



Stockpot visited Craft Guild chef Grant Hawthorn at The Plough, a new fine dining restaurant near Milton Keynes where, along with the owners, he's aiming for the stars

'A chef's dream' is how Grant Hawthorn describes The Plough in Wavendon. The restaurant opened in the summer after extensive refurbishment of what was previously a "rough and ready" local pub and former 16th century coaching inn, and head chef Hawthorn was brought in by the owners Jonathan Todd and Howard Bridgeman, local businessmen with no previous experience of the industry, to oversee the whole affair from 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 the front of house staff to every piece of cutlery and crockery."

The concept 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 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. We wanted to create something comparable to Le Cinq at George V in Paris, Waterside Inn in Bray, Rick Stein's in Cornwall. Somewhere relaxed but professional – what I call understated elegance."

Remaining focused on the customer, there is no service charge on the menu, filtered tap water is available for those that don't want bottled, and they even offer 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 just providing 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, there is courtyard dining for up to 65 at the rear of the building. Designed by landscaping company Hasmead, of which Jonathan Todd is director, the courtyard's electric heating system and canvas awnings mean it can be used all year round.

The kitchen, although initially cause for concern, is now sufficiently equipped, says Hawthorn. "When I came on board the kitchen had already been put in by a kitchen designer. It had three microwaves, a freezer in the hot kitchen, and just small under-bar fridges. There was no workflow, nowhere even to wash our hands. They spent £40K on the kitchen, and 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 nearly double that number. "I want everyone to have a life. I want my staff to be happy and fresh. With 48 hour weeks they'll serve happy food."

He hopes to retain his staff in the long run, working as a

**Above**  
The team at  
The Plough  
are committed to  
achieving a  
Michelin star

team to achieve the goal of a Michelin star. “My guys have given me a three year commitment. That’s 18 months to achieve a Michelin star and 18 months to maintain it. The food we are doing now will be very different to what we will be doing in six months. We have to get consistent, then raise the bar.”

Hawthorn describes his style as “comfort food with elegance” and says the menu offers British food with a modern European influence. It is based on the seasons, with around nine core items and the rest changing daily. “At the moment there is a heavy focus on seafood as I’m trying to reinforce in the guest’s mind that they can have decent seafood without it being a seafood restaurant.”

One of his signature dishes is marinated loin of tuna, which is flavoured with pickled ginger, Dijon mustard, plum wine, garlic and olive oil. “I just sear it. It’s got all the subtleties of tuna and the flavours of umami, it’s all there.”

Having grown up in a seaside village, he has very strong views on sourcing. “I get my tuna from Sri Lanka, the Maldives or Australia. I dated a marine biologist for six years and her influence rubbed off on me when it comes to fishing and issues like sustainability. I won’t touch northern hemisphere tuna; it’s to do with the blood line.”

Another dish not to be missed is Hawthorn’s take on the traditional Cape Malva pudding, which came second in Restaurant Magazine’s best UK dishes in 2006. This year The Plough’s cheeseboard has been nominated, which consists of 18 British cheeses, served with homemade melon preserves. Also nominated is his roast butternut squash soup with carrot and truffle oil. “With our food, people will recognise the flavours and what it is. It’s not overcomplicated. If it’s an aubergine purée, it will taste of aubergine, and it will complement the dish not confuse the palate. I have a fair amount of purées on the menu. They have a great mouthfeel; it’s about comfort food.”

As much as possible is made from scratch, 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 is something the EHOs always nail you for. I wouldn’t have been awarded my five stars



for hygiene if I made ice cream here.”

Gelateria Danieli in Richmond supplies its ice cream. “It makes a smoked salmon and pickled ginger ice cream for me, which I serve with fresh white asparagus, cracked white pepper and Maldon salt. It’s not like a Heston Blumenthal dish; it’s something I did years ago in Cape Town.”

While Hawthorn has endeavoured to source as much local produce as possible, establishing suppliers outside London has proved difficult. “I have a local butcher, whose meat comes from his family farm or within 15 miles of the butchery, which is only five miles from us. Our venison comes from Woburn Abbey. But we still get our fresh produce from London. I’ve been to see 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.”

Plans for the restaurant to become self sufficient within 18 months look set to solve such problems. “We have 12 acres of land in Moulton, which is about 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 planted.”

He is also getting advice on the kind of livestock they 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.”



**Above**  
Head chef  
Grant Hawthorn  
**Left**  
Hawthorn’s  
award winning  
Malva pudding