



Building a  
kitchen  
fit for the  
**stars**



If there's one thing guaranteed to get a chef excited (and spending money) it's the prospect of a new kitchen. Alain Roux, chef-proprietor of The Waterside Inn, is no exception. He can't keep the smile off his face when we chat, just in the run-up to Christmas 2008, about the restaurant's latest project: the refurbishment of its 23-year-old kitchen.



**I**t's very exciting,' he says, laconically, the grin belying his sparse words. He could have added – given the amount of modern kitchen gizmos and equipment chefs can lay their hands on these days – that the refurbishment was potentially budget-busting.

Luckily, The Waterside Inn's founder and joint proprietor, Alain's father Michel Roux, has been on hand during the project's planning stages over the past year, to rein-in his son when finances began to mushroom. 'We were going to have a rotisserie,' says Alain, wistfully, 'but my Dad thought it was too expensive, so we've got an empty wall where it was going to go now! Maybe we'll add it in a few years. We'll see.'

We'll return to the subject of the rotisserie later, but even without one, the kitchen's refurbishment is going to clock-in at around £1.5m, so you can see why Michel balked at that particular fence. Nonetheless, the new kitchen's going to give Alain a few new toys to play with. A plancha (a type of solid-top grill commonplace in Spanish kitchens), the latest hi-spec steam ovens, and some all-singing-all-dancing induction hobs. A few years ago induction (electric) hobs would never have been spotted in a professional kitchen – chefs have always preferred the more subtle power control that gas ranges afford – but modern technological advancements mean that they are now taking their place alongside the naked flames of gas.

It's not only cooking equipment that is being replaced. The back-up facilities – waste disposal systems, drains, ventilation, electrical wiring (including emergency power options in the event of a mains power cut) are all being re-done. In fact, the kitchen will be completely gutted and its space usage rationalised.

'It's an old building; the walls are uneven and the kitchen's not square or even rectangular – lots of corners,' explains Alain, punctuating his words with evocative gestures of wonky walls, nooks and crannies. 'So we're going to get rid of that and have pretty much an open space, not restrained by internal columns or walls,' he says, adding with obvious glee: 'we'll be able to work clockwise.'



If that sounds a tad nerdy, then take it from me, being able to have a one-directional flow-of-work in a busy kitchen is infinitely preferable to its alternative – a kind of directional-free-for-all (imagine a multi-directional roundabout system) which inevitably ends up in bumps and dodgemes that, in turn, causes time-wastage and, sometimes, breakages if plates etc are accidentally knocked out of hurrying hands.

'I won't miss not working clockwise,' reiterates Alain. 'It's one of the most annoying things about the old kitchen. That and not being able to always have clearly defined areas. Over the years – probably every year, actually – we changed and adapted little things, replaced a fridge counter, moved some preparation areas around. But there's only so much you can do with a higgledy-piggledy floor plan... the worst has been my baker, who's had to work alongside the fish prep area because there was nowhere else to fit him in!'

Of course, nearly a quarter of a century ago when the kitchen was last refitted and still his father's domain, everything was tickety-boo and

up-to-the minute on the equipment front. Moreover, a one-way workflow wasn't as important because The Waterside Inn was still in the process of establishing itself as the UK's premier restaurant-with-rooms.

'The business is a lot busier than 23 years ago,' confirms Alain. 'In those days it was a lot more seasonal, you'd get quiet weeks in the winter months (although not at weekends). But these days, having rooms, that doesn't happen. I would say we run the business more or less at full capacity all year round now, except of course during our New Year break when we close down for a few weeks. People don't wait for a weekend (or summer) to go away and have a little holiday.'

His father, whirl winding-in from another meeting to join our confab (which is taking place just before a fully-fledged project meeting), underlines Alain's assessment. 'We do roughly 30,000-32,000 covers [meals] a year now – what I needed in the 1980s and what he needs to use now... well it's completely different.

'You know,' Michel continues, 'I think we're going to save around

20%-30% on the energy bill because of the new equipment technology. And I believe the new layout will mean that instead of having around 24-26 chefs in the kitchen we'll probably only need around 20-22 because we won't need so many what I call "arms and legs" – that is, people who we need to just speed up the hand on of plates etc. In fact, I hope the layout will save up to four or five hours a day in "real" working time because the equipment will be to hand and not the other side of the kitchen.' Of course, the big question is, how will a new kitchen manifest itself for the thousands of Waterside Inn devotees who dine in the restaurant with its idyllic views overlooking the Thames? 'I don't think they'll notice any difference in the food, because we'll be doing the same dishes – hopefully they'll get things a bit quicker, perhaps,' muses Alain. 'I think', ponders his father, 'that dishes will develop in time as he plays around with and gets used to the new equipment.' Once it's up-and-running, any guest wanting to see the kitchen for themselves will be welcomed in with open arms, but diners peeking behind the

scenes will probably remark on the kitchen's compactness, despite its space-opening makeover. 'They've always said, "phawww how can you do so many meals in a small kitchen like that?"' laughs Michel, 'and I don't think that will change. It's spacious, but not too big. Actually – a big kitchen is very tiring to work in and you never get any esprit de corps because people never get a feel for each other.'

'I've worked in some big kitchens and it's terrible,' confirms Alain. 'You feel cold, you have to walk miles to get somewhere or something and you can't supervise the team. It's a nightmare.'

Esprit de corps, team spirit, is important in any business, but particularly in a professional kitchen, where everybody needs to be doing his or her "bit" to put a dish together (individual chefs cook the meat, make the sauce, are responsible for the garnishes i.e. the "extras" on a dish like vegetables). Especially important are the chefs who hold the fort when a chef-proprietor like Alain is occasionally away, meeting-and-greeting regular customers for instance.





Alain's right-hand-man is head chef Fabrice Uhryn and he, too, has been involved in drawing up the spec for The Waterside Inn's new kitchen. As, in fact, has the restaurant's legendary restaurant manager, Diego Masciaga, who has provided the view from the other side of the fence, the dining room. Masciaga is also the driving force behind designing a new wine cellar for The Waterside Inn, to be installed in tandem with the new kitchen, which it will adjoin.

In lesser restaurants, dining room and kitchen often don't communicate properly with each other, to the detriment of their customers' dining out experience (who tells the chefs of each customer's foibles, or speed of food consumption, if not the waiting staff?). But at The Waterside Inn, this is not the case. 'Like me, Alain likes the teams to be comfortable and involved in all things,' stresses Michel. 'We've had many team meetings to discuss the project.'

Not only The Waterside Inn team meetings. Once the decision had been taken to go ahead with a refurbishment, the Rouxs then had to put in place a team of professionals – architects, builders, kitchen designers – to implement their vision for a gleaming new kitchen. 'We've worked with the architects, Greenway and Lee, on a few projects, so that was an easy decision,' says Alain darting off to fetch the project files to take into a meeting – their sixth – with the construction squad.

About five minutes later he staggers into The Waterside Inn's private dining room, where the up-date gathering is taking place, weighed down by four huge box files and a bulging ring file – such is the bureaucratic reality of fitting a £1.5m new kitchen. The discussion is already in full-swing, going through the logistical minutiae of building work. The cost of extra ventilation for a new bakery area, how to get delivery lorries down the narrow country lane that is Ferry Road (at the end of which The Waterside Inn is located), whether or not to expend money on an electrical switch that would enable an independent generator to be hooked up to supply power should there be a mains electricity failure, where and when to put in site office and loos for the builders (the car park on the 29<sup>th</sup> December 2008), how not to offend the neighbours.

The latter, or 'village housekeeping' as Michel puts it, is high on the agenda. 'Don't park in the car park in the spaces reserved for the neighbours cars, please, because they will give me hell – and they will be right to do so,' he says forcefully, insisting that during the refurbishment everyone should park ten minutes away in the main Bray village car park and walk down to The Waterside Inn.

Most importantly of all, the long-term schedule for work is confirmed, The Waterside Inn will close down immediately after Christmas, enabling workmen to move in on 29<sup>th</sup> December to gut the kitchen prior to carrying out the structural work ear-marked for its new incarnation. The end of March will be when the project is completed. And weekly, on-site progress meetings will keep a tight-rein on scheduling.



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'We're planning to be back in the kitchen on 5<sup>th</sup> April, with our first service on 8<sup>th</sup> April,' says Alain. 'I'm not saying which year,' he grins, suddenly getting superstitious about naming 2009. And with that, he hands over a huge bunch of keys that would do Buckingham Palace proud to Mark Blackwell of Blackwell Projects who will be principal contractors for the refurbishment.

### Monitoring progress

Two months later, in mid-February, I drop in to The Waterside Inn to see how things are progressing. England has just weathered the unexpected snow-laden cold snap that brought the country's transport systems to a grinding halt. But, as I soon discover at this week's site meeting, it didn't stop work on the project. Roofers were on site, reports Blackwell, 'even when it was snowing' looking out for windows of opportunity – 'two hours here and there' – to keep pushing the refurbishment forward.

Such dedication to the job-in-hand seems to be the norm with workmen on this project; and there are certainly plenty of tradesmen about. At any given time for the past seven weeks, up to 100 specialist workmen and consultants have been on-site at The Waterside Inn. Meticulous day-by-day, hour-by-hour planning charts scattered around the site office shed enlightenment on how grid-lock has been avoided.

The end result of this pernickety planning, is that the refurbishment, for the time being at least, is around two or three days ahead of schedule. This is impressive. Restaurant refurbishments (both dining room and/or kitchen) are notorious for over-running. Moreover, having working days in-hand enables you to deal with unexpected building problems; like long-buried wells underneath old kitchen floors, which need to be bridged-over properly. 'It's the fifth well we've found on the whole site,' reveals Alain, who is remarkably sanguine about the discovery.

Perhaps his cheerfulness is down to the fact that he will, after all, be having a rotisserie built-in to his new kitchen. A 'good deal,' it seems, has been swung with rotisserie specialist Cuisines Design CHK, (?) and future diners of The Waterside Inn will be able to feast on spit-roasted suckling pigs, barons of lamb, poussin and game birds. 'Dad knew I was upset about not getting the rotisserie and managed to talk them round to a good price!' laughs Alain.

Time is ticking away and after the meeting has zipped through a few other up-dates (including material storage, drainage and roof issues, streamlining piping and cabling) Alain leads the way into the kitchen. It's a scene of controlled chaos yet, gutted of the accoutrements of a professional kitchen, seems surprisingly spacious. The concrete floor is to be laid down in the afternoon: after that, it'll be full steam ahead to get the space ready for the project's final ten days at the end of March/beginning of April – ear-marked for equipment fitting.

### Final countdown

By the time of my next visit, exactly a month later, that final countdown to The Waterside Inn's reopening is in sight. The kitchen's final form is perceptible, with doorways and divisions in situ, including those delineating walk-in freezers and a dedicated bakery area. The rotisserie and bespoke island range – the latter made by Athanor – have yet to be installed but are expected soon. And despite modifications to the air-ducting system (to prevent obstruction of a doorway) no untoward problems appear to be rocking the boat.

There's a palpable air of excitement among everyone gathered in the site office, especially Masciaga who is

bursting to tell me about his new wine cellar. Like The Waterside Inn's kitchen, this will be brought bang up-to-date, with the installation of new racks, a special cabinet for fine wines and an air-conditioning system. Amazingly, it's existed without a climate-controlled temperature system during the whole of the restaurant's life to-date. 'The bar's being done too,' says Masciaga, gesturing out of a small doorway that leads towards the main dining room.

He's almost as excited about a new coffee machine ('he's Italian' grins Alain with a shrug), showing me proudly where it will live in the kitchen. As with everything concerning the refurbishment, the minutiae of installing this has already been dissected in the weekly meeting (three storage shelves have to be lost to accommodate its filter system, for instance), sandwiched between mentions of staff training on new equipment, and health and safety regulations for gas flues. Nothing is ever left to chance. 'There's no room for slippage,' stresses Blackwell.

### The handover

Two-and-a-half weeks later on 31<sup>st</sup> March, as I wend my way to Bray again to see the official kitchen handover, I can see that Blackwell's confidence wasn't misplaced. It's a sunny Tuesday morning and outside The Waterside Inn a photographer is snapping away, recording the final throes of the project. In the site office two huge files bulging with guarantees, health and safety instructions and operating manuals sit on the table ready to be hand-over to Michel and Alain. 'Homework,' murmurs Alain.

The meeting is short and sweet as there's nothing major to talk about any more. Just confirmations of final building inspections by the local council, and details of the clean-downs to be done in the kitchen over the next three days

by the teams of workmen. As predicted three months previously, Alain and his chefs will be in the kitchen at the weekend to familiarise themselves with its new form and gear-up for normal duties when The Waterside Inn reopens on Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> April. The restaurant and rooms have been fully booked for months, so delay really wasn't an option. Nevertheless, Michel proffers grateful thanks to everyone concerned with the project. 'It's quite stunning to see you kept to your schedule. I appreciate all you've done, it's bloody good.' And the kitchen itself? Well, it's hard to believe that it occupies virtually the same square footage because it feels so much larger. But that's due entirely to knocking a few walls down, putting on a very small extension at the back and utilising the space more logically. There is pristine, gleaming stainless steel everywhere; and dominating the whole area is a beautiful island cooking range and an impressive, glinting rotisserie recessed into one wall.

'Robyn [Michel's wife], says she's going to be the first to eat something cooked on it,' reveals Alain. 'Beautiful isn't it,' adds his father waving a hand at the whole kitchen. Worth the upheaval, the extended closure, the expenditure in an uncertain economic time, I venture to ask? 'Yes, certainly,' says Michel firmly. 'The kitchen needed to be done – I don't regret it at all. We'll see the benefits very soon.'

'You know,' Michel continues, 'I think we're going to save around 20%-30% on the energy bill because of the new equipment technology. And I believe the new layout will mean that instead of having around 24-26 chefs in the kitchen we'll probably only need around 20-22 because we won't need so many what I call "arms and legs"'

