

An interview with in-house chef Thomas Park

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When did your love for food and cooking start?

I've loved being in the kitchen ever since I was a young child. I used to cook with my mother, who is a fantastic cook with a broad range of tastes. She especially loves Italian and Indian food, and initially taught me simple dishes such as Bolognese, lasagne, and pizza before we moved on to the more complicated dishes. I remember being fascinated by how many ingredients and how much time and effort went into producing a proper curry! I've loved cooking ever since.

What's your history as a chef?

My first job after leaving school was as a kitchen porter in a very busy commercial hotel in Aberdeen. This was a completely new world to me as I had never seen such a massive operation with so many chefs, KP's and waiting staff, all hurrying around, constantly busy. My passion for cooking brought me all over the UK, working in a variety of kitchens from cafés, youth hostels, bistros, pubs, restaurants and hotels. By 2013 I had decided that the Scottish Highlands was where I wanted to settle and so opened my own very popular café / restaurant in Speyside which I ran for 3 years, before starting a new challenge at Alladale.

How would you describe your food?

Wholesome, healthy, comforting! I love producing this type of food and our guests really appreciate the home from home feeling. I cook mostly traditionally, without many gadgets, but there are necessities like an ice cream machine that I can't do without. I take pride that everything on my menu is homemade using local ingredients and is as healthy as possible.

What are your favourite ingredients to cook with?

Star anise, absolutely hands down my favourite ingredient of all, I love the flavour and its ability to sit well in both savoury and sweet dishes. Thyme is my favourite herb to use and again is very versatile. Venison, the healthiest and most flavoursome of red meats.

What is the nicest compliment your food ever received?

If a guest tells me that whatever they've just had is the best they have ever tasted then for me there is no better compliment. That's exactly what I'm trying to achieve!

Where do you get your supplies from?

Alladale is a very remote place to be when it comes to trying to get supplies here. It has taken me a while to get good suppliers who are willing to travel this far. My main supplier is Williamson Food Service based in Inverness. This company has been a lifeline to us as they not only supply us quality fruit, vegetables, dry goods and dairy products but they are happy to deliver orders from other companies. This has been invaluable to me for getting products from otherwise hard to get to places. Williamson also have a strong ethos in supporting local business and supplying as much local produce as possible.



If you would put up a dish that symbolizes Scottish cuisine, what would it be?

I'm not sure there is one dish that can encompass Scottish food as a whole, as there is so much produce on offer. For me though a venison dish would be the most symbolic of Scotland. Although you can get venison virtually everywhere, Scottish wild venison really is the best in the world.

What do you enjoy most about working at Alladale?

After leaving Aberdeen I lived and worked mostly in the countryside or by the sea and soon realised this is where I belong. I'm very much an outdoor enthusiast so the move to Alladale among the mountains, rivers and lochs and with access to some of the best beaches in the world was a very easy decision to make. The scenery here and around northern Scotland is simply stunning.

Where do you get your inspiration from?

Everywhere I can. Restaurants, cafés, websites, food magazines, books, friends, family, shops, nature, walks etc.

Who in the food world do you most admire?

I admire what modern chefs are doing with ingredients these days. It's turned into a science and is mind blowing! I also admire what chefs around Scotland have done for the culinary scene in recent years to really put us on the food map. There are countless top quality places to eat around Scotland that are striving to use the best of Scottish produce. That has really helped to lift Scotland out of the bad reputation we once had for unhealthy foods. I am proud to play my part in that.

What kind of food do you like to cook at home?

I usually use a slow cooker at home for various meat and vegetable stews, great for my lifestyle of working long hours, as well as healthy. Also I like to steam food which is a quick and easy way of cooking a healthy meal. As a treat now and then I like a medium rare steak with blue cheese melted on top, sweet potato mash, greens and red onion marmalade.

What is your favourite food memory?

As a child getting what was called 'The ice cream factory' for my birthday that came in a bowl bigger than my head. When I travelled to Thailand and got the biggest culture shock I've ever had, the food was incredible. Travelling to Italy and trying out an Italian pizza for the first time. Being asked to select which piece of cow I wanted from a steakhouse in Texas! Growing and using herbs in cooking for the first time. Recently, receiving a standing ovation for Christmas dinner. There are many!

Funniest kitchen incident?

I once saw a girl trying to scoop a ball of extremely hard ice cream just out the freezer. She was putting so much force into it that just as she was almost through the scoop ripped through the ice cream and the ball shot into the air, almost hit the ceiling, and then landed in the bowl she was serving in. I couldn't have done that better myself. She got a cheer as it happened!

