

World's Great Chef Visits Tasmania's East coast

By Mandy Burbury

In early March, 2008 I experienced what could have been a very embarrassing moment. For the previous few days I had hardly been able to contain my excitement, I would finally be meeting perhaps one of the world's greatest Chefs, here on the East coast. Naturally, I did some homework and knew that Michel Roux was not only famous for his Michelin restaurants in the United Kingdom, but was also a Marathon runner.

Imagine my surprise when I heard the vehicle drive up and a delightful elderly grey haired gentleman stepped out,

"I can imagine your complete surprise", said his Australian born wife Robyn, when I recounted the story, "you must have thought that if that's what running does for you, don't get involved".

Such was the easy rapport that developed between those that were fortunate enough to partake in a superb breakfast cooked by John T Bailey from The Banc Restaurant in Swansea, amongst the walnut trees in the Webster Horticulture orchard.

Not only was I surprised, I was absolutely thrilled, as this was not the fit younger nephew Michel Jnr, but the Patriarch of the Roux dynasty here in Tasmania. Michel and Albert Roux were born into a family from Charolles in the French region of Saone et Loire who had always run charcuteries. It was a way of life, but for the Roux brothers, they wanted to cook 'everything'.

Michel spent three years as an apprentice pastry chef in Paris during the 1950's. As an aside, Robyn Roux told me that on their way from Stanley to Bicheno they called at The White House bakery at Westbury.

"It was closed, but we knocked on the door around the back and the lady there kindly let us in to have a look at the bakery. Naturally we didn't say who we were, but Michel mentioned he had once been a pastry chef, so she immediately called for a 'pinny' and told him to get involved. This is typical of everything we find in Tasmania, the friendliness is overwhelming".

Little did she know who helped cooked the pastries last Monday!

By the age of 18, he was working as the sous chef at the British Embassy in Paris and after two years in military service and a stint with Mademoiselle Cecile de Rothschild. "where I learned to be a gourmet", he and his brother Albert moved to London. The year was 1967 and according to Michel, "We introduced haute cuisine to the British public. Their idea of exotic fare was spaghetti Bolognese. It was a land of culinary philistines". The restaurant was Le Gavroche which received its first Michelin star in 1974 and by 1982 had three, which it has managed to maintain right through to the present time and is now operated by Michel Jnr. Marathon Man.

The Brothers Roux, as they were known, are legendary in Great Britain. During the 1970's they also opened their second restaurant, The Waterside Inn at Bray-on-Thames, a stone's throw from Windsor Castle. Again, it wasn't long before this was also given the highest culinary distinction, three Michelin stars.

Michel now has close ties with Australia. He met his wife Robyn, 25 years ago in Sydney

"I trained at NIDA and then became involved in restaurants, it's all the same, it's all theatre. A good friend of mine asked me to entertain a visiting Chef. Don't be silly, I said, he'll be some overweight, egotistical Frenchman, and I'll have to spend the evening justifying Australian food. But, we had dinner and we had the best evening, and the next morning he rang and asked me out to dinner, and two weeks later I was in England"

Robyn's part in the now very famous highly awarded Waterside Inn has been the accommodation. Her magnificently decorated suites and apartments carry tariffs from around \$700 a night,

"We have 11 bedrooms, and that has also been a revolution, like the food, it never changes dramatically but it subtly changes direction."

The Roux's give back constantly into an industry that has been revolutionized over the past forty years, thanks entirely some would say to Michel and Albert. They have offered since 1984 the Roux Scholarship which encourages young Chefs to achieve their full potential.

It wasn't long after the delicious breakfast of bircher muesli, made naturally with Webster Walnuts and local berries, followed by poached eggs and black pudding, that our own John T Bailey, whose restaurant in Swansea has had its own accolades bestowed upon it, was to be found 'chewing the fat' with Michele about their early days in the London restaurant trade. Much was written that week about the Roux's visit to Tasmania, but surely their memories will be of that glorious morning spent here on the East coast.