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## RAISING THE BAR

*with The Clockspire*



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## THE CLOCKSPIRE

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There is something special about a restaurant in the moments before service begins. Like a pre-show stage set, I watch as props are arranged, the mood manipulated and final, considered touches applied. Backstage, beyond the glint of silverware, voices can be heard, and incredible aromas begin to fill the room. The excitement mounts. Very soon an expectant audience will be seated, the curtain will rise and this immaculate space will burst into life.

Katharine and I are lucky enough to be visiting the recently opened Clockspire Restaurant in Milborne Port. Today this impeccably restored and entirely rejuvenated building is aglow in winter sunlight, its hamstone walls and lush interior beaming with pride. >







Top of the bill here are chef, Luke Sutton, general manager, Massimiliano Mannella and restaurant manager, Thomas Gammella. Berkshire-born Luke began his career at the Michelin starred L'Ortolan before moving on to (the also Michelin starred) Woodspeen, under chef John Campbell, who incidentally, along with Alessandro Fasoli, is now one of The Clockspire's managing directors. The Woodspeen carved its name as a restaurant-cum-cookery school, utilising its own kitchen garden, and Luke is keen to adopt a similar minimum-miles approach to his own seasonal dishes.

Luke's love for all things culinary began with family holidays to France. 'My family always had great holidays, particularly in the Loire region. We were encouraged to try new foods and I remember being inspired by our visits to the food markets there.'

'Massi' hails from the countryside of Liguria, and after five years studying the restaurant business on Italian home soil he made his way to London, where he became the general manager of Ramsay's London House restaurant.

Restaurant manager, Thomas, began work in restaurants in Milan at the age of 16, while still at school. After graduating from the E. Maggia Hotel Institute in Piedmont he went on to work full-time in a number of

restaurants in Milan, before realising that 'Italy was too small for me' and he felt the need to spread his wings. Thomas moved to the UK and began work at The Woodspeen as a commis waiter before working his way up to restaurant manager. It was here he met Luke and in 2018 and 2019 was awarded the prestigious Award of Excellence from the Royal Academy of the Culinary Arts.

With Luke now heading up a kitchen of his own he is liberated to experiment with new flavours and methods. 'People come to try new combinations and explore the food that we serve,' he says. One such item is Luke's parmesan custard and cep puree, finished with elderberries – that he hand-picked last autumn – and a 14-year-old balsamic. While dreaming up the menu for The Clockspire's 70-cover dining room, Luke made a committed effort to visit as many local suppliers as possible. Wasabi is sourced from the watercress beds in Broadmayne and meat from the acclaimed Brace of Butchers in Poundbury to name just two. Within weeks of opening last autumn Luke was thrown headlong into the Christmas season and then fatherhood with the birth of his first child – a daughter, Aurora. It's been a heady few months and is only now that Luke can take stock of all that has been achieved. >









Currently the menu includes a number of signature local and far flung pairings such as wood pigeon (sourced via a nearby shoot), served with black pudding, kohlrabi and apple (£12). The hand-dived scallops, pork cheek, smoked pineapple and lime (£16) is another dish embracing fresh, simple ingredients with a playful twist. As Luke says ‘people like simple food but not every day. We want to offer challenging, unusual ingredients.’

Luke admits he is ‘not really a meat eater’ which might go some way to explain his sublime harvest tart with purple sprouting, truffle, mascarpone and hazelnut (£19) and the inspirational dessert of beetroot parfait. ‘It works very well in the winter when there are a shortage of berries,’ adds Luke. These confident flavour combinations are succinctly articulated in menu descriptions comprising of often just four ingredients. ‘It encourages the diner to discuss the menu with the waiting staff and creates an interaction between customer and kitchen which is important,’ explains Luke.

Massi’s experience gleaned from managing London House shines through in his attention to detail and welcoming gusto. The Ramsay influence of a congenial restaurant run like a well-oiled machine is very much in evidence. The glass is crystal, the service attentive but never over-bearing, and then there is the bar...

Upon climbing the stairs to the gloriously well-stocked mezzanine bar, guests are treated to an awe-inspiring view of the vaulted ceiling that stretches across the main hall below. The bar itself is intimate — sun-drenched by day and cosily lit by night, it offers a wonderfully vibey space in which to explore the cocktail list.

Thomas, Massi and Luke are thrilled to be part of the team behind the revival of the building. Otherwise known as The Medlycott Centre, it was built in 1854 and originally home to the local school. Over the years

it then played host to a number of businesses before falling into disrepair. In 2015 Mike Fisher of Studio Indigo and his partner Lord Charles Allen acquired the nearby Ven House, and not long after noticed that The Medlycott was up for sale. ‘We got access,’ explains Mike, ‘and discovered that it was a magnificent building but had been butchered and divided up into office units. We liked the idea of giving something back to the local community and as our two passions are buildings and food we decided to buy it and turn it into a restaurant.’

‘Our aim was to restore the building as faithfully as possible,’ he continues. ‘When we gave the planning presentation in the village, 200 people turned up. Everyone had a story about the school and were particularly passionate about the clocktower and the bells. So we made a point of reinstating the bells and renovating the clocktower. We knew the vaulted ceiling was the vital component to the look of the building so we chose low-level seating because we wanted people to enjoy the volume [of the hall].’

Mike and his team have certainly returned the space to its former glory while introducing a calm, elegant aesthetic that is justly loyal to the original architecture. The addition of the bar above the kitchen is an exciting space, tempting guests to within reach of those stunning timber vaults.

It was through Mike and his partner’s friend Alastair Storey (recently voted most powerful influencer in the hospitality industry), that they came to connect with John Campbell and eventually Massi, Thomas and Luke. Now, having created the space, hand-picked the team and opened their doors, all that remains is for you to cross the threshold and experience Milborne Port’s very own gourmet destination. Encore! ●

*thelockspire.com*