



BOY DONE GOOD

As Canary Wharf welcomes Tom's Kitchen to its vibrant dining scene, EMMA JOHNSON meets with head chef Tom Aikens, to talk about becoming a global brand, coping with pressure, and putting those infamous early years behind him



I am in the wrong place. Apparently. I am sure I was meant to meet Tom Aikens at his 'Kitchen' in Chelsea, not at his eponymous restaurant around the corner. I am really sure of this, (it can be confusing, so I made sure to check with his 'people' beforehand). The waitress eyeballs me and assures me I am in the wrong place. I stand my ground, frantically searching for the email that confirms I am to meet him here, while designer buggies roll past me, making beelines for cappuccinos and organic granola. Finally she concedes: "OK. Well, I'll call him, he's coming over now."

I take a seat in the restaurant and wait. Breakfast service is well underway and the clattering of cups and saucers, the smell of bacon and coffee pervades the light airy room. Tom's Kitchen looks like just that, Tom's own kitchen, white-tiled walls, wooden tables, monochrome pictures on the walls, pots of herbs and kitchen utensils dotted about. A carefully considered, casual-dining, good, honest food formula that has already won great favour with both the yummy mummies of Chelsea and the tourists and City workers at his Somerset House branch, its arrival in Canary Wharf has been much-anticipated. But even the wait for Tom's Kitchen here, as Aikens explains when he turns up, is part of the point. "First and foremost it's about getting a good site. One of things that delayed us with coming to Canary Wharf was that the right place hadn't come up," explains Aikens.

The right place has turned out to be a big space at Westferry Circus, airy and light it offers ample room for Tom's Kitchen to serve a busy lunchtime rush, and a more sedate evening service, as well as providing a large space for the planned deli. "It's a feeling you have that there are some sites you know are not going to work and some just have something magic about them," he explains.

Food follows the same formula as the two current Tom's Kitchens, great British-inspired food, served simply in warm, inviting interiors. With three Kitchens now, two Delis and a Terrace at Somerset House, the 'Tom's' brand has definitely found its feet; meaning future roll-outs are likely to follow hard on the heels of this one. "The idea is to try and make Tom's Kitchen into a brand, like Jamie's done with Jamie's Italian," he clarifies. "A lot of the success with a brand is just really getting right what people love about food and understanding that simplistic approach to it. What is harder to get your head around is being commercial in what you're doing. When I created this I never thought it was going to be a roll-out concept. But it really works. We'll just take our time; and obviously if we come across good sites we'll look at them and keep expanding. We have some more planned in ►

► London and the first international launch in Istanbul in September too.”

World domination, it seems, is just around the corner then. But it wasn't always this easy, and Aikens has had somewhat of a complicated climb up the career ladder. Awarded two Michelin stars at the tender age of 26 as head chef at Pied a Terre in Charlotte Street, he shot to culinary stardom in a very short space of time. “I never thought that I would have had the stars at that age – no way. I don't think anyone else did either.”

But with great success comes great pressure, and the challenge of managing a busy and renowned kitchen team required the kind of maturity and wisdom that someone in their mid-twenties simply doesn't have. A minor implosion, along with a rather public resignation, followed and Aikens had to take time to regroup. “Oh the horror,” he grimaces when I ask him about it. “I was a head chef at the age of 26 and there was no way I had the experience, the qualifications, the patience – any of it. My mind wasn't set on things and that really came across in the way that I worked and managed people,” he says, which is as close as he'll get to talking about an alleged incident where he branded a trainee with a hot palette knife, and consequentially quit.

“The world was a different place in 1995. I was 26, I had no management skills, so I was doing exactly what I wanted to do. I had so much energy – not saying that I don't have the enthusiasm now that I had then – but I was living on three hours sleep and adrenaline. And the way that kitchens were run then, they were a lot tougher than they are these days. I think I came across as very firm, very tough. I wouldn't say I was the easiest chef to work with.”

Fast-forward 14 or so years, and life is treating Aikens a little differently. Ask anyone in the industry and they'll tell you he's calmed. Actually, he'll tell you himself. “In the last three years I've definitely mellowed. It takes a number of years to improve the way that you communicate, and the way that you're teaching and training your staff. And, just having the confidence in what you're

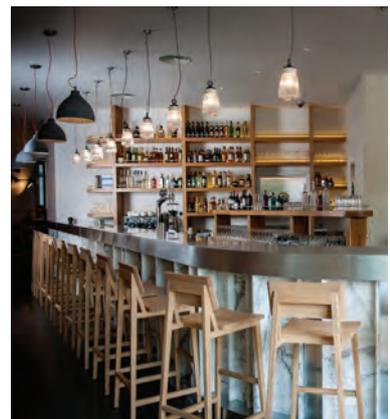
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doing. I think when you get to a certain age you feel a little more confident in yourself and your ability to manage people as well.”

At 40, it seems the restaurant industry is being kinder to Aikens, a more refined version of the young hotshot he was. Still, when I ask him if the two stars were a blessing or a curse, he says he wouldn't change things. “It was definitely a blessing to have them. It's the level of cooking that I'm doing now – if not more – and I think

we're aiming to have that again. Back then it was difficult and tricky for me. It was amazing to have [the stars], but it was definitely a lot more pressure.”

These days the pressures of running a business are ever-present, but Aikens is prepared for it. “With Canary Wharf, we're geared for it to be really busy during lunch times – so we understand the pressure that orders will need to be done quickly. We need to make sure the kitchen is exactly the right size for that and we've got new computerised ordering systems in place, so hopefully the flow of the service will be a lot smoother. That was one of my concerns, because obviously those ladies and gents in Canary Wharf don't want



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even the food, “If you have great staff that are well-trained, that know about the food, then the customers will feel special, and keep coming back,” he says. “So we make sure that we get the right staff and they fit the position that we are looking for – otherwise it’s like getting a footballer into a position that they don’t want to play in. And we make sure that they get the training they need as well. I reckon a lot of the team I have now will be with me into the foreseeable future – and it’s nice to see them grow from being a commis waiter to eventually becoming a manager.”

Aikens chose to open Tom’s Kitchen Canary Wharf with a brunch on a Saturday, a fact that might be surprising if it wasn’t for his commitment to the family audience. “We’re trying to do things for kids at the weekends. We’ll offer free food for kids up to a certain age, and we also have a private dining room with a TV playing cartoons and offering free nibbles, things like popcorn and vegetables to little burgers...”

As he talks, Aikens’ eyes – for the first time in our interview – twinkle with real enthusiasm. Having recently become a father, the chef’s life has certainly taken on new meaning and focus. Not for him the 20 hour days of his youth, but regular time off, and quality time too. He has most weekends free, and makes sure his life during the week has balance too. “If I get a break in the day, I’ll go home to give my daughter her evening

feed before she goes to bed.” At the weekends, the focus is also on indulging his passions – food and family. “I don’t really go out a lot. I cook a lot on the weekends, which I like to do; particularly with

Violette as she’s now eating proper food and solids, so we just give her a bit of ours.”

She’s gaining a pretty good appetite, then, I ask him. “She is indeed,” and he smiles again, proudly, before continuing. “We’ll often go to Petersham Nurseries or Kew for lunch and a walk, and it’s nice because she just loves to run around. She’s quite independent, so we let her run riot and she loves it.” Finally, it seems, the people running riot in Aikens’ life are exactly those that are meant to be. That’s progress indeed. ☺

to be spending an hour waiting for their lunch,” he says with a wry smile.

This hands-on approach is typical of Aikens now, and while he spends most of his time cooking at his eponymous restaurant in Chelsea, and developing the Tom’s side of the business, he is still looking for other ways to make his mark – collaborating with brands as varied as Qatar Airways and David Linley. “I think it’s important to show people how diverse you are, that you’re not one-dimensional. Tom Aikens and David Linley for instance, although it’s a much higher-end luxury brand than what we’re doing with Tom’s Kitchen, it’s still going to bring value to what Tom’s Kitchen stands for. It’s synergies coming together to strengthen what we’re doing.”

Back in Canary Wharf, it’s business as usual for the time being. With a successful formula that works, Aikens anticipates that, after the initial weeks, the restaurant will all but run itself, supported by a long-standing team that understands the brand. And this is perhaps where Aikens himself has learnt the most and invested the most. For him now, managing, supporting and training his team is as important as the setting, the brand,

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