

Marc Wilkinson



Marc Wilkinson's intimate and sophisticated little restaurant, in the conservation village of Oxton, comes highly recommended. It is the first on Merseyside to be awarded three AA rosettes, as well as being named a rising star by Michelin.

Here, modern cooking techniques are used to create a light, contemporary French cuisine which takes diners on thrilling adventures in taste, texture and temperature.

Three skillfully composed, fixed-price tasting menus are the guide to subtle and complex dishes that surprise and delight.

Only the best ingredients satisfy this chef-patron, who is as attentive to the creation of a beautiful eating environment as he is to the creation of beautiful food. Soft lighting bathes the warm sandy tones of the soigné interior, with its sensual suede chairs, specially commissioned artwork and fine tableware. Or you can dine al fresco to the soothing sound of a water sculpture. Art, architecture and design are important interests for this many layered man, but food is his *raison d'être*.

He devours the latest books, especially those on the science of food (often reviewing them for the catering press), and carries out his own action-research in great restaurants like El Bulli (returning with menus for guests to browse).

Unassuming, immensely hardworking and gently humorous, Marc Wilkinson is lauded at every turn, for the dazzling quality of his cooking and the delicious originality of his food.

"We try to be different at Fraiche. We try. It's very difficult to be original about everything, but we try to have our own touch, our own twist to things. The highlight of cooking for me is when you create a new dish. Take our Shot of Pesto. It's so good – one of my best amuse bouche! You take pesto and deconstruct it: put all the ingredients in front of you – or just picture them in your head – and then reconstruct them in a different format.

What I am doing is a basil and lemon powder, with fresh parmesan shavings, and pine nuts with extra virgin oil dust. Close your eyes and you've got pesto there. But it's so fresh! – because the basil isn't cooked. It's raw in the powder so, when it hits, you get that floral depth which I love.

Of course, sometimes, you arrive at things by accident – like using rice as part of my seasoning for fish. It happened when I was making puffed rice. That's where you blow wild rice at 200° C until it puffs, a bit like popcorn. I just started experimenting, and found that if I crushed it, and mixed in liquorice, sea salt and orange-powder, I got an interesting crust on the skin of the fish.

At the moment, I'm working on creating extracts, which I like a lot. I began by cooking a classic version, then using modern techniques I should be able to capture a pure flavour with out the stewed effect taking place or over cooked taste – but it will taste quite different. In my head I know what I want to create,

but it's translating that into reality that takes the time. Some dishes come quicker than others. This is going to take a while ...

There's always a new dish in the back of my mind. I suppose that's what drives me. I know money makes the world go round, but Fraiche isn't money-driven. It doesn't give me sufficient incentive.

I'm one of those passionate people who are a bit stupid in the head, who aren't that interested in financial gain. Ideally, money would be nice to have. Then I'd go and eat at Per Se, Thomas Keller's restaurant in New York. I suppose everything revolves around food with me!

My friends call me obsessed ... I am obsessed! But to be good at anything, I don't see how you can't be slightly bonkers about it. Take Salvador Dalí for example. I love Dalí – I've visited his galleries in Figueres, Madrid and Barcelona. I think he was slightly mad, bless him, but look what work that produced!

Ferran Adrià, the most influential chef in the world, is another instance, but he's reaching the heights because of it. I met him at his restaurant, El Bulli, which is regularly voted the best in the world. He and his brother Albert, and the rest of the team, refuse to accept the same parameters as other people. It's the only way to break new ground.

The problem is you tend not to switch off. I normally work seven days a week at Fraiche. I do fifteen or sixteen hours straight in the kitchen, except Mondays and Tuesdays when we're closed.

Monday is my day for meetings and job-runs, book work and wine ordering, compiling the lists and talking to my supply network for the following week, while Tuesdays are spent in the kitchen all day working on the dishes for that week.

So, now and again, when I need a break, I fly somewhere for a day. I go to Barcelona a lot. I love the architecture in Spain, especially the stunning modern buildings – the Guggenheim in Bilbao is better than the art inside! In particular, I love Catalonia – my second home.

I leave on a Sunday from John Lennon Airport, Liverpool, have dinner at a good restaurant, then maybe a lunch somewhere else the next day, on my way back.

That's what I'm doing this weekend. I'm going to Barcelona and eating at Sergi Arola on Sunday and at alkimia, which is so exciting, on Monday.

You *know* the food is going to make you sit up in your chair. It's not going to be a fishcake, lamb shank, or confit duck. You can eat food like that closer to home and it can be well cooked, substantial, comforting or whatever. But, for me, it's not *excitement*. It's not sensual, it's just sustenance

I need these little breaks, just to fire me up. It's definitely important to eat out. Not enough chefs do. But I'd never go into a restaurant and copy a dish, just like for like. That's so lazy, and so unfair on the chef and restaurant that you've just visited. But they do it!

Gordon Ramsay's lobster ravioli, Marco Pierre White's lemon tart, Michel Bras' chocolate fondant – you'll find them everywhere. The trouble is, when things get copied, they sometimes end up far removed from the original. For instance, Beefeater restaurants have chocolate fondant on the menu now, but it's a completely different entity from the fantastic dish invented by Bras in Laguiole.

Certain techniques, certain principles of cooking might come from something you've seen elsewhere, but sometimes, the ideas you pick up in places are nothing to do with the food. In Padua, at Le Calandre – which I think is the best restaurant in Italy – it was something about the service which stuck in my head.

In Barcelona, at a restaurant called Abac, it was handbag hooks. I thought why didn't we think of that? So, before I jumped on the plane, I went into El Corte Inglés bought two dozen, came home and installed them.

I designed Fraiche myself, on a seaside theme, inspired by views from my former home. We had to take this 1850s terraced house back to the bare brick and start afresh: new floors, new walls – the lot! Hard work, most of which I did everything: myself. The thing is, you have this vision, this dream which drives you on. But it's fun too, especially working with artists who convert your ideas into reality.

I'm a big fan of glass, so we have six pieces of wall art commissioned from Liverpool glass artist, Jenny Barker, and we've just taken delivery of water glasses, which are unique to Fraiche, by local artist Charlie MacPherson.

Our glass plates are by two London artists I found through Heston Blumenthal at the Fat Duck, where I used to eat when I lived nearby. The 'moon' over the bar in the back room is by Paul Cocksedge, a fantastic lighting designer, who I came across at the V & A.

I go on evolving the restaurant in various ways, whether by adding new artwork, special tableware, or an outside eating area. It's all part of the pleasure, the theatre of dining out. I like guests to be able to relax in comfort, to be pampered.

So I put a lot of emphasis on front of house. When you come here, you are always greeted and welcomed in. Even though you might have had a rough day at work, when you shut that door, you can just switch off.

Sometimes people come in stiff as ice, but then friendly staff bring them some amuse bouche, they have a drink and start to melt. If we can make you smile, relax you, entertain you, surprise you, warm up your spirit by giving you something that tastes wonderful ... that's what drives me too, I guess.

How did I start in this business? I was fifteen, I was poor, and I wanted a bike!

So I got a job as a chef's donkey in Anglesey, North Wales, which is where my family had moved to from the Wirral. The restaurant was in a three-star hotel.

Scampi, fillet steak, sole meunière – this food was all new, all exciting. It's cringe worthy now, but back then I didn't know what these things were. I'd never eaten out in a restaurant as a kid. It was unheard of. A packet of crisps in the back of the car was the scenario – we never actually went into any of these places.

Things are much better now, and if I had children I would definitely, definitely bring them up dining in restaurants. It opens the palate – and opens the mind to so much more.

Hopefully, they wouldn't have tunnel vision for MacDonalds and eating chips. I'd be gutted if a child of mine turned out like that. I can hear it now: "Oh dad, how can you eat this rubbish? You never take us anywhere nice!"

And I'd growl, "Shut up and eat your foie gras!"

Anyway – back in Anglesey – I got my bike. The work just seemed to click with me, and I was rapidly getting more responsibility in the kitchen. So there I was, plodding along, when a programme came on TV called *Take Six Chefs*.

It turned my world upside down. I watched it in awe. I was absolutely gobsmacked at what these people did with food!

Suddenly, I realised I wasn't even scratching the surface of what was out there. The world of fine dining was where I wanted to be. So I asked my father to take me to a Michelin-starred restaurant for my eighteenth birthday.

He did, and I was hooked. Once the addiction kicks in, it's a one-way street: the more you experience, the more your palate is opened up, the higher your expectations become, and the higher your standards rise.

So I got myself a job in a classical French kitchen, at a restaurant run by a French family in Yorkshire. It was a good solid foundation. I did everything: butchered the meat, plucked the birds, boned the fish, shucked the oysters ... It was a hard time, but an awakening.

Next, I spent two years in the Michelin-starred Arkle restaurant at the Chester Grosvenor, followed by a spell at Winteringham Fields, Lincolnshire, which had two stars at the time. My travels took me to Canada for a year, working at one of the country's best hotels, a five-star Relais Chateaux, but it was after I returned to England that my eyes were really opened.

It happened while I was head chef at the Mirabelle in Eastbourne's Grand Hotel. I took a trip to Paris to eat at Pierre Gagnaire. The experience blew me away! I know a restaurant has been good if, when I come out and I'm walking down the street, I've got flavour memories in my head.

I had a sole dish at Pierre Gagnaire and wow! I can still taste it. That was 2000 – the year I woke up – and the beginning of the next big change in my life. Since then, my cooking has been evolving into the modern cuisine that I do now.

The thing about Gagnaire is, he pushes the boundaries of cooking. He became a mentor for me and made me start questioning everything. Up to that point, I did things because that's the way they were done. After Gagnaire, I wanted to understand *why*.

So, I began to read a lot more on the science of food, by authors such as Peter Barham, and Harold McGee. I was intrigued. I started studying the work of the brilliant French scientist, Hervé This, who wrote *Molecular Gastronomy: Exploring the Science of Flavour*.

He has worked with a number of chefs, including Gagnaire, and is one of the founding fathers of molecular gastronomy. It's all about breaking things down so you understand them – simple things like crème anglaise. Traditionally, you would split a vanilla pod, put it in the milk and heat, not realising that there is an enzyme in milk which works against vanilla and mutes the flavour. But, if you heat the milk up to 80°C first and *then* add the vanilla, the enzyme is killed by the heat, and this allows the vanilla to be absorbed better.

It's such a simple little thing – but only when you know!

Take eggs. We poach eggs in a water bath. Egg white sets at a different temperature to egg yolk, hence you can hold a poached egg hot for hours without it setting – providing you know what temperature egg yolk sets at. So, if you hold the egg at 64° C, the yolk won't set.

This kind of knowledge is the key to improving your cooking techniques. However, as I've said, I was trained in the classical French tradition – it was drilled into me!

If you look at those chefs around my age group who are cooking well now, nearly all of us have solid classical French backgrounds. It induces such a firm foundation to build on.

The only worry now is that the next generation of cooks, who want to do the foams and all the high-tech modern cooking, won't have that solid foundation. They want to do this all-singing and dancing cooking but lack the basic building blocks.

If you ask them can they make puff pastry, they just look blank. I asked one young chef, who had done three years at college, if he could make crème anglaise. He replied, "No, can you show me?" I said, "You've done three years at college and you don't know how to make custard?" "No, we didn't do that. I can make a rose out of marzipan." Really good functional stuff that!

We make everything here – except cheese biscuits. I buy those in – decent ones, like Duchy, charcoal, lavender oatcakes. We make our own breads – I love bread, you see. Of course, there's no point in doing it just for the sake of putting "handmade" on a menu. If a local baker can make a superior product, and save you time, buy it in – there's no stigma attached. To get bread right, I think, is a bit more difficult than people say.

I've spent many an hour, studying and experimenting and working it. Because bread is not something you can just take from a book. It's something about the texture, the feel – and I know when it feels right.

I'm a thorn in the side of suppliers because I always want something a bit better! "It's only you ever moans, Marc", they tell me, "nobody else does."

When I opened Fraiche, in April 2004, it was difficult to get the produce I needed. I had been working as head chef of the Latymer restaurant at Pennyhill Park hotel in Surrey. I was on the hub of London there, so produce and suppliers were thick and fast. I never had to worry about getting anything. I'd just ring up and it would be there the next day.

My cheeses came twice a week from Rungis in Paris, the biggest wholesale food market in the world. Premier Cheeses would have two hundred of them in the back of the van, all proper cheeses – it was just heaven!

But they don't deliver up here – too far away.

For ten years I used Pascal Beillevoire butter, which for me is the best in the world. If you go to Gordon Ramsay's restaurant in Hospital Road, or the Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, that's what you get and it is fantastic – but Pascal Beillevoire doesn't deliver here either!

Salads were another problem. If I asked for woodruff, verbena, purple basil, bulls blood leaves, or peashoots my suppliers would say, "What d'ya want that for?"

Nobody else asks for them.” It was like Paul Heathcote all over again, a generation later!

Like him, I was coming back to my roots, coming home to my family. I like the Wirral, and Oxton is particularly attractive. In the centre, where Fraiche is, there are quite a few restaurants, cafés and pubs. There’s strong community spirit too, with village events, which are good for Oxton – and good for business! But once here, I had to rethink quite a few things on the supply front.

Whenever possible I use local produce, but because we’re a French restaurant I have French products too. Cheeses, for instance, come from France and here. We use Mrs Bourne’s Cheshire and Bourne’s Blue Cheshire and we also use unsalted butter from their family farm, just outside Malpas. I tasted a number of local butters and Mrs Bourne’s was the best.

Fresh produce is gaining momentum, and I really look forward to the asparagus season at Claremont Farm here on the Wirral. Their asparagus is great, their courgette flowers too. I like flowers, full stop. I use them in my cooking – nasturtiums, roses, courgette flowers. I use rose extract and the petals too, which I crystallize so you get a crunch from them which is rather nice. I even use dandelion leaves to give salad a bit of a kick, a little like woodruff.

I try to get to local Farmers’ Markets whenever I can, but I wish we had more really good, local, daily food markets in this country. It’s so frustrating when you see all the amazing examples in other European countries.

I’ve spent many an hour in La Boqueria in Barcelona – the fish alone, the sea cucumbers and urchins – it’s brilliant. But it’s not just Spain or France or Italy you find them.

In Ireland, Cork has its excellent English Market. Every city needs one. They’re great for everybody, fascinating for children and great for encouraging local produce.

When I first came here, meat was a problem, but it’s sorted now thanks to a fantastic high-street butcher at New Ferry on the Wirral. His name is Callum Edge.

Through him I source excellent, locally produced meat, like my Gloucester Old Spot pork. He supplies my lamb and beef too, and when they have a rare breed, they’ll let me know and we’ll talk about hanging and for how long.

For so many of us today the connection from beast to frying pan is broken. You go to the supermarket and it’s some product in plastic. There’s no sense that it was ever a beast. Some kids you speak to might never, ever, have seen a cow. They don’t realise where their bacon, or any other meat they see in a packet, really comes from.

It’s very, very easy to switch off from the real relationship, but it’s important that we don’t – as the recent national debate about battery chickens has shown.

At Fraiche we only buy free-range chickens and free-range eggs, organic as well. It’s not that I’m an organic obsessive, but what I buy must taste good *and* it must be reared well.

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