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Catch of the day

Edinburgh's Ondine is striding into the new year with a name change and a rethink about its future. *Lisa Jenkins* meets chef-proprietor Roy Brett



Ondine charges a little more than a pound for its oysters nowadays, and serves them up during a weekday happy hour among the smell of Edinburgh's finest seafood being cooked on open flame.

While changes have been born out of adversity the restaurant has remained to its opening vision of offering a relaxed atmosphere where diners can tuck into the city's finest produce.

Chef-patron Roy Brett, who opened the restaurant in 2009, has reinvigorated the interior, with new decor and flooring and a Robata grill installed in the kitchen, in an attempt to capture a post-pandemic audience.

Brett opened Ondine with his cousin, who helped secure the chef and his partner, Karen, a business loan, and the restaurant quickly became a success. "Our fondest memories are of sitting in bars we love, eating fruits of the sea, and we wanted to create a similar environ-

ment, one where you can eat with your fingers because this breaks down barriers. We wanted an element of sophistication but for our customers to feel relaxed. This is still as relevant to me now as it was 12 years ago. We offered oysters for a £1 as well as fish and chips and lobster thermidor – it was always about using the simplest and the best ingredients."

Ondine was awarded a Michelin Plate in 2021 but Brett says he has never felt the need for accolades. "It's not the reason why I get out of bed in the mornings – I made that decision a long time ago."

Surviving the pandemic

Brett says he and Karen dealt with the pandemic and Brexit as many others did: by switching to delivery. "Brexit was already affecting the city prior to the pandemic and the city had definitely slowed down, then you throw in Covid, and the constant mixed messages from two governments, then lockdown – we didn't know what was going to happen next."

They launched Ondine at Home as soon as they could, and this paid the staff and suppliers. "We all worked together to keep the restaurant alive, but it was very tough. We locked down with 38 staff and reopened with eight."

Although the restaurant is now back up to 16 staff, Brett says this still weighs heavy on him. "This was the hardest thing we've ever had to do at Ondine. We'd all spent years together, but we just didn't know what our future would be. It was a hollow moment for us, and I didn't sleep well on that at all – we definitely felt we'd let them down."

Scaffolding woes

Then in November 2020 Brett was informed of investigative work planned for the outside of his entire building, initially planned for three months. The wraparound scaffolding was erected in December 2020, then extended to



"We all worked together to keep the restaurant alive, but it was very tough"

Roy Brett

Staffing for the future

Brexit has taken its toll on Brett's staff, along with other issues that plague the industry.

"To keep your staff, you have to look after them, and recruitment is almost impossible," he says. "With wages, food costs and VAT going up, you're looking at an extra 30% on business costs. One of my biggest concerns is the effects of Brexit on the economy and human resource."

He is hopeful the government will change the processes for recruiting staff, "so chefs can

From the menu

Starters

- Loch Fyne oysters, house dressing 6/£18
- Squid tempura, Vietnamese dipping sauce £16
- Dressed brown crab, buttered crumpets £16

Mains

- Lobster thermidor £39
- Perthshire rib of beef on the bone £39
- Miso-glazed glazed aubergine, chilli cashew crumble £18
- North Sea cod, shrimp butter, creamed spinach £28
- Monkfish chop, bharta aubergine, spiced cashew, jeera rice £32
- Grand fruits of the sea over crushed ice, for two £90

The Fishmarket

Brett and his fishmonger business partner Gary Welsh opened the Fishmarket in Newhaven three years ago, which is run as a separate business.

"Gary's team are filleting fresh fish at the back of the shop with views over the pier for our customers. You can taste the difference when you are serving such a fresh product."



spring 2021 and is now expected to remain until March 2022. "The building work is almost worse than Covid now, and the scaffolding completely obliterates the front of the restaurant. It's had a huge impact on our business." The investigations are still ongoing, and some cladding has been removed.

Brett says he and Karen had many serious conversations about "shutting up and just calling it a day", but the couple persevered and instead chose to invigorate Ondine.

"We decided to change the name of the restaurant to Ondine Oyster and Grill – it softens the whole 'restaurant' term and we've evolved again. The grill has added another dimension to our menus; it's added another level of flavour."

"We are grilling on open fire, with the smells and the flavours that brings. We're having a lot of fun cooking again."

recruit the right people, no matter where they live", but adds that in reality we are watching a really bad decision that was made playing out "so when we're out of the pandemic we will still be living with Brexit".

He adds: "I really hope there will be a relaxation on migration again."

"I've worked with some wonderful people throughout my career from all walks of life, from all nationalities, and that's what makes our industry. Well, it makes life really."

From Edinburgh to Cornwall and back again

The chef's career started in his hometown, learning his trade on day release to Telford College whilst working at the Caledonian hotel, affectionately known as the Caley and renamed the Waldorf Astoria Edinburgh – the Caledonian in 2011.

He trained alongside chefs Martin Wishart and Tony Singh at college and later worked with both, and post-graduation he went down to London. He was lucky enough, he says, to work with Alan Hill at the Savoy Grill before being tempted back home for a short stint at Prestonfield House in Edinburgh, prior to being appointed as head chef of One Devonshire Gardens in Glasgow in 2011.

Brett was flattered to be appointed head chef by Ken McCulloch and Beverley Paine at One Devonshire Gardens, but says "I was far too young to be a head chef and, if I'm being honest, I didn't have enough experience and I definitely had shortcomings. I was too young to lead. I knew I had to get some more experience. I was suddenly dealing with food costs and managing a team and it was just overwhelming. I was barely a man myself."

After a year as head chef, he left on good terms and headed back to London to join the late Jeremy Storde at the Belvedere in Holland Park. "Jeremy was an incredible chef – a genius, actually. He came from the Waterside Inn and had been working in France. He was a loveable, albeit intense guy with such attention to detail alongside his focus on seasonality. He had a great brain and great hands," adds Brett.

As many chefs do, Brett tried the Michelin route next, but "I hated the Michelin kitchen environment, and it didn't work out for me."

So then, and on advice from chef Anton Edleman at the Savoy, he started work with Mark Hix at Caprice Holdings.



"Mark was cooking incredible food alongside so many others at that time in the early 1990s in London. I was learning so much about food, about menu layout, where to eat, which chefs to watch. Mark was a massive influence on me, and I owe him so much," he says.

Brett then met Karen, who became his wife of 28 years and business partner, and made the decision to come back to Scotland in 1993. Reunited with McCulloch in a short stint back at One Devonshire Gardens, he briefly worked alongside the late Andrew Fairlie, before taking on the role of executive chef for the first opening in a long line of Malmesbury hotels.

The first Malmesbury opened on the Leith waterfront in Edinburgh in 1994 and was quickly followed by Malmesbury Glasgow. "We had an £18,000 budget to open Edinburgh, and it was exhausting – four months on, no days off, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We had to make sure the brand got off its feet – and it did. We got great reviews, but it was tough."

"Once we'd established a bit of a name and had opened the Newcastle Malmesbury, people wanted to come and join us."

"After we were sold to Wyndham [in 1998] and then MWB [in 2001] we opened Manchester, then Leeds, and Birmingham was on the horizon. I watched Malmesbury go through an amazing transformation. However, I'd felt a real sense of loss when Ken left, and although I was working with Roy Tutty [chief executive of Wyndham] and we worked really well together, Malmesbury had grown to such a size and I looked around me and at all the new infrastructure and I knew it wasn't what I wanted anymore."

Late in 2001, and now with his first-born son Charlie at 18 months, the Brett family took the long journey south from Scotland to Cornwall. The chef had accepted a role as executive chef at Rick Stein Restaurants after the two chefs had hit it off after a chat.

"Rick and I had so many heroes in common, and I didn't know then that my food heroes were actually his mates," he says. He held responsibility for the Seafood Restaurant, St Petroc's, an industrial unit, and the cookery school, and during his time with the group they developed the café, a brasserie and established the deli and Stein's Fish and Chips.

However, Cornwall wasn't to keep him for long. "One day Rick and I were at the airport, on our way back from cooking at the Queen's Golden Jubilee, and I heard a call for a flight to Edinburgh – and I just knew the time had come for me to go back home. I knew that Rick was building the business for his boys, and rightly so, but Karen and I knew we had more to give and we'd talked about opening our own place."

His last role before opening Ondine saw him back with McCulloch launching the Dakota brand in Scotland from 2006 to 2009. It was at the end of this tenure that he and Karen finally found their dream site for Ondine, with a view over Edinburgh Old Town.

