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WORDOFMOUTH BLOG



From MasterChef to restaurateur

Mat Follas won MasterChef earlier this year and is now taking the plunge and working towards the opening of his restaurant - and he wants your advice ...



Mat Follas's new restaurant premises in Beaminstor, near Bridport, Dorset. This is the place before Mat did any work to improve it. Photograph: Mat Follas

When the people at Word of Mouth asked me if I wanted to blog the progress of my start up restaurant, The Wild Garlic – my first thought was: when? Since winning Masterchef, there's been no time to breathe and the amount of work to be done has just increased by about 70% (if I'd won The Apprentice it would be at least 110% ... am I the only one who hates those overstatements?).

It also struck me that in the midst of all of the panic and work involved in getting the restaurant under way, writing a few posts would force me to pause - give me a chance to step back, stop and calmly think about what we're doing. Most importantly, I'm hoping to get some good honest feedback from Word of Mouthers – you're known for being an opinionated lot when it comes to eating out, and I think this is a brilliant opportunity to get some real help with some of the decisions I need to take from people who know what they like – and don't like – about the places they eat out in.

So I'd like to say don't hold back, I'm keen to hear your thoughts. But in all honesty, there's just one bit of feedback I really don't need – yep, it's the worst time, economically speaking, in the last 20 years, that I could have picked to do this, and yes, I'm clearly mad to consider opening a restaurant in the current climate. But there's not much I can do about that now!

A few weeks ago, I finally resigned from a corporate IT job. After 11 years and one week (not sure how many hours but I was close to counting), I sat for half an hour wavering over pressing the 'send' button ... wondering how we were going to pay the bills ... all that job security gone ... that wage coming in automatically every month. The decision itself wasn't hard but actually doing it, pressing that button, was another thing entirely. But ... bye bye IBM.

I didn't look back for long – I'd already signed the lease on a great little place in my local town that I'd had my eye on for a few years. It had been a locals' pub in a town of three pubs and no restaurants, struggled to find its place for years then been

transformed into a nice bistro run by a young couple who made a real success of it before selling it at the height of the property boom.

The buyer was a good cook, young and with a clear idea of what he wanted to serve, but unfortunately it wasn't what the locals wanted to eat. After realising too late that he had to change, the business ran out of funds about the same time as I was finishing MasterChef.

After extended negotiations and lots of looking at other sites we eventually took a lease on the building. It's taken three months to the day, from agreeing to purchase the lease, to actually signing it. It's incredible - the stress; the rows. People keep asking how it feels to be fulfilling my dream. Well, at the moment, it feels like I've got a big lump of cold sick stuck in my stomach.

But no matter, it's in my name now. I got up with great determination the day after signing, had breakfast and charged over to the restaurant. Finally I could walk through the door and take a sledgehammer to the oversized bar and start to make it look like the image in my head. At last I can begin getting ready to open. And this is where the first lot of decisions come in – the all important look of the place.

Currently it's all beech veneer tables, white fabric chairs and leather placemats, which are not my style at all. But is my own taste going to be right for the restaurant? I'm wondering if I should go country kitchen - all wood - or something a bit more modern, like the clean lines and stainless steel Kevin McCloud is so fond of.

For furniture, we've made contact with [Marnie Moyle](#), an amazing outdoor table designer who I'm very excited about (and flattered that she likes what we're doing) ... but her beautiful tables are designed for outdoors and I'm not sure the the chairs she has with them work inside.



A Marnie Moyle table

in its natural habitat. Would these work indoors, do you think? Photograph: Marnie Moyle

Can I fit her furniture with something else, I'm thinking, or do her tables have to be properly matched with equally high end chairs? I personally think that £20 indoor chairs around those tables will work - it's eclectic and very much us, but I'm suspending judgement for a time, surfing the web, looking at country cottage styles until I see some [Arne Jacobsen](#) chairs (is that just my [teenage memories](#) of Christine Keeler [getting the better of me?](#)). If you've got any good links you reckon I should see (for the furniture that is, not Christine Keeler!), please share them below.

There's also the question of the huge bar in the restaurant that dominated the place before I knocked it down (yep, that's right, please don't say the one thing you'd want is a huge, oversized bar). But what should I replace it with? It would be a great daytime seating area for drinking coffee or wine, a comfy area to wait in or even act as a casual overflow dining area for a few walk-ins. Or we could squeeze a couple of small tables in. The thing is, I want customers to enjoy the space, stay for the evening, maybe have an extra glass or two of wine. If they're comfortable enough to stay for three courses, I think that's worth more than the extra revenue of trying to turn a table.

The more I write the more questions come ... I need to get on with making the kitchen workable (and easier to clean), so no doubt there will be more questions to come, from

menu to front of house staffing issues. But in the meantime, I'd love to hear your thoughts on style. What brings you into a restaurant and, more importantly, what brings you back? What are your "must haves" and "don't do's" for a restaurant in terms of space and design?

[Next](#)

[Previous](#)

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