



KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL

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hotel, but we're the
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Mr J. Williams

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John Williams MBE, Executive Chef of The Ritz London is definitely not a temper-tantrum chef. Behind his silver-framed glasses, the amiable chef's eyes glimmer with warmth as he jokes with his staff on his pass through the working area of a kitchen so clean it could be on show. It's 11am and preparations for lunch are well underway, but the stainless steel counters gleam and not a molecule of food has made its way to the floor. Williams surveys his domain fondly. The Chef has a reason to be proud: under his supervision, the kitchen has undergone a million pound refurbishment. And every penny has been well-spent.

"When I first came here, we had limited space," Williams says, delineating a space around half the size of the current expanse. "Almost everything was prepared in one area, from the breakfast service to staff meals, creating a bottle-neck at busy times. When most of the staff came in, the breakfast service would be extremely busy and crowded. Look at them now," he says, gesturing towards a row of chefs, diligently slicing and dicing on the back bench. The chefs look far from frantic. There's no doubt they're working hard, plucking the prime leaves from bunches of fresh herbs and dissecting vegetables into precise forms, but there's no panic, no running and no shouting. Just the quiet hum of a finely tuned team.

"It's because everything now has its place. We have an area to prepare staff meals, breakfast cooking, The Palm Court sandwiches, The Ritz Restaurant meals and two pastry areas. It's a massive set-up. It's fantastic," says Williams with obvious pleasure. He guides me over to the enormous pressure cookers, where chicken stock bubbles away, wafting mouth-watering scents towards the extractor fans. Stock preparation used to take around ten hours. Now it's been reduced to three. It's clear the new kitchen is having considerable impact.

"This is the first piece of equipment which is making a finer product for us. It is physically creating a better sauce and stock," Williams says of the pressure cookers. He points to what looks like an oversized oven. "There's nothing like this from steaming, baking, roasting; everything. Honestly, even to the point where you can wilt spinach and set it to the point where the spinach is wilted without releasing liquid. It is remarkable technology which has revolutionised our kitchen."

The Chef directs one of his staff to fill a pot with cold water and places it on the induction hob. The water simmers almost instantaneously,

reaching boiling point mere seconds later. "That's faster than a kettle isn't it?" he asks rhetorically.

Williams is a self-confessed traditionalist when it comes to food and he grins when he pairs this with his access to the most up-to-date commercial kitchen in the city. "Some people ask 'Are you not cooking so much now?' but this equipment is perfectly functional for everything we do. It's still hands on, but there are automated items that we can utilise," he says. He's quick to point out that this hasn't reduced his staffing needs — it has simply reduced the pressure on the service, and given The Ritz's enduring popularity, the investment building for the future. "We have got the equipment that will take us there," he confirms confidently.

"The kitchen was 13 years old and we've increased our food and beverage business by 30 percent in four years, so the demands on the kitchen have been greater and greater," says Managing Director, Stephen Boxall, confirming it was time for a change. "We need state of the art, not state of the ark."

Williams celebrated his ten-year tenure in these kitchens earlier this year, laughing when I suggest the million-pound refurbishment was his anniversary gift. "John deserves that. He creates amazing dishes," confirms Boxall. Williams initially applied for the Head Chef role 24 years ago, but was beaten by David Nicholls who, back then, had more experience at the helm. "I thought I could do a good job for The Ritz. That's the truth. I really thought I could achieve something here," he reminisces. Williams spent most of his working life in the grand houses, including 18 years in Claridges and a couple of years in The Berkeley, so he was primed for the role. He was even offered it at one point, but the timing was not quite right. "Inside, I always wanted to work for The Ritz. I felt I could be part of The Ritz and The Ritz fitted in with my mentality," he says. There's obviously some truth to this, as this is where he landed and he's not going anywhere else any time soon.

"I think it is very important, we have to respect a building like this and understand this is a British institution since opening in 1906. We've been very fortunate that the owners heavily invest to ensure The Ritz is well maintained and ever changing. That is the pure beauty of The Ritz," Williams continues. "If we started cooking very different kinds of foods — what I call 'eclectic' it would be detrimental to the brand in every single way. I deeply protect and promote the culinary identity of The Ritz"

Williams' aim is to utilise ingredients as much as possible from around Britain's shores, although he admits that The Ritz does occasionally dip into French produce. It's only to be expected in a French-influenced restaurant. "What is very important to me is that we get the ingredients at source. The quicker we get the food to the table the better the food will be. It's quite a simple process in my head and I think it gets confused by chefs that don't quite understand that," he states.

He has such a clear vision of The Ritz that on his first visit to the kitchen with Managing Director, Stephen Boxall, the soon-to-be Head Chef pointed to the cast iron Staub pots and questioned what they were being used for. Boxall explained that some of the dishes were being served in those pots. "That simply does not fit with The Ritz," commented Williams. By the time his first day rolled around the pots were gone. Williams knows The Ritz cuisine has to be served on silver and fine china, and while many of the serving dishes have modernised in design, there's a classic elegance that remains, which is integral to the hotel.

There's no question that the ambience created by The Ritz Restaurant's towering marble columns, floor to ceiling windows, kaleidoscopic ceiling frescoes, gilded neoclassical statues and the spectacular garland chandelier requires a certain type of cuisine. "What we do have is a very specific style that fits with the beauty of the restaurant," confirms the Chef. "When you visit, what you've got to experience is well presented beautiful and tasty food. I use the words haute cuisine. People don't use these words anymore," he says. He's adamant that haute cuisine does not translate to fine dining. "That's exactly what I don't mean. Because in this country we use this word 'fine dining' in pubs and everywhere and that's exactly what I don't like. It's got to be very specific ingredients. I only use fish from around our shores, but it's particular fish. It is turbot, wild salmon, Dover sole. They are the premium. The shellfish we use is langoustine, crab, lobster and scallops. Whether you finish it with caviar or something else, the fact is that there's a very specific style."

Williams is delighted when I suggest that he could be the guardian of good food. "I'd love to be remembered as just that, as being the guardian of what we should really be cooking in this country," he says. And while he may be a traditionalist at heart, that doesn't mean that the food offering at The Ritz is not contemporary. "You have to have evolution, without revolution, people are not going to come to dine," he says. Williams encourages his team to experiment, but naturally, the chef has the final say. "They will do something and I'm the arbitrator of taste. I say yes or no. My thought process is: Is the food good? Then, does it fit? Is it Ritz?"

It may seem contradictory for a chef focused on tradition, albeit an evolving tradition, to have a high-tech kitchen, but Williams counters:

"Why should a modern kitchen not cook with tradition? The beauty of this is that it can do both."

"The design had to be modern, it had to be practical, and on my side, it had to have an energy saving as well. The Ritz wants to be as green as possible," says Boxall. He also points to the time savings for the hotel's engineers. "Every stove, every fridge, has a monitor within it, connected to the network which communicates any faults to the servers in Switzerland." Faults are repaired almost before they are even noticed.

The new layout has taken some getting used to, particularly with the move from gas to induction. "I don't have any gas which is really economical. Our kitchen might be the only hotel kitchen in London that doesn't have any gas. I'm quite chuffed with that," says Williams. The kitchen team had a head start in adapting, as the pastry and private dining areas were already on induction and this tiny space was where they cooked for a month while the fit-out was being completed. "They literally cordoned [the main kitchen] off, boxed it and sealed it. I did not see a speck of dust outside of there. They were fantastic in not disturbing our business, because we were still running and they totally respected that."

The Chef makes it sound like smooth sailing, but he admits there were a few moments where his confidence slipped. On the first day in the new space, Williams prepared a meal for one of the hotel's most regular guests. "I was cooking fish on the new stove and suddenly I got scared rigid, because I thought: 'The place is too cold. It's physically cold.' I was accustomed to a kitchen that was over 40 degrees. For 40-odd years I was used to walking into kitchens with loads of heat, and I was preparing this piece of fish and I was seriously worried." His fears were unfounded. The fish was perfect, as is every dish that rolls out of this kitchen.

As if to prove a point, Williams sets the team to work on a series of dishes from the popular lunch menu. Four of the chefs, guided by Executive Sous Chef Christian Grebenstein, glide in and out, preparing each of the components and plating them with infinite care. From native lobster with beetroot and Oscietra caviar to Red Mullet and fennel with pickled onion and a Bouillabaisse jus and a terrine of goose liver with figs and hazelnut, every speck of food is positioned, drizzled and spooned with tender precision. The result is an edible work of art, the mouth-watering flavours tantalising the palate.

While the Chef and his team are ultimately responsible for the unrivalled quality of the cuisine here, the new kitchen certainly helps. "The finished set up is a dream kitchen. There's not a kitchen like this in London. I'm amazed at how well it's worked out," Williams surmises. "When you stand at the front of the house, the swan is sailing along, but underneath ...," he punctuates this with a booming laugh. "The reality of it is we are the engine of this hotel, but we're the Rolls-Royce," he concludes.

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