

guardian.co.uk**WORDOFMOUTH
BLOG**

MasterChef restaurant: opening night

He's listened to you on rabbit, decor, and service charges - now it's all about the cooking. There's one thing even Jay Rayner can't sway him on, though: chunky chips



Mat Follas at the opening of his restaurant, The Wild Garlic. Photograph: Chris Ould

I'm exhausted, relieved and ecstatic ... our restaurant, [The Wild Garlic](#) is up and running. We trialled first on the crowd from the local pub, then friends and family, finally, on Saturday we had our real opening, with 350 people, canapes and wine. The staff were all nervous and jittery, almost panicky, on the practice run, but the opening went well, apart from a sudden realisation that a lot of people in the restaurant increases the temperature: blessed as we were with good weather, most people drifted outside.

Thanks so much to the Word of Mouth crowd for [all the feedback](#) on the various stages of opening. I have taken lots of it to heart and made some changes as a result. [The menu has changed](#), basic things like the toilets have had more attention than I would have initially given them. I have [dropped the service charge](#) from the bill and the tips the last few days have been fair, around 10%, so those suggestions were spot on.

Rabbit, too, is on the menu directly as a result of your comments (I guess we won't be seeing the person who said they wouldn't ever come to the restaurant if I serve bunny!). Oh, and, controversially, I haven't changed my view on chips - we have none on at the moment. I'm risking [the wrath of the chunky chip haters](#), I know, but the chips will be chunky, when the right potatoes are in season.

I won't please all of you, but I'd hate for my restaurant to be something too comfortable; it should gently challenge some people's preconceptions and for others be a place where they know they'll get something great to eat and enjoy the ambience. I'm really proud of the design of the restaurant and the opening menu, which I've [posted on my blog](#).

There are still details I'm mulling over - we're decorating the tables with fresh wild flowers picked from the hedgerows after Amanda went for a walk and came back with a bunch of tall, frothy cow parsley and plopped it in a vase. It looked magical; uncontrived, fresh and interesting. She says the next bunch will be foxgloves and ferns.

So now it's all about the cooking, it's not earth-changing or likely to make me rich but

I'm loving the hard work, running a great team, and most importantly, finally having a job where I can let my imagination run wild.



Sea kale. Photograph: Amanda Follas

We always have 'fish of the day'; it's very exciting for me to wait and see what seafood comes in that day and then devise a dish from it. It gives a real freshness and spontaneity to the overall menu and it's often the dish I'm most proud of. We have favourite plants, like sea kale, that we are desperate to use more of. In March, it has young leaves which can be 'forced' like rhubarb, in May it has flower spikes like broccoli and then in June it has seed-pods, the size of a large pea but tasting of cabbage. It seems wrong to forage for it because it's not a common plant so we're trying to grow it. We visited [Jekka McVicar's herb farm](#) in the spring and brought a few specimens home to see how they do in the garden.

Another favourite of ours is edible flowers. On [MasterChef](#) I made a lavender mousse, the smell and flavour are reminiscent of a country cottage garden, and we're continuing to serve that. This year we've also been experimenting with lemon verbena but have yet to extract the flavour with any great success, but we will persevere because the *deja vu* you get when you smell it is an absolute delight.



Pineapple sage. Photograph: Amanda Follas

Another flower we love is pineapple sage; it has two great things going for it; firstly it is bright red and looks amazing, and secondly it tastes very sweet, like pineapple or honey. I can't think why everyone doesn't use it!

As you drive around Dorset in April and May, you can smell the wild garlic as it blooms; this month it's been replaced by pungent elderflowers. We want to use these wonderful smells and flavours - they mark the passing of the seasons and we love the anticipation caused by knowing that we won't see them again for a whole year.

We want to harvest some wild garlic seeds and pickle them to make our own 'capers', a technique I noticed they used when I visited [Noma](#) in Denmark during the filming for [MasterChef](#). We've been a little busy, so this may be something that will have to wait until next year.

We like to employ traditional techniques to enhance the flavour of food, for instance, we smoke a lot of food in the kitchen. I don't mind at all if the aroma of alder smoke wafts through to the customers in the restaurant because it never fails to make people salivate and we can produce extraordinary things with it, like smoked mash.

I realise that I've been incredibly lucky in attracting a lot of interest and coverage in the

build up to launch, thanks to the MasterChef win. For our opening we had 350 people drop in and we're benefiting from an enormous amount of goodwill from our customers, who seem genuinely excited by the restaurant. We're trying our hardest to produce food and service that mirror their expectation, while staying true to how we'd like to do things.

The MasterChef factor is interesting, I think. We didn't try to make the opening a 'celebrity' occasion, we wanted it to be a local affair all about a new restaurant in west Dorset because, let's face it, if the locals don't come, we're sunk.



Opening night at The

Wild Garlic. Photograph: Chris Ould

Amanda and I are terrible introverts, so the prospect of a whole evening of schmoozing was pretty stressful, but we are becoming quite practised at it with the various goings-on over the last few months. I spent opening evening air-kissing and meeting interesting people - I'd normally be more interested in loitering around near the ocean bed with a diving buddy, but I actually enjoyed it enormously. The evening was declared a success by all and we're delighted that so many people came to share the launch with us.

The whole celeb business holds little appeal for me in terms of being recognised and, let's face it, MasterChef hardly makes me A list. That said, it's a chance for some interesting stuff, such as an endorsement deal with an great NZ wine I drink anyway. I'm getting more offers as time goes on and I have to admit, making appearances and the likes might not come naturally to me, but it all means I won't have to panic too much about funds this year and it makes business sense to keep the profile up for the sake of the restaurant.

We did rush the opening, in part because of a slightly difficult situation with my former employer that I won't bore you with. Suffice to say, I was faced with a choice of playing safe in an unhappy situation or taking a risk. I decided to get on with it, because you only get one chance like this. I think I've made the right choice.

It's been great fun blogging over here on Word of Mouth and I've loved having so much feedback. I wanted to do it because the readers here are known for being an opinionated bunch and we all know constructive criticism is a valuable thing for anyone entering the service industry. I have to say, though, I didn't expect the hundreds of comments we got, or the informative and generous nature of them, so I'm both chuffed and grateful.

I'll be continuing to listen over at my own blog to anyone who's interested in staying in touch, and anyone who wants to pop in to the place down in Beaminster - there will always be a special place in my new restaurant for Word of Mouth readers (most likely the toilet, as that's where you had the most influence!). You know where to find me.

[Next](#)

[Previous](#)

[Blog home](#)