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January 2007

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WHAT'S COOKING?

Someone's cooking up a storm in Manchester. Award-winning chef, Eyck Zimmer, gives us some food for thought. Interview by Rachel Metcalfe

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ith an impressive CV and over 40 culinary accolades to his name, Eyck Zimmer has every reason to feel good about himself.

No stranger to the world of competitive cooking, 37-year-old Eyck was crowned Master of Culinary Arts in 2000 and through the years has picked up numerous gastronomic gongs including Prix Pierre Taittinger 2002, Grand Prix de Cuisine 2004 and most recently, National Chef of the Year 2006.

Add to this a stellar working life in a series of five-star hotels in Germany, Switzerland and Portugal – not to mention the posts he held at five of London's most prestigious hotels – and it's easy to see that this is a man whose career has gone from strength to strength.

Now enjoying a new life in the north as executive chef at The Lowry Hotel in Manchester, German-born Eyck is keen to move away from the formal dining experience and introduce diners to British classics, created using fresh ingredients and produce from the North West.

Eyck certainly seems to know what people want to eat, so where does he find his inspiration?

Who or what is your biggest inspiration in life?

Professionally, I have a lot of respect for John Williams (executive chef at The Ritz), he is not a celebrity chef but he is a great chef. He has a real appreciation of food and a vast knowledge of food that is rarely found in this country. He is partially the reason behind my success in the industry. Otherwise, I respect people who are unique and creative like Vivienne Westwood. She doesn't just follow trends; she does the things she likes.

Did you always want to be a chef?

As far as I can remember, yes. I knew I had to be creative. There is no better pleasure than transforming ingredients into a meal for people to enjoy. Cooking is like everything, you need to practice and constantly analyse what flavours marry together and what texture combinations will enhance the eating quality of the dish. Memories of the palate last a lifetime and I think we all remember our favourite meals until the day we die.

How would you describe your style?

My influences extend from classic British dishes to the more diverse flavours of fusion cuisine. My style is very much modern eclectic and I mix different influences and different ingredients to produce dishes I can be proud of.

Where do you find inspiration for new dishes?

My travels, books and exploring different cultures all give me inspiration.

Professionally, what has made you most proud?

Professionally – having achieved the Grand Slam of Cooking Competitions in the United Kingdom; Master of Culinary Arts 2000; winning Prix Pierre Taittinger 2002; representing the UK at the Bocuse D'Or in 2003 and 2005 in Lyon; and now being crowned National Chef of the year 2006.

How did it feel to win Knorr Chef of the year 2006?

The awards ceremony was a roller coaster. I was immediately awarded the best main course and just thought there was no chance of winning Chef of the Year after that. Before they announced the winner they said: "The winner said it would be his last competition," and I thought ooh maybe it's me after all, (as I decided that prior to entering). Then when they quoted my website and that I was East German I knew it was me. It was one of my proudest moments. My mentor and now good friend John Williams congratulated me with a hug and said he was so proud of me. To walk through a room full of chefs and people from the hospitality industry giving you a standing ovation – well that speaks for itself.

You have achieved so much, but do you have an ultimate ambition?

Having my own restaurant would be nice – so if somebody out there would like to give me half a million pounds to do so, please feel free! But I still have lots to do here at The Lowry Hotel in Manchester.

Can you describe how it feels at the end of a good night in the kitchen and restaurant?

I don't mind working hard if I have the right support. You can be the greatest chef in the world but you can't do it by yourself, you need a good team. It's great when we are busy and my team is giving it their best shot and it all comes together. I enjoy it and then I couldn't ask for more. When that's the case we have a beer whilst cleaning the kitchen...who says a chef's life is bad?! Happy customers and things going to plan makes it all worthwhile.

You must get very stressed in the kitchen at times, how do you keep yourself calm?

I don't! (He laughs). Well, I think I am quite easy to get along with, if you stay on the right side of me. My chefs spend a lot of time in the kitchen every day, so it should be as much fun as possible, but I'm not afraid of shouting if I feel there is the need.

Do you have any other great passions in life?

I don't get enough spare time for much else really. I guess cooking is my biggest passion but I do love music, travelling and the gym.

Have you ever been to a place that has really blown you away or inspired you?

To eat it would have to be Alain Ducasse in Paris, Joel Robuchon in London, Harald Wolfarth in Baiersbronn in Germany and Danil Boulud in New York.

You believe that cooking should be a 'carefully balanced reflection of all things nature has to offer'. Is nature your main inspiration?

There is no greater inspiration than nature. Seasonal fruit and vegetables are just unbeatable in terms of flavour and aroma and there's nothing better than springtime for lamb or autumn for game and mushrooms.

What is your philosophy on life?

Work hard, try your best and don't be afraid to fail. Believe in yourself and then things will come your way. ■

