

Food *for* Fort

Lancashire food champion and television cookery judge Matthew Fort is no slouch in the kitchen, as guests at one of our top hotels discovered.

Roger Borrell reports

Matthew Fort at Northcote Manor



“Advertising was the perfect business for someone of my natural idleness”

Left: Matthew discusses the menu with head chef Lisa Allen
Below: Matthew with fellow TV judges Prue Leith and Oliver Peyton

There can be few food critics who haven't wriggled a little uncomfortably in their well-padded banquettes when asked: 'If you're so clever, why don't you put on an apron and show us what you can do...'

It's a bit unfair. After all, you wouldn't expect a critic at La Boheme to warble about tiny hands being frozen before being allowed to venture an opinion on the singing.

But son of Lancashire Matthew Fort is pretty dismissive of food critics who pontificate in print but struggle to boil an egg at home. What's more, he can sing a bit, too.

He recently travelled back here from his Cotswolds home to cook for scores of demanding guests at the Michelin-starred Northcote Manor in Langho, as part of the annual Obsession food festival.

Not only did he and fellow critic Tom Parker-Bowles acquit themselves with a flourish, Matthew entertained the kitchen team with some opera sung in Italian and then stayed up until 3am celebrating his triumph.

'I'm an ambitious domestic cook although some years ago I did cook at Heathcote's in Manchester. I've tried to blank it from my mind - someone gave the food an absolute pasting,' says Matthew, one of the three judges on the

BBC's Great British Menu.

'But it does no harm at all for a food reviewer to see things from the other side. When I first started to write about food I spent time working in the kitchen at Raymond Blanc's Le Manoir aux Quat Saisons to learn something about the subject.'

In recent years, Matthew has watched in delight as the reputation of north west food has grown. It's a part of the world that is close to his heart.

The Forts came from Read, not far from Northcote. They were tenant farmers who made their money from cotton and were involved in the early development of mercerisation (a process which added strength and lustre and made the cotton more receptive to dyes) in the 1800s.

Forts represented Clitheroe in Parliament under Liberal colours through the 19th century and in 1950 Matthew's father, Richard, swapped his career to follow in the family footsteps, but as a Tory. He held the seat until his death in 1959.

'I have tremendous memories of that time,' says Matthew. 'I can remember getting lost at Great Harwood Agricultural Show and I recall being pictured with my father sweeping the streets of Clitheroe. It was obviously some campaign he was involved with.'

The young Fort studied English and French at Lancaster University. 'I lived



in a garret in Lancaster and also spent a year in digs in Morecambe. It was a bit of a shock to the system for a tender lad like me,' he laughs.

'But it was a fantastic experience. Everyone needs one great liberating experience in their life and going to Lancaster was mine. Academically, it wasn't very productive but I learned a lot of things about life.'

A year at an American university was followed by work in London's advertising industry. With a nice line in self-deprecation, he chuckles: 'Advertising was the perfect business for someone of my natural idleness!'

'If anyone has the impression that I've done what I've done because of some innate drive and energy it would be a lie. Things always just happen to me. Sadly, my champagne tastes have >



Matthew and Nigel Haworth

“Sadly, my champagne tastes have never matched my beer income”

never matched my beer income.’

The old Etonian, whose culinary tour of Sicily ‘Sweet Honey, Bitter Lemons’ is now out in paperback, always cooked at home and he impressed one dinner party guest so much he asked him to work for him in the food pages of the Financial Times Saturday Review. From there, via several other publications, he was persuaded to abandon advertising, take a 50 per cent cut in guaranteed income and become food editor for The Guardian. At last, he’d found a natural home.

He rekindled his love affair with Lancashire several years ago when he was passing through on the way back from a fishing trip in Cumberland. Looking for sustenance, he dropped into Paul Heathcote’s Longridge restaurant. ‘It was an absolute revelation. This was a restaurant that wasn’t serving Italian or French - it was British food!’

As a result he and Paul became firm friends and the first modern book about the region’s cuisine, Rhubarb and Black Pudding, was hailed as a culinary breakthrough. You could argue it started the local produce revolution.

Further probing of the region took him to Sharrow Bay, the Inn at Whitewell and Nigel Haworth. ‘The region had so much going for it - the black pudding, the Sarah Nelson gingerbread, and the extraordinary

cheeses. All this wonderful food existed and there were people producing great dishes from it but they all seemed to be doing it in isolation. There was no unity of purpose.

‘That’s all changed now - it all feels more joined up. People are talking to each other and working together and as a result the north west has seen this tremendous revival.’

The next series of the Great British Menu is currently being filmed with Matthew, Prue Leith and Oliver Peyton putting another group of chefs through the mill. ‘It’s a wonderful job,’ he said. ‘I sit at a table, they bring me food and all I have to do is say: “Pass the sickbag, Alice” or “Bring me a second helping”.

‘I thoroughly enjoy working with Prue and Oliver although we do have some interesting differences of opinion. But it’s a programme I’m very proud of because it introduces some brilliant chefs to a wider audience and the secret is that it takes good chefs seriously. It’s a competition but it doesn’t dress them up in some ludicrous situation. It’s fantastic we have people who things so well with such passion.’

Nigel Haworth, one of the stars of the last series, has now bowed out. But, without giving too much away, don’t be surprised to see another brilliant Northcote chef, Lisa Allen, taking his place on your screens very soon. 🍷



Craig Bancroft with Nigel Haworth

It’s an Obsession

Nigel Haworth and business partner Craig Bancroft have been running the Obsession Food and Wine Festival for ten memorable years at Northcote. The event brings some of the world’s finest chefs to Lancashire to cook for those fortunate enough to secure a ticket. If you haven’t managed to be there or you want to remember one of the sumptuous meals, Nigel Haworth’s Obsession Cookbook is now out with more than 100 recipes by over 50 top chefs. Each has recreated their Northcote menu as well as including a dish they love to cook at home. Pre-ordered copies, personalised and signed by Nigel, cost £35.00. The festival and sales of the book will benefit Hospitality Action, a charity for people from the industry who have fallen on hard times. You can find out more from www.northcote.com.



Make a meal of it

If you are looking for recipes, places to eat or information about local food producers, then our wonderful website lancashire.greatbritishlife.co.uk is the place for you. And if you know a great restaurant or producer who deserves to be covered in Lancashire Life, drop us a line at letters@lancashirelife.co.uk.

