

BEST of British

Artist, food scientist or, as he himself insists, chef, Heston Blumenthal has stirred taste buds with his original and leftfield creative genius. Through books, TV and three Michelin stars, he is spearheading the renaissance of great British food at his Berkshire restaurant, The Fat Duck.

Roger St. Pierre finds out what drives the 'molecular-gastronomist'.

Heston Blumenthal was 16 years old and on a family holiday in France when he had his first gourmet awakening. His father took the family to a three Michelin Star restaurant called L'Oustau de Baumaniere, in Provence. The sights, sounds, smells and tastes of the experience captivated the teenager and he made the decision there and then that no other career would do.

While others hide behind the received wisdom of Escoffier and Larouse, or slavishly emulate their Michelin-starred peers, this earnest young Englishman continues the habits of his childhood and asks endless questions.

It was this quest that led him to link up with Dr Peter Barham, author of *The Science of Cooking*, and a reader in physics at Bristol University. 'Unsatisfied with the stock answer, "Because that's the way it's done", Heston continually asks, "But why?"', says Barham. For all this, Blumenthal always insists that behind the hype over his 'laboratory' approach, what matters is what works. The diner should forget about all the science the moment he puts the food in his mouth.

RSP Some writers have credited you with turning cooking from an art form into a science.

HB Well, I have never professed to be either artist or scientist. I am a chef who creates dishes and cooks food. I have an innate curiosity and have asked a lot of questions along the way, and have been lucky enough to meet other chefs, taste technicians, scent and smell specialists, psychologists and many other fascinating people.

Certainly I use the knowledge I have picked up along the way, but as an addition rather than an alternative to the skills I have learned in my own kitchen. I use knowledge as a tool of the trade, in



the same way as one would use a food processor or a knife.

Reading Harold McGhee's book *On Food And Cooking* was a defining moment for me. It was Harold who explained that browning meat at a high temperature simply does not seal in the juices as many people have supposed. Once explained, Harold's finding make perfect sense, though I have to confess that at first it was tough reading for someone who never even passed a chemistry O-level exam. However, I persevered and I am very glad I did. I was lucky enough to finally meet Harold and we have in fact become great friends.

RSP You have an admirably meticulous and intensely researched approach, but do you still sometimes stumble on something by pure chance?

HB Yes, absolutely – and mistakes are key to development. No chef should ever be afraid to try out new ideas and techniques, and it is amazing what you can learn from the mistakes made along the way. Sometimes we can spend years trying to get a dish exactly how we want it and at other times it all comes together right away, but you should keep going back and trying new approaches. Even when something finally makes

it onto the menu I will try to keep improving on it as my knowledge increases.

RSP When you have finally achieved perfection, or as close to it as you feel you can get, what sort of emotion does it arouse?

HB Frustration, I suppose, because I never believe I have reached ultimate perfection. That's impossible to achieve, of course, because what might be a perfect dish for some, or even many, will be far from it for others, which is why we made a point in the TV series of calling it *In Search of Perfection*.

Take dishes like the smoked bacon and egg ice cream. It is so popular that we have been unable to take it off the menu at The Fat Duck. However, it has changed dramatically since its conception and each year a new element or a slight modification has been brought to the dish. Put simply, perfection can only be strived for and never achieved.

RSP You had a wide variety of other jobs before becoming a chef. What lessons did you learn and did those help you with your role in the kitchen?

HB None of the other jobs I had could bring much to the skills of working in the kitchen, but



Roast foie gras
Almond fluid gel,
cherry, chamomile.



The Fat Duck, Bray.

'A RESTAURANT SHOULD NOT SIMPLY BE ABOUT SATISFYING A HUNGER. IT SHOULD ALSO BE ABOUT ENTERTAINMENT AND FUN.'

perhaps credit control and accounting taught me something about the business side of running a restaurant. I think mainly, though, the time I spent in those other jobs makes me realise just how lucky I now am.

RSP Just how well organised are you in the kitchen and how important is the equipment you use?

HB We have a really small kitchen at The Fat Duck and organisation is all-important. It's like a finely tuned machine when we are in service and one thing going wrong can be disastrous, so organisation is key. The equipment is just another facet of the smooth running.

RSP What are your favourite food tools?

HB My knives, of course! I recently discovered Tojiro knives, from Japan, which are fantastic. They are incredibly sharp and allow amazing accuracy.

RSP How much have you been influenced by the cuisine and ingredients of other cultures?

HB I am typical of most chefs and am grateful to have a wife and family who share in my passion. When travelling, whether for business or holiday,

I always try to visit the local food markets and see what is on offer. It's amazing what incredible flavours you can pick up out on location.

RSP British food has a proud heritage but lost its way during the 20th century. What is your vision for the future of British cuisine?

HB This is a truly exciting time for the UK in the global market. London has been recognised for some years now as a gastronomic destination offering some of the best cuisine in the world and now there are more and more restaurants throughout the UK that are at last being recognised for their quality.

The excellence of British produce is gradually being brought into the mainstream, and the population as a whole is becoming more interested in where its food is from, how it is farmed and so on. After a bleak few years, the UK is now seen as a gastronomic destination offering some of the best cuisine in the world. Even more importantly, our consumer demands are higher than ever before. ■

Reservations: +44 1628 580 333
Website: www.fatduck.co.uk

THE FAT DUCK A Tasting Menu

Nitro-green tea and lime mousse
Oyster and passion fruit jelly, lavender
Pommery grain mustard ice cream,
red cabbage gazpacho
Quail jelly, cream of langoustine,
parfait of foie gras
Oak moss and truffle toast
(Homage to Alain Chapel)

Snail porridge
Joselito ham

Roast foie gras
Almond fluid gel,
cherry, chamomile

'Sound of the sea'

**Salmon poached
with liquorice**
Artichokes, vanilla mayonnaise
and Manni olive oil

Ballotine of Anjou pigeon
Black pudding to order, Pickling brine
and spiced juices

Hot and iced tea

Mrs Marshall's margaret cornet

Pine sherbet fountain (pre-hit)

Mango and Douglas fir puree
Bavarois of lychee and mango,
blackcurrant sorbet,
Blackcurrant and green peppercorn jelly

Parsnip cereal

**Nitro-scrambled egg and
bacon ice cream**
Pain perdu, tea jelly

Price: £115



Quail jelly with
langoustine and
foie gras.