

HOWARD'S WAY

Top chef Phil Howard on how lockdown led to a new venture, his favourite dishes, and his life in Barnes...



With the lockdowns hitting restaurants hard, many chefs looked at how they could diversify while their doors were closed. Phil Howard, who is at the forefront of some of London's top dining spots, including Church Road in Barnes, Michelin-starred Elystan Street in Chelsea, and Kitchen W8 in Kensington, wanted to continue with what he loves – being in the kitchen. During the first lockdown, he was busily cooking for the NHS staff and also developed a home-delivery service from his restaurants which still thrives. On top of that, he's just launched OTTO, a pasta delivery company, starting off with SW London addresses.

Explains Phil: "The home delivery service was so completely different to anything I've ever done before and I thoroughly enjoyed it. It's a very pure experience because most of the issues of running restaurants died away and all that was left was just to cook and send out these great meals."

"But fine dining home delivery comes at a certain price point. And it became clear that pasta was one of the best types of dishes we were sending out – pasta is not an expensive dish. And it's easy to finish at home."

On the menu, which is being created in a SW London kitchen, there will be dishes such as rigatoni with slow-cooked oxtail, and a seasonal pansotti (a triangular ravioli) with asparagus, nettles and ricotta. Key for

Phil, who started his career working for the likes of the Roux brothers and Marco Pierre White, before leading his own restaurant, The Square, is the quality of ingredients: "I've spent 35 years cooking at the highest level and ingredients are king, and so in all that time I've established relationships with the best suppliers. I know where everything comes from that I buy."

Alongside his new delivery venture, Phil is also delighted to have reopened his restaurants on May 17. Phil co-owns Church Road, Elystan Street, and Kitchen W8 with restaurateur Rebecca Mascarenhas, who set up the famous Sonny's, the site on which Church Road now sits. In addition, Rebecca owns Putney's HomeSW15 and is running its summer pop-up on the Lower Richmond Road, prior to it becoming permanent.

Phil has also been a familiar face on our TV screens with the likes of Saturday Kitchen and MasterChef. Any plans in store for more? "I've done a lot of TV over the years but while I do enjoy doing it, it's time-consuming. As a chef and as a restaurateur, the piece of the jigsaw that I enjoy is cooking, so I try and protect that, and if you want to keep restaurants current, relevant, and with cohesive teams that are all marching in the same direction, you've got to lead from the front."

Phil lives in Barnes with his wife Jennie and their two children, Millie and Ali. He says that

he loves the green open spaces, and the pace of life. "When you spend your working life in a basement kitchen, which is effectively a stainless-steel box, to come back home to a place like this, it's a great antidote. It's a really lovely place to live. I love walking by the river and in Richmond Park. I've been doing marathons for many years, and much of my training is along the river."

He also enjoys the local shops and the farmers' market for food. So, who does the cooking at home? "My wife's a great cook, so she does the lion's share. But if I cook, it's always something simple. I will buy a bunch of asparagus, boil it and pop a poached egg on top or I'll buy some epic tomatoes and serve them with olive oil and burrata. But, as always, if you focus on the ingredients and buy something seasonal, you don't have to do much to it."

As he looks forward to the year ahead, Phil reflects that while it has been a tough time for the industry, good things have come out of it. "We've all had some time to get a fresh perspective on life. And I want to go back into the restaurants with a renewed sense of purpose to make sure everything is the best it can be. For example, we've always been committed to sustainability and the provenance of our ingredients but there's always room to do more. It's also reminded us how important balance is in our lives so I'm making sure that I have that in my life, and those of my teams." 

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