

WHISTLES

IN CONVERSATION WITH GREEN MICHELIN STAR CHEF RICKI WESTON ON LOCAL FOOD SOURCING, COOKING RESPONSIBLY AND HOW MENU INSPIRATION CONTINUES TO EVOLVE

This autumn, alongside our quest for innovative and responsible food sourcing, we had the chance to talk with Executive Chef Ricki Weston. He's one of the UK's standout Michelin-starred chefs with a focus on sustainability and you'll find him leading the dining room at Whatley Manor in the heart of the Cotswolds.

So, let's dive in and discover the inspirations and passions that have woven Weston's unique journey in the world of cooking.



When did you first fall in love with cooking? What do you love most about it?

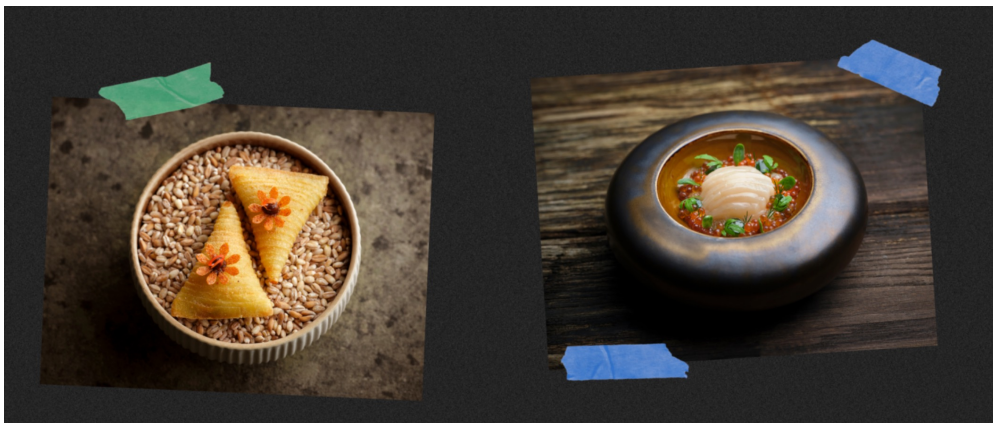
I've always found joy in cooking. It's that familiar ritual of cooking at home with the kids, the parents—just everyone. I'm pretty sure most people can relate to that. My grandparents used to live next door to a farm too, so I grew up surrounded by fresh ingredients. It became second nature, learning to select the best produce and figuring out which ones we liked the most.

At the start, I didn't have a burning desire to become a chef. Fate had me land in a kitchen for some work experience and I remember thinking, "this is going to be the worst week of my life." Little did I know, I'd fall in love with the kitchen. I made a bold move, quitting school just before my exams and made it my mission to collaborate with the finest chefs in the area, even if I was a couple of years behind. From then on, it was all about soaking up as much knowledge as possible. There's magic in watching things come together.

Tell us more about your current role as Chef...

In our kitchen at Whatley, there's over 50 years of collective experience. It's amazing to witness the entire process, turning raw ingredients into beautifully plated masterpieces. It's a testament to our dedication and expertise, a spectacle that never gets old. I'm not just about cooking; I'm about composing balanced menus and dishes. In my current role, I get the opportunity to rally the whole team, inspiring them to share their ideas and be part of something greater. That builds excitement amongst themselves in the kitchen and everyone becomes passionate about their unique creations. It's not just about one dish; it's about the entire experience. This journey is about more than just the kitchen and we're always developing as we push forward.

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You source a lot of ingredients from the local garden and grounds responsibly. How does this influence the way you cook and create menus?

For me, prioritising seasonality and sourcing locally has always been important. When a product is in season, it's at its peak, bursting with natural flavours. We're fortunate to have our own grounds and garden, which we blend with the kitchen. And the fact that we have cows right here on-site, grazing the grounds, is remarkable.

Given our location amidst sprawling countryside, foraging becomes an exciting aspect too. From mushrooms to wild garlic, we're able to tap into nature's pantry. Bringing our team outdoors to witness the source of our ingredients encourages a deeper connection. I think this hands-on experience encourages enthusiasm. They can say, "I picked this just an hour ago," and it creates a link between the ingredients and the plate. It brings back connection to food, which is the very reason we became chefs in the first place.

Also in an era of convenience, it's so easy to just pick up the phone and order ingredients but we mustn't forget our roots. We became chefs not only for our love of food, but also for the appreciation of the produce itself. And being where we are, it's a perfect opportunity to maintain that connection.

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How would you describe your approach to cooking and creating? What makes your menus unique?

When it comes to my style, I'd say it's deeply rooted in British heritage. We take a good look at what's being grown or available in the area. We try to build on those connections to create our dishes, especially the smaller bites. And as for the finishing touches, they're steeped in nostalgia. It's a quick way to establish an identity.

This isn't just about the food. It's also about the story. When you come into our kitchen, we'll tell you why we've chosen a particular ingredient or technique. Like why we've paired the muscat tart with that specific vinegar. There are so many threads that tie it all together. However, the core is always the ingredient and the technique. We draw a lot from classical cooking methods.

Another big thing for me is passing on the knowledge. We've got to think about the next generation of chefs. What are they learning? How are they entering the industry? It's not the same as when I started out, and we've got to adapt. The way we were trained, the long hours—it's all evolved. So, it's crucial to focus on giving them the right foundations and making it accessible. That's the direction we're headed, and it's vital for the future of our craft.

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What are the challenges involved with creating a tasting menu?

Portions are important but I'd say finding the right balance and managing costs are the current challenges we're tackling. It's not just about offering premium ingredients; it's about nailing the balance and how we incorporate them into our menus overall. It's not all about heavy, rich foods anymore. Nowadays, it's more about lighter, fresher options and accommodating various dietary needs. We make sure every menu we have is something we're genuinely proud of. It's a reflection of what we're all about in the restaurant, not just a piece of paper with dishes listed on it.

And what are your main focuses? What do you want your tasting menus to bring to people?

My main goal is to create an experience that encompasses all aspects. Going out for a meal has evolved into more than just what's on the plate. It's about the entire journey: the service, the ambiance, the theatre. Nostalgia plays a big part, as it's something everyone can connect with. We aim to evoke memories while also crafting new ones.

How do you focus on being responsible in your cooking and creating? And why is it important to you?

Sustainability isn't just a checkbox for our restaurant, it's woven into the very fabric of our whole ethos. The training and the insight we've received have left us with only one option – to approach things this way, because it's the right way.

In the kitchen, food waste is a big focus. We meticulously weigh it and work on reduction strategies. We've introduced a 'Waste Project Notes' system, where the team identifies items frequently discarded and comes up with ideas ways to repurpose them. This sparks creativity but of course, it has to taste great and not look like a leftover. It's about instilling a culture of scrutinising everything we do. We question it all.

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Which other chefs and restaurants do you admire? Any favourites?

I've got one that always comes to mind when I'm asked about chefs and restaurants – this spot over in the Faroe Islands called Koks. It's something else, seriously. It's in the middle of nowhere and still has two Michelin stars. Their videos showcasing where they get their produce are mind-blowing. Everything, and I mean everything, is sourced right from that island. You can't just pick up the phone and expect a delivery the next day, it's not that simple. Powell, the chef there, has a deep knowledge of the Faroe Islands' roots and he's using all these unique methods to age meats and fish, taking into account how the air density and moisture change over the seasons. It's truly something special. This whole approach, with its focus on local ingredients and seasons, consistently brings out an incredible dining experience.