



HOWARD'S WAY

Barnes-based celebrity chef, **Phil Howard**, talks to Kiran Sidhu about food, fitness and fish

Distinctive, welcoming and quietly outstanding are words that describe both Phil Howard and his restaurants. The Barnes local is a two Michelin star head chef and co-owner of The Square in Mayfair, and co-owner of three other restaurants, The Ledbury in Notting Hill - recently voted the tenth best restaurant in the world - W8 in Kensington and Sonny's in Barnes. He is also the star of BBC TV's *The Great British Menu*. He's got a lot on his plate!

As co-owner of Sonny's, Phil is responsible for devising the restaurant's menu. However, unlike the common held image of the tyrant chef only interested in singing his own accolades, he has a more collaborative approach. 'I do write all the menus, but then I do throw them over for debate and input from James Holah, who is Head Chef. It's very easy for me to just draught a menu, but you need to have your chef involved in what you're serving. Sonny's requires a more open-minded approach so we end up with a variety of eclectic dishes that satisfy all tastes.' As I chat to Phil over lunch at Sonny's, James cooks us a dish from the current menu. Roast Cod with Pea Puree and Potato and Ham Galette. It's a clean and fresh plate of happiness that sings of the marriage of the right components - a fundamental principle of Phil Howard's cooking. One night a month, he cooks a four course dinner at Sonny's (details www.sonnyskitchen.co.uk).

Rather than just being another 'exclusive' London restaurant, Howard sees Sonny's as an 'inclusive' restaurant in family-friendly Barnes. 'We're trying to please everyone here, which is not easy. We want to get hungry men, women, kids, we want special occasions, and the "I don't want to cook" people and that's quite tricky,' Phil tells me as the cod melts in my mouth. 'There's a real ownership feel to Sonny's. It's as though the people of Barnes own Sonny. It is their restaurant.'

Today, Phil Howard is one of Britain's most accomplished and respected chefs - two Michelin stars and a partner in one of the world's top ten restaurants is about as good as it gets but he has faced his fair share of challenges. Early in his career he battled

drug addiction and lost his brother to a drugs overdose. Nowadays he leads a much more healthy and active lifestyle.

When he's not cooking, Phil can often be seen running the streets of Barnes. 'Barnes is a very special place. I feel physically different when I come over the bridge from the Hammersmith side to Barnes. It has all the components that constitute a village, it has a market, a fishmonger and a butcher, there's Two Peas in a Pod, a proper old-fashioned baker and they all struggle on. You have all of the benefits of living in cosmopolitan, urban London but you're actually living in a village and that's a special thing.'

So, where does a chef of his calibre eat out in his neighbourhood of Barnes? The Red Lion, is one place. 'When I'm off I like to eat out where I'm confident about what I'm going to get, it doesn't have to be fancy.' The place that he does enthuse about more than any other is Riva on Castelnau. 'It's an absolute old school, proper, great neighbourhood restaurant. Absolutely delicious, low-key Italian food!'

These days, top chefs are seen as culinary rock stars, no longer one dimensional figures stuck in the kitchen. Their aprons are looking whiter and more pristine as they come to the forefront to show food as a real art form. Is he more artist than chef I wonder? Phil answers with an emphatic 'no.' He continues: 'You do get top Michelin star chefs who do see themselves as artists. We come in different shapes and sizes and there are lots of chefs who philosophise about what they're going to do - what their plates are going to look like. I'm just intuitive. I don't think about it too much. But there has to be a collaboration between your brain and your stomach. My theory is that in this day and age, there are too many top chefs that put too much emphasis on what goes on in the brain rather than in the stomach. I don't spend my time trying to be an artist. I have a mental template of a menu and what's seasonal. There are a lot of chefs out there who see themselves as great artists and yes, of course it's a creative thing, I'm not saying it's not. But I think you can get too carried away with it.'

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