

→ flavour matt follas



This year's *MasterChef* winner **Mat Follas** might be one of the only Harley Davidson riders with a penchant for crab thermidor and truffle bread. With the competition now at an end, **Helen Aurelius-Haddock** takes a trip to Dorset and talks to Mat about his most challenging culinary project to date: the opening of his new restaurant.

The green oak tables for Mat Follas's new restaurant were being carefully unloaded under many a watchful eye as I arrived to talk to him.

Designed as outdoor furniture, they seemed rather unwieldy and momentarily at odds with the interior. There was an ample trestle table that absolutely refused to go inside until partially dismantled by Mat's crew of helpers. It was eventually inched inside the door, taking a few fingers as victims, but managing to avoid the sheet of plate glass at the entrance etched with the name of the new restaurant in town, The Wild Garlic.

Once installed, they quickly blended with the muted greens of the décor, and made themselves at home. The edges were patiently carved with snatched sayings from West Country writers such as Thomas Hardy. Others were inscribed with the names of the wild ingredients that would soon be gracing them.

Inside, things were busy – there was a crew attending to the legion of snagging jobs that any site requires to bring it up to the mark. Things were really taking shape however – an unblemished blackboard sat above the fireplace waiting for its plat du jour to be announced. Elsewhere, a wood burner patiently awaited its turn in the limelight – it will see little action in the summer days to follow, but judging by the advance bookings taking Mat right into September already, it won't be long before its services are required.

# Mat Follas

The front of house was alive with a score of conversations, questions and mobile calls – all of which were aimed at Mat. Yet, while I waited for him, he patiently dealt with each person and their particular query. He smiled the whole time. A man clearly happy with the gradual achievement of a cherished dream – to open a restaurant and cook the food he loves for others.

bartering at its best. Mat's second inspiration came from his hometown of Beaminster in New Zealand, which has a strong tradition of foraging, and he was keen to join in the fun when he moved back there six years ago with his family. His wife Amanda has also always been a keen gardener and, seeing her husband's growing affinity for the wild,

“He strapped a brace of wild rabbit and some spider crabs to his Harley and rode off to compete for the final accolade. He went, he cooked, he conquered.”

Mat's pre-MasterChef existence was that of an IT engineer. He learned to cook out of necessity, as so many do. However, there was a secondary motivation: “I wanted to impress the ladies!” he admits. Back then it was none of your nettle soup or elderflower sorbets. He stuck to the culinary standards of spaghetti Bolognese, stir fries and the odd curry.

So where did the love affair with wild food come from? His love of scuba diving for many years played a major part. “I got a real buzz from coming up from a dive with about a hundred and fifty quid's worth of free seafood,” he says. He used to set about cooking some of the catch for friends and family, and traded the rest for meat from his local butcher and Guinness from his local. Modern-day

quickly turned her garden from “pretty to edible”. Herbs and flowers soon became readily available for the Follas family kitchen table. Mat's love of cooking and a desire for change from a corporate work life were prime factors in his application to become a contestant in MasterChef 2009. He modestly claims never to have set out to win. “I was simply contented to not make a fool out of myself in my heat!” he says.

Events were to prove otherwise, and during the filming from June to September last year, he quickly found himself in the semi-finals, with a one in six chance of winning. The odds were favourably stacked at this point and he, like his fellow contestants, tried to be very tactical in the ensuing round. Mat leapt out of his comfort zone, pushed his wild food creations to one side

and cooked a very safe and bland dish, nearly losing the competition.

The judges' acerbic off-screen roasting soon brought him to his senses. He regrouped and prepared for the final. He strapped a brace of wild rabbit and some spider crabs to his Harley and rode off to compete for the final accolade. He went, he cooked, he conquered. Mat became this year's MasterChef.

The Wild Garlic morphed from a dream into a reality when the chances of winning were looming large on the horizon. The menu has a 24 carat hallmark of foraged food, including Mat's MasterChef signature dishes of trio of wild rabbit and spider crab thermidor. As we spoke, he was planning to bake truffle bread with fellow cook Heather Badcock for the launch, and the appearance of hand-dived scallops with wild garlic butter reveals an intention to source some of his food personally. Proud of his Kiwi heritage, he will also be showcasing Montana Wines to accompany the food.

He will of course use local suppliers, and has graciously highlighted these on his website, to allow full transparency as to his raw ingredients. As time allows, I feel he will offer the locations of his wild food as well, give or take the odd secret stash of harder-to-get ingredients! Although not a big exponent of organic food, preferring to use well managed, locally stocked foodstuffs, Mat wants to ensure that his customers will know the provenance of each carefully selected ingredient. He seems undeterred by the threat of inclement weather or low stocks in the hedgerows, and will work around any shortfalls by simple substitution.

Mat has had the courage to realise his creative side, and has risked his shirt to bring The Wild Garlic to fruition. Even now, when asked about book deals, product endorsement or TV appearances, Mat remains unfalteringly modest. “If it comes my way I'll take it – I am flattered by it all. I only did MasterChef because I wanted to become a chef.” As a man on the verge of opening a restaurant destined for success by virtue of its unique bill of fare, Mat's success will be very much deserved.

