

LET'S BREAK BREAD

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Do you know that feeling about an hour before you're due to welcome your dinner party guests and you just know you've overcommitted?

The pans are building up. The smell of burning is the new timer. You are running out of worktop to put things down. You haven't even started dessert yet. Don't look down at the floor!

Maybe you are far more serene than that. Totally in control. Never in a fluster. Always ready on time. Oh how we envy you! You probably don't need to read on.

We've always been over optimistic and over ambitious. A furious combination. At the tender age of 26 that spirit led us to bite off more than we could chew once again. Our family purchased a dilapidated country house set in 45 acres, complete with leaking roof and full of asbestos.. It needed gutting and totally reimagining.

But what has all this got to do with bread?



HOW BREAD CHANGED EVERYTHING

A few weeks before we opened Hampton Manor, back in 2009, I was vacuuming the freshly laid carpet with our first Chef. I didn't really know what a Michelin star was back then. I thought it was something you got for having a very posh restaurant with lots of cutlery laid out and perfectly ironed table cloths. I knew this Chef had previously had one of these coveted stars over his kitchen pass and assumed that another one would soon follow him to our door.

Three years later and a Michelin star was nowhere to be seen, but I had fallen in love with being around the kitchen. The smells, the passion, the produce and the people.

We met our first Michelin inspector. A rare privilege that occasionally happens after they have made a mystery visit.

We had started eating our way round the Michelin star circuit both in England and abroad. The research budget was rapidly escalating! We started to realise that a Michelin star had nothing to do with hovering waiters and white tablecloths.

All the Michelin talk made us hungry. Hungry to be in the club, for success, to be counted alongside the great restaurants we had visited. It meant we started trying harder and harder.

It is funny, isn't it, that often the harder you try the more elusive something becomes?

We had no idea that winning a Michelin star would take another 4 years and that in the end it would come down to a loaf of bread.

A loaf of bread! Surely there is more to winning a Michelin star than that?

Well perhaps. We had tried so many different ideas for our bread offering. We were dazzled by the endless choice of breads in some of the finest restaurants. We felt obliged to compete. Miniature loaves, tapenade twirls, rustic baguettes. The games went on and on. Nothing felt right or stood out.

After another mystery Michelin visit we were left with a coded message.... "you need to learn to cook like a Roux brother before you can cook like Heston". It was a gift. It made sense of so many of the simple, confident, understated Michelin star restaurants that I had visited. Over the coming months these words started to shape our conversations in the kitchen.

It was a turbulent time. We appointed a new Head Chef and despite his compelling CV and tremendous creativity it hadn't worked out. In many senses it was a crisis moment that turned into our most strategic inflection point. Do we go out to find the big name Chef who can lead us to the promised land or do we take a chance on nurturing a team of local lads who had been the heart of the kitchen from the outset?

We promoted a young chef from within the ranks. Rob Palmer took the reins with no former experience of cooking in a Michelin starred restaurant.

The first thing he did was to change the bread to a simple loaf with a deep flavour and a dark crust. It was light and fluffy inside with a crunchy outer. It felt and tasted so right.

The next chapter for us was a process of stripping it back. Simplicity, honesty and flavour.

WHAT THE BREAD SAID

For us Rob's loaf became the symbol of a guiding principle. Less is more. Put all your energy into a few things and do them well. The kitchen was finding its identity and its confidence. We had embraced the Michelin message to simplify and focus. We worked harder at sourcing the best ingredients and did our best to restrain ourselves from messing about with them.

Just 18 months later it was to be our Autumn. 3rd October, 2016. It was the first year that Michelin had launched their guide at an organised event in London. It was normally a press release followed by a media frenzy to see who had made the cut. We had a call asking us to attend the award ceremony but no confirmation of why. It was a long wait in the wings of the auditorium. We were surrounded by the good and the great in the cheffing world. We spotted Heston, Tom Kerridge, the Roux crew. The feeling was electric but we still didn't know for sure. Could we be here for some other excruciating reason?

As we waited we were approached by a lady... "You're up first". There were about 30 of us in the wings of the auditorium. Adrenalin had kicked in and I blurted out... "please don't tell me we're here for some other award". As much as collecting any award from Michelin was nice, the thought of not collecting a Michelin Star at last was devastating. Our hopes had really peaked. This had been seven years in the making.

Our young general manager, Craig Newman, was with us. His presence had been specifically requested. We were ushered to the side of the stage and could see the presentations unfolding...

"and now we are starting with a special award"... NO! Not a special award. Please anything but a SPECIAL AWARD. Our hearts sank.

"Going to Peel's Restaurant at Hampton Manor... the first ever... Michelin Award for Welcome & Service".

As we began our walk to the stage a empathetic official saw the pain in our eyes and whispered... "this won't be your only visit to the stage today".

What a lifeline. One that helped us adjust and appreciate the incredible honour that had just been bestowed on us. We had been picked out of all the restaurants in the UK for our welcome and service. We were a young and small team. It was not something we ever anticipated but as it sunk in it really touched all of us.

We sat back down in the audience and watched the proceedings with hope. As the stars were announced we found ourselves at the very back of the queue, and were starting to sweat again. But sure enough the official had been on the money. We were invited to the stage to collect our first Michelin Star. It was a golden week as we were awarded 4 AA rosettes for culinary excellence one week later.

Without doubt the Michelin star was not for our bread. In fact many starred restaurants don't even make bread. Some buy it in from skilled bakers and focus on their job of cooking a decent dinner. Bread, snacks, after dinner treats... they are all peripheral to Michelin's main interest. Can you source good ingredients, treat them with respect and deliver a good plate of food to their diners consistently? Bread for us though was the first step to a way of thinking that would run right through our menu planning and dish development.

The bread said... Keep its simple, trust the ingredients and keep it up. We've been doing that for the last 4 years and have retained the great honour of a Michelin star every year.

WHERE WILL THE BREAD HEAD?

It was one thing, coming of age as a team. We now had a badge to tell the world that we know how to cook. The journey from there though has been even more rewarding. The relationships that we were building with farmers, artisans and wine makers was opening our eyes to a world at serious risk.

You see food isn't just about eating. Food is political. Bread is POLITICAL.

Bread tells a story for most cultures. For many it is a beautiful and evocative story. It is a story that people of every race and background can relate to. It is something that almost everyone can afford. It is something that all can share.

The bigger story about bread in our nation is worrying. The late Dr Martin Wolfe brought our grain story into sharp focus. Martin spent nearly 40 years as a plant pathologist at Cambridge before making his most lasting impact through his innovative farming revolution. He inspired a "movement" of agriculture and food practitioners.

When we recently visited Martin's farm, Wakelyns, his family showed us the pioneering agroforestry project where he had fought the good fight for diversity in the modern grain variety. His goal was to build resilience back in to our farming system.

Our grains were once diverse and adapted to specific areas which created unique flavours. Like much of our farming in the 1900s we moved to selective hybrid wheats with the goal of making baking easier. The 1960s though escalated the human interference in nature. It was known as the Green revolution but was riddled with unintended consequences. We were trying to feed the world.

The belief was that, through intensive selection, we could create high yielding, disease resistant varieties that would allow farmers to scale. The unfortunate reality is becoming ever clearer.

We've eliminated diversity, reduced the resilience, devastated nutrient density and left ourselves exposed to severe soil erosion which has a direct impact on carbon emissions. The lack of diversity has had a wide range of impacts on the wider farming system. Most notably the dependence of modern monoculture on nitrogen fertilizers and the need to use chemicals to treat disease. It has devastated the life of the soil and our water.

The soil was once home to 80% of the world's living biomass. To put it in perspective, earthworms alone outweighed the cumulative weight of all other life species put together. A reality that is severely under threat. It was an intelligent and dynamic system that delivered minerals and nutrients into our food. An army of fungi and bacteria pulled together and adapted to the ever changing world that the food system was required to survive. Chemical inputs devastated this unseen ecosystem.

The last chapter of Martin's life saw him illegally distribute genetically diverse wheats to other farmers and communities as a protest against the domination of the big business agro-chemical propaganda that was driving the political decisions.

Today Martin's disruptive agenda is increasingly becoming acknowledged as mission critical to saving the future of our soil and farming system.

The reality for bread is a slow return to diverse heritage grains and population wheats that give flavour to the baker. Back in our kitchen that brings challenges as diversity isn't predictable and Michelin want consistency. The risks of joining this fight though are worth taking. If we're going to cook well we're going to have to be very attentive to the ingredients in our hands. Real food isn't a quick fix. It is living and changing. If we listen to it, and dance with it, we can unlock a new world of flavour.