

Standing Solo

We learn there's more to Michael Caines than cooking, as we speak to the celebrated chef about his new ventures, the evolving F&B industry and his decision to leave Gidleigh Park after two decades.

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Michael Caines is in high spirits. Then again, he has a lot to be enthusiastic about. After departing last year from Gidleigh Park, a country house hotel in Devon, where he served as head chef for 21 years, he is finally going solo. It's been a gradual process, but characteristic for the Michelin-starred chef, whose gentle inflection and measured demeanour is indicative of a career shaped by carefully planned business decisions. "I'm not getting any younger," he jokes. "There's more to me than cooking and I wanted to be in control of my destiny. So I felt it was time to find my own country house."

That country house happens to be a Grade II listed Georgian pile set on 28 acres of land overlooking the estuary in East Devon – a property Caines nearly dismissed after initially judging it from a black and white photograph. "I thought it looked awful," he exclaims. "But when I saw it in person, I was speechless. I've lived in Exeter all my life; Exmouth was my stomping ground and I never knew this place existed." Now renamed Lympstone Manor, construction is well under way to bring life to Caines' masterplan for a 21-room food destination, complete with its own vineyard, set to open in the spring. Inspired by Raymond Blanc's Oxfordshire retreat Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons – a hotel he spent his early years in and one

he still looks up to today – Caines witnessed its trajectory and claims he is the first chef to attempt such a venture since Blanc's offering 31 years ago. "Raymond is a dear friend and a wonderful mentor," he says. "For me, the benchmark is Le Manoir. The fact that no one has really tried to do it since, shows you how difficult it is. It's a challenge that can't be underestimated. That said, I am not recreating Le Manoir, I am setting up Lympstone Manor, which is a hotel, restaurant and vineyard. It is a place for me to be creative, not just in the kitchen, but with the interiors, the style of the house, the grounds, all of that vision will be mine."

Our meeting though, takes place at a country house in an entirely different location. We are sitting in the ornate drawing room of Palé Hall, a grand Victorian property cradled in the Dee Valley on the fringe of Snowdonia National Park in North Wales. Owned by first time hoteliers, Alan Harper, an ex chief executive; and his wife Angela, a former head teacher, the 18-room retreat is an exquisite mishmash of antique furnishings arranged among original details – from geometric floor tiles to decorative cornices, handsome wood panelling and a magnificent stained glass ceiling. It's coming up to aperitif hour and the staff are bustling about, preparing for the arrival of the guests that will soon start to meander through for a pre-dinner





Salmon with seasonal vegetables

cocktail. Caines, looking smart in his chef's whites, has briefly popped out of the kitchen to talk shop, and considering this is the hotel's opening night, he appears largely unruffled. "I like the analogy of a swan," he chuckles, when probed. "Graceful and calm on the top, but paddling like mad underneath."

Remarkably, the entire property seems to be running like a well-oiled machine. It's something that can surely be put down to the Harpers' decision to bring Caines on board and tap into his industry know-how. It's a canny move that has worked to benefit both parties. "Palé Hall and Lympstone Manor complement each other in terms of clientele," says Caines. "It helps both our profiles, drawing in guests that have enjoyed what I did when I was at Gidleigh Park."

Caines' proficiency certainly runs deep. From co-launching eight other properties – some under the ABode Hotels umbrella – as the director of F&B with hotelier Andrew Brownsword, opening a restaurant in Abu Dhabi and providing quality nosh to the Williams F1 Team's motorhome facility, his expertise at Palé Hall is evident from the standard of the staff – many of them former Le Manoir employees – to the seamlessness of the service. "My experience is reassuring to the Harpers, as they have invested so much into this hotel," explains Caines. "But I've been lucky. I have worked with a lot of great people over the years, with the right pedigree and attention to detail. Then there are talented people out there ready to be given an opportunity, so we are planning on developing and creating our own team. If you are willing and you have personality, then we can give you the skills."

Indeed, one of Caines' key tasks was to employ a chef to head up the kitchen. A tricky business when the hotel's foundation is partly based on one's name and reputation. "You need someone who is able to buy in and develop," says Caines. "But also the kind of person that isn't offended by the fact that they have to share the platform with me. It's a good opportunity for them to make a name for themselves."

The answer is Gareth Stevenson, a determined young man who was previously the head chef at one of the ABode properties Caines set up in Chester. "He was keen from the start. He's got a lot of passion and talent and he deserves an opportunity to show that," says Caines. "Importantly, he understands my relationship with the Harpers. He is a good chef with some good ideas, which we'll nurture."

The food itself is based on Caines' cooking philosophy: modern

European fare centred on classic skills, using fresh, seasonal and local ingredients. On the menu are some of his greatest hits, including a gracefully executed pan-fried scallop served with tapenade, aubergine, tomato vinaigrette, tomato concassé and topped with basil; and delicious roast wood pigeon presented with pea puree, fricassee of broad beans, peas and mushrooms with Madeira sauce. "I always draw an analogy to music," says Caines. "If you go to watch your favourite band or pop star and they don't sing some of their hits, you're going to be disappointed." Mixed with Caines' signature dishes are a series of offerings from Stevenson that have been scrupulously inspected by Caines and the Harpers to ensure they fit the bill. "It's important that the menus draw from 25 years of experience," explains Caines. "Gareth can also then learn from that and understand that, from day one, he's going to be cooking to a standard that we hope will make an impression."

Of course, while the food is the main draw – and while it's been said that Michelin inspectors do not make their judgements based on

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design or interior – from a diner's perspective it can cloud or highlight the experience, often cementing the decision to return. There are two dining rooms in Palé Hall: The Henry Robertson Dining Room (named after the original owner of the house), an expansive space with lemon yellow wallpapered walls,

ornate plaster ceilings and views of the vast green gardens outside, and the Venice. Once the kitchen it is now a cosy nook that has been lifted with sparkling chandeliers and intricate Zoffany wallpaper, depicting romantic scenes of the canal city. "I remember Gordon Ramsay once said to me that a restaurant's interiors should be like an expensive handbag: functional, but at the same time as glamorous on the inside as it is on the outside." It's that function that is of most concern to Caines. "Firstly, when you walk into a room it has to feel like an incredible space in which you want to dine," he begins. "After that, you're going to be sitting at the table for two or three hours and things have to work; the table has to be at the right level, lighting is also important. What is the point of having a candle if it's burnt out by the main lights? The background music, the staff, whatever it might be, needs to be well balanced." And while he ultimately believes that the choice of crockery or glassware should be an extension of an overall mood or concept, he also thinks that what you put on the plate is more important.

Having worked across a series of different ventures, Caines is at the perfect vantage point to reveal the unique characteristics and differences



Banana parfait

between standalone restaurants and those in hotels. “You become part of an experience in a hotel,” he explains. “Even if your restaurant might be the draw, you’re not necessarily the main memory that people will depart with. They will leave with a sense of place, because of the location, and then the house itself and the drama of the interior you create. The feel and welcome you give the guest, the attention to detail in the room, all of that matters.” And while Caines does admit that assembling a standout menu that will give guests a different experience over two or three days is challenging – not to mention running a kitchen that is permanently open – he still believes managing a standalone restaurant is more testing. “If you’re doing a concept as a standalone, you have to take your qualities and mould it to fit the market in which it sits. You will need to compete with the market and also contend with rivalries on the high street. So I think, from that perspective, it’s harder work if I’m honest.”

Now with 30 or so years of experience under his belt, Caines can officially be considered an old-timer. Over the years he has witnessed shifts in the industry and talks confidently about how the sector has evolved. “The change has been very positive,” he says, nodding.

“Overall, hotels have recognised that F&B is a key part of what their offer should be. Even places like Holiday Inn acknowledge that they can’t really open unless they’ve got a Pizza Express next door. I think hotels now see F&B as value. They don’t necessarily get rid of that space now, instead they try and nurture it.”

Caines clearly has a sharp entrepreneurial sense and keen business skills he takes pride in developing. And although composed, he is notably thrilled about the new chapter in his life. But with so much going on, you can’t help but wonder how he stays focused. “Sometimes to move forward, you’ve got to let go,” he discloses. “I also go running, which helps. I trail run. So for the last couple of days, I ran up and down this hill,” he says, half jokingly, pointing behind him. On a more serious note, he continues, “I think with Palé Hall, Kentisbury Grange [the other existing property in his portfolio] and Lympstone Manor, I’ve found a sense of calm in my life. For a long time, I wondered where I’d end up. I’d be quite happy if I didn’t move from Lympstone Manor for the rest of my life, with that amazing view to admire, and then retreated to Wales every now and then to be here at Palé Hall. I could do a lot worse, so I’m happy and I’m really looking forward to the future.” ●