

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

MICHELIN STARS AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY ARE JUST TWO OF THE GOALS OF THE TEAM BEHIND THE PLOUGH, A NEWLY OPENED FINE DINING RESTAURANT IN MILTON KEYNES. KIRSTY COLLINGS REPORTS



Milton Keynes in Buckinghamshire may not be renowned for its thriving culinary scene, but that's precisely why two local businessmen invested more than £600,000 of their own money into The Plough at Wavendon.

The fine dining restaurant opened this summer after extensive refurbishment of what was previously a "rough and ready" local pub and former 16th century coaching inn. Owners Jonathan Todd and Howard Bridgeman wanted to create the finest restaurant in the area, somewhere with exceptional service and food at which they would be happy to entertain clients. Having no previous experience of the industry, the pair brought in head chef Grant Hawthorn to lend the project a chef's perspective.

"When Jon and Howard asked me to do this they gave me a shell in which to create a concept," says Hawthorn. "They didn't know me at all, but entrusted me with their dream; their baby. I was left to select everything from front of house staff to every piece of cutlery

and crockery. It was a chef's dream."

The concept Hawthorn created draws on the 35 year old's South African roots where he trained as a chef before moving to the UK seven years ago. "It is based on Cape Town fine dining. It's all about offering a very personal service, with attention to detail but without being stuffy," he explains. "We aim to be on a par with two Michelin star restaurants – somewhere comparable to Le Cinq at George V in Paris, Waterside Inn in Bray, Rick Stein's in Cornwall."

Remaining focused on the customer, there is no service charge on the menu, filtered tap water is available for people that don't want bottled, and the restaurant even offers guests a free ride home within a 10 mile radius. "We have an eight seater Mercedes that can be booked on a first come first served basis and will collect our guests and drop them home free of charge."

Despite such attention to detail Hawthorn insists: "All we are doing here is the basics."

Set back from the road behind a sweeping gravel driveway, The Plough creates a welcoming first impression. Guests can enjoy a pre-dinner drink under the cover of pruned flat topped trees on the front terrace or in the small but cosy bar area, complete with Georgian fireplace.

In addition to the 38 cover dining room decorated with local artists' paintings, there is courtyard dining for up to 65 at the rear of the building. Although a dismal summer has not yet allowed the courtyard to reach its full potential, a system of electric heaters and canvas awnings mean customers can enjoy al fresco dining year round, while offering a sanctuary for any diehard smokers. One of the restaurant owners is director of the landscaping company responsible, and the project has already won an industry award.

In the gravel parking area adjacent to the courtyard there is also space for a 120 person marquee and according to Hawthorn they already have two weddings booked.



HEAD CHEF GRANT HAWTHORN'S SIGNATURE DISH, MARINATED LOIN OF TUNA, IS A POPULAR CHOICE AT THE PLOUGH

Above the restaurant there is living accommodation for some of the staff and administration offices, with future plans for a wine cellar. "We currently have 140 bins but hope to get that up to 300 bins."

The kitchen, although initially cause for concern, is now sufficiently equipped, says Hawthorn. "When I came on board the kitchen had already been fitted by a kitchen designer. It had three microwaves, a freezer in the hot kitchen, and just a few small under-bar fridges. There was no workflow, nowhere to wash our hands. They spent £40K on the kitchen. I came in and had to spend another £56K putting it right."

Hawthorn heads a brigade of eight chefs with 12 front of house staff but eventually plans to almost double that number. "I want my staff to be happy and fresh. With 48 hour weeks they will serve happy food."

He says the staff are paid London wages, and although there is no service charge on the menu, on average they get 10%. "It works well – the staff work hard for their tips."

"My guys have given me a three year commitment. That's 18 months to achieve a Michelin star and 18 months to maintain it," says Hawthorn. He admits: "I'm ambitious, and the owners are ambitious too."

HOME GROWN

Perhaps their most ambitious aim however is to become totally self sufficient for food supplies within 18 months.

"We have 12 acres of land in Moulton, which is 16 miles away, that we hope to start using from January next year. I'm not a farmer, but I've been monitoring all my ordering levels – everything from a basil leaf

to a carrot. Once we have a history of what we will require and when, we can get it all planted at the right times."

They are also getting advice on the kind of livestock the restaurant could produce. "We're still young, and only small, so we are being advised to stick to rare breeds at the start, predominantly pork. In the end it would be great to have our own chickens and ducks, but the cost per head at the abattoir means it's only really financially viable for us to do pork due to the yield."

For now, Hawthorn uses a local butcher, whose meat comes from a family farm or within 15 miles of the butchery. Venison comes from nearby Woburn Abbey. Fresh produce however has to come from London.

"I've talked to local farm shops here but it's hard to establish the supply. It took us two months just to get a milk supplier to tell us no – he only supplies supermarkets. It's frustrating – there seems to be no network outside London. I want to support local businesses and the local economy but I'm really struggling to do so."

As much as possible is made from scratch in the kitchen, says Hawthorn. "I make my own bread here, we do three or four types. My chefs fillet their own fish, debone a joint of lamb. We make our own sauces in the classical way. I like to have control over the food."

The one thing that is bought in however is ice cream. "We don't have room in the kitchen and it's something the EHOs always nail you on. I wouldn't have been awarded my five stars for hygiene if I made ice cream here."

Hawthorn describes his style as "comfort food with elegance" and says the menu is

seasonal, offering British food with a modern European influence.

Having grown up in a seaside village, he is passionate about fish and one of his signature dishes is marinated loin of tuna. "I do it with pickled ginger, Dijon mustard, plum wine, garlic and olive oil, then just sear it. It's got all the subtleties of tuna and the flavours of umami; it's all there."

AWARD WINNING DISHES

Another dish not to be missed is his take on the traditional Cape Malva pudding, which came second in Restaurant Magazine's best UK dishes. This year his roast butternut squash soup with carrot and truffle oil has been nominated along with the restaurant's cheeseboard, which boasts 18 British farmhouse cheeses served with homemade melon preserves.

"I keep the menu limited, so seven or nine core items stay on but others change regularly. You never know what's going to be at the market on a Monday, and it's been a shocking year for produce. We aim for a 67% GP but it's difficult to maintain as some things have gone up in price immensely. I have to strike a balance between cost and seasonality, being creative and cooking for the customer, which all makes for interesting menu planning."

The average spend per head for lunch and dinner is £61. "Although Milton Keynes has a bit of a bad reputation, this area is actually very wealthy. It's commutable, with both old and new money – great demographics. I grew up in a village, so I know locals are your bread and butter and around 80% of our business is repeat."