



Why Mr Kitchin is over the moon with his star

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I'M HALFWAY through a phone conversation with Tom Kitchin, chef, restaurateur and rising star of the Scottish food scene, when he interrupts me.

"Hang on," he says. "Martin Wishart's on the other line.

The phone is put down and I hear him pick up another receiver. Words like "Wonderful... fantastic... couldn't believe it" float down the line, until he finally finishes up with: "Thanks man, that means a lot. Let's have a drink on Saturday."

He picks up the phone again. "Sorry 'bout that. Where were we?"

The reason for Kitchin's flustered phone manner is that yesterday morning, around 8:30am, the 29-year-old received a call telling him his Leith-based restaurant had won a Michelin star. The award makes him one of the youngest Scots ever to have received the accolade.

Even more astoundingly, Kitchin's restaurant (called, not entirely surprisingly, The Kitchin) only opened last June. Given that the Michelin guide is usually in the hands of its publishers by autumn, this is quite an achievement.

"I'm still a bit shell-shocked, to be honest," he tells me. "My legs just went when I heard. I really wasn't expecting it. I was focusing on next year, thinking if we had a chance, it would be then. It really is unbelievable."

Kitchin is clearly something special. Starting his restaurant career at the age of 14, washing dishes at the Lomond Country Inn, the local pub near his home town of Kinross, he decamped to London at the age of 18 after a year and a half learning the ropes at Gleneagles.

Training under such luminaries as the legendary French chef Pierre Koffman - who ran the three-Michelin starred London restaurant La Tante Claire - as well as Guy Savoy and Alain Ducasse, his food is contemporary Scottish, with a distinctive French influence. Dishes at Kitchin might include a fillet of beef bordelaise, cooked with the bone marrow, or seared halibut with ginger tomato chutney and a herbe beurre blanc.

"He understands his style of food and what the customers need," says Wishart, who retained his Michelin-star rating in yesterday's awards for his eponymous Edinburgh restaurant, when I track him down for a chat later on.

"He's got a great restaurant, and of course the star comes for the cooking, which is what Tom can be proud of."

Other contemporaries happily concur. "His food is very honest," says Andrew Fairlie, who retained his two Michelin stars yesterday. His is the only restaurant in Scotland with this rating.

"Technically, he's a very good cook. He's a passionate young guy. He wears his heart on his sleeve and works very hard at what he does. I was really pleased for him, and it was very quick for Michelin, I have to say. It just shows how solid he is and that they've got trust in him that he's going to maintain it."

Kitchin's star, along with another new addition, Glenapp Castle at Ballantrae, in South Ayrshire, which also won a Michelin star, confirms that Scottish restaurants, and Scottish cooking, are starting to achieve the international recognition some say is long overdue.

"I think the future is really bright at the moment," says Fairlie. "At the top level we're doing very well. If that helps bring up standards elsewhere, that would be fantastic."

Kitchin himself is passionate about raising standards of cooking in Scotland - not only in restaurants but also in the home, where he is all for a return to basic, seasonal, local cuisine. He says, "There are definitely interesting things happening. There are a lot of places that are just good to go and eat at, but there's still a lot of crap out there. But at another level, you've got people like Martin [Wishart] and Andrew [Fairlie] who've been doing it for years and have become real leaders of our gastronomic scene."

"I think we could do more to encourage young chefs like Tom," says Wishart.

"We could do with more support and more funding when it comes to small businesses in general. The good thing about this is, young chefs will look up to someone like Tom. People will want to emulate that."

Kitchin was adamant that he wanted to open his first restaurant here in Scotland, rather than anywhere else, despite having worked in the glamorous, high-octane surroundings of London, France and Monte Carlo over the past 12 years.

His mentor, Pierre Koffman, tells me: "He wanted to go back to Scotland and open a restaurant there. He could have done it in London, he would have won a star there too, I'm sure, but being Scottish he wanted to do it in Scotland, and that's nice."

Kitchin says one of the main reasons for him to return home was the fabulous range of fresh food Scotland has to offer.

"I've been working in places like Monte Carlo, in a three-star Michelin restaurant, and cooking Scottish grouse. They worship this bird that's come from the Perthshire hills. So when I came back to Scotland I wanted to place a massive emphasis on the Scottish produce that we have."

And what about the future? Kitchin would like to see the restaurant filling up more during the week - its position in Leith means it's not in a hugely busy area, and while the tables are packed at weekends, during the week there can be a few empty covers. And he says he's looking forward to all the fresh Scottish produce that spring will bring.

Koffman certainly has no qualms about the prospects of his former student. "I suppose all young chefs [who achieve] a star then want a second or even a third star, so maybe he will follow that path. We'll see."

"His cooking is certainly good enough to get three stars one day. He's got off to a great start."

Kitchin admits it hasn't all been easy. "You work 16, 17 hours a day. Sometimes you think to yourself, 'God, is it worth it?'"

"But when something like today happens, it is."

And with that, he heads back to his kitchen.

THE KITCHIN - À LA CARTE MENU

STARTERS

Market Salad Salad of mixed organic leaves and seasonal vegetables with a herb dressing, £7.00

Scallops Seared hand-dived Orkney scallops with sautéed purple sprouting broccoli, crispy bacon and a pumpkin beurre blanc, £13.50

Halibut Carpaccio of wild halibut and beetroot with pickled garlic, capers and lemon dressing, £8.50

Foie Gras Pan-fried foie gras with haggis, neeps and tatties à la Kitchin, £12.00

Pork & Langoustine Roasted langoustine tails from Anstruther with boned and rolled pig's head, served with a crispy ear salad, £14.00

MAIN COURSES

Venison and chestnuts served with a juniper berry sauce, £23.00

Rabbit Saddle of rabbit farced with spinach and shallots, served with slow-cooked piperade Basquaise, £24.00

Fillet of Beef Grilled fillet of beef 'bordelaise' with bone marrow, sautéed mushrooms and potato gratin, £22.00

Red Mullet Red mullet upside-down, roast squid, cumin-flavoured aubergine caviar with spice sauce, £19.00

Monkfish Roast tail of monkfish wrapped in pancetta, with Jerusalem artichokes, salsify and roast garlic, £21.00

Turbot Fillet of wild turbot poached in red wine with confit of leeks à la crème, £23.00

DESSERTS

Biscuit glacé Biscuit glacé with marinated vanilla citrus, £5.00

Honey Iced Perthshire heather hills honey parfait with cumquats with cardamom brandy snaps, £6.00

Apple & Chestnuts Cinnamon-spiced apple and chestnut compote served with apple sorbet, £6.00

Chocolate Chocolate tarte with orange and ginger ice-cream, £6.50

Cheese Scottish and French selection, £7.50

The Kitchin 0131-555-1755