



Fire up your taste buds

Padstow's star shines bright and never more so than at Christmas. *Anna Turns* chats to the town's award-winning chef, **Paul Ainsworth**, to find out why. Photos by *James Ram*.

Despite regular TV appearances on BBC's *Saturday Kitchen* and *MasterChef*, plus a well-earned Michelin star to his name, Paul Ainsworth remains a humble, down-to-earth chap. "TV's a funny thing," he says. "When I first started out there were only four or five TV chefs on our screens; now there are hundreds. I'm just going on TV to do my job and inspire other people to cook."

Paul agrees that the recent exponential rise in cookery shows has helped reconnect people to where their food comes from and how it's produced. "This industry has just exploded and we're in the midst of a revolution. Food brings people together and it releases endorphins – I appreciate that more now; there comes a time in your life when having a good dinner with friends becomes your main pleasure. Food should be for everybody – it doesn't matter if it's from a street vendor or from Claridge's, everyone can experience amazing food."

And TV always comes second to the Cornish town he's called home for the past 12 years: "Padstow's always my number one priority," says Paul, who for the tenth year is helping to organise the Padstow Christmas Festival. "We started from small, intimate beginnings with a few local chefs doing demos to about 50 people." The festival has grown and grown, and Rick Stein and

Paul now invite chefs from further afield, too, including Tom Kerridge, Angela Hartnett and Sophie Michell. "Couple great Cornish food with the good feeling Christmas brings, and our festival really kicks off the festive season," says Paul enthusiastically. "It's a chance to get things from stallholders and producers that you simply wouldn't get in supermarkets – artisan wines, beautiful duck fat, cheeses and hams, panettone and Christmas cakes, chutneys, membrillo pastes, all made here in Cornwall."

Cornwall is well known for fabulous food tourism, with Padstow firmly marked on the gastromap, but Paul remembers when the busy seasons used to be shorter and more defined: "We hit a real turning point when the volcanic ash cloud shut down the airports in April 2010 – our bookings went berserk for four weeks out of season and so many people discovered Cornwall for the first time because of that," he says. "Then the staycation developed and that's huge now – I love it so much down here I almost wish I could be the person visiting Cornwall on holiday, seeing it from a fresh perspective. Of course, you can't always guarantee sunny weather but I think there's a wonderful feeling when you can just pack up the car, without the hassle of airports, and tap into Cornwall's vibe – there's so much to do here."



Paul Ainsworth, Rick and Jack Stein at *The Padstow Festival Cookbook* launch

In fact, Paul had his own staycation this year with his wife Emma and one-year-old daughter Aricie, visiting all the adventure parks, beaches and, of course, scouring the region for new producers as he goes: "That's my default setting, and it can be as simple as stumbling across a farm shop and picking up a lovely chutney that might spark an idea for a dish. I always appreciate producers doing great things."

But does the vibrant Cornish food scene rival that of London? Paul thinks it can, while still retaining its own identity and personality. "Amazing things are happening here at the moment. For example, chef Tom Adams at Coombeshead Farm moved down from London and he's making wonderful butter and the best bread I've ever tasted in my life."

And though Padstow might be better known by some for Rick Stein's plethora of restaurants, which has grown since *The Seafood Restaurant* first opened in 1975, Paul has no intention to compete directly with Stein: "We've always wanted to complement Rick, so at No. 6, we champion the farmers. Of course, we have brilliant fish on our doorstep but we've also got world-class farming. We are ingredient-led, so we make the most of the lamb, beef, pork, duck, the game – that's our niche."

And that niche is attracting attention. Paul recently cooked for Gordon Ramsay when he holidayed in Cornwall (rumour has it Gordon is planning to open a restaurant in Fowey). "I worked for Gordon for six years, and he's a big fan of our Italian restaurant *Rojano's* in the Square – he'll eat there seven or eight times when he's down here for a couple of weeks – but it was really lovely to cook for him at No. 6 for the first time, too."

Paul also worked for Gary Rhodes and Marcus Wareing in London, plus hospitality was bred into him from an early age, living in his parent's ten-bed B&B in Southampton, so perhaps it's no wonder Paul has held a Michelin star since 2012. But what's the secret to retaining it? "Consistency



Paul Ainsworth and Paul Dodd cook up a feast in the festival demo kitchen

is the key," according to Paul. "We evolve but we always remember why Michelin gave us the star and we stick to those values. That doesn't mean play it safe or don't change, but I've always produced an à la carte menu and that suits my personality, so we don't do a tasting menu. While we're very serious about what we do, I don't want guests to feel the pressure and intensity of the standard we try to deliver every day – I want them to feel happy and relaxed. Ultimately it's all about the customer." So, for Paul, it's never about following trends, he stays true to himself but pushes himself to stay at the forefront and evolve.

Finally, I ask Paul about the family aspect of his business. His wife Emma was instrumental in renovating Padstow Townhouse to create their first boutique B&B and she works hard behind the scenes, plus his sister Michelle works as his assistant. But it goes further than that, as Paul explains: "The chefs working alongside me have become my family – I probably spend more time with them than I do with my wife. John Walton, head chef at No. 6, has been with me for 12 years, and Paul Dodd, the chef director at *Rojano's*, has worked with me for 10 years. That's how it works – I surround myself with energetic, passionate people who keep me creative!" ■

Padstow Christmas Festival: 7-10 December. For more info: padstowchristmasfestival.co.uk

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Paul Ainsworth and friends share some of their favourite recipes in *The Padstow Festival Cookbook* (£12), available via mail order through Padstow Tourist Information Centre and at the festival.