a platter to impress your guests, then cut into slices using a very sharp serrated knife. Lift onto individual plates and pour on some mousseline sauce. Serve the rest in a sauceboat. (the crepes ensure a crisper crust, as they prevent the steam from the fish making the pastry soggy, but you can omit these provided you will wrap the sea bass in spinach leaves).

Mousseline Sauce

Whip 75ml whipping cream to soft peaks and fold into the hollandaise just before serving. Adjust the seasoning. The subtle sauce is superb with poached or steamed fish, or with asparagus. When truffles are in season, I add some chopped truffle trimmings to make sure the sauce is even more delectable.

Sauce Vierge (as served with during Royal Ascot)

80g tomatoes
200ml Olive Oil
Juice of 1 lemon
2 tbsp snipped basil leaves
1 tbsp snipped chervil leaves
1 garlic clove, finely chopped
6 coriander seeds, crushed
Salt and freshly ground pepper

Peel, deseed and dice the tomatoes and place in a bowl with the olive oil, lemon juice, herbs, garlic and coriander seeds. Mix gently and season with salt and pepper to taste. Just before serving, warm the sauce slightly, to about 30-40C.