



Stacks of excellence

The Three Chimneys on Skye may be located in spectacular scenery, but that's nothing compared to the food

★It's quite some trek to The Three Chimneys on the Isle of Skye: a three-hour drive from Inverness to Dunvegan, skirting the looming Black Cuillin mountains, down a single-track road through peat bogs, pulling up onto Loch Dunvegan's shores. You have to be keen to come here.

Shirley Spear's restaurant with rooms, which she has run with husband Eddie since 1985, has an unending list of accolades: the converted crofter's cottage has featured twice in S.Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants awards, has three AA rosettes and scores of other credits notched up over the years. But never a Michelin star. After this year's awards, Spear is perplexed.

"I think we're as good, if not better, than some of the restaurants in Scotland that already have a Michelin star," she muses. "We don't need it to build up the restaurant, but it would be nice to get the recognition and encourage recruitment to the restaurant, because Michael and Kevin are tip-top chefs."

She's referring to Head Chef Michael Smith and Sous Chef Kevin MacLean. Since 1999, Shirley and Eddie have stepped back from the business, taking on more of a management role at The Three Chimneys, taking care of the staff and looking after the restaurant's marketing and finance. Health and age dictated this. "I didn't want to be the one slaving at the hot stove any more," says Shirley, who was looking for a chef with a business head.

Smith, 36, arrived fresh from setting up Stefan King's Arta and Gong in Glasgow, and had the razor touch that she was after, becoming Head Chef in April 2005. He trained at Le Gavroche before going on to Conran's (now D&D's) Pont de la Tour, and later became Jeremy Lee's Senior Sous Chef at the Blueprint Café at London's Design Museum.

"I had none of that professional background experience and knowledge," says Spear. So with new Front-of-House Manager Jeanette Neil – a local lass – The Three Chimneys fired up for its

next stage of operation. Smith recruited a whole new team of five in the kitchen, including himself. But how easy is it to recruit to such a rural area? "It's very difficult," he says. "Everything is difficult here. For example, to recruit staff here, you must be able to drive – it's the first question I ask. Can you drive? Do you have your own transport? Otherwise there's no way to get into work."

It helped that he brought his Sous Chef Kevin MacLean with him, who'd worked with him at Arta in Glasgow. Younger staff, says Smith, need to understand that it's the location rather than the kitchen that takes adjusting to. "A kitchen's similar everywhere – it could be in the middle of London or the dark side of the moon – but you need to want to come and move here. If you're into the fantastic scenery, the hill-walking or the outdoor life, you might stand a chance."

For Smith, the role is a natural fit. "I'm from Inverness, I've worked on the West Coast early in my career, I know what it means," he says. With his French wife and two children, the family live near to the restaurant in a traditional cottage.

Initially it was "fairly daunting" taking over Shirley Spear's kitchen. "I said to myself, it's either going to work out or it won't, so I was prepared for potential failure. Hopefully things are going well," says Smith. And how about working with her? "That's a challenge as well," he laughs. "We're both artistic with artistic temperaments, we both know what we like and we have strong opinions – we've been known to have heated conversations but we don't fall out – we benefit from it."

He thinks they are very similar in their approach to the cooking. "Shirley's got a great palate. She understands food." Both Smith and Spear are fervent advocates of putting the Scottish menu above all else. "Shirley's always been a bastion of Scottish food," he says, but believes he has updated her repertoire of "classic French dishes, which was the style in the 1980s and the 1990s".

The menu changes both seasonally and daily – a necessity in such a rural location where guests are a captive audience. It reads like a hop, skip and a jump around the island, with almost every village and town on Skye featuring. Dishes include Potted Colbost Crab, Broadford Smoked Haddock and Loch Dunvegan Langoustines, which precede mains such as Pan-Fried Scallops from Sconser or Roast West Coast Hake with Pickled Borreraig Winkles. The prawns and langoustines are plucked from the loch just yards from the restaurant.

"What I always do is try and incorporate local ingredients as much as possible," says Smith. "In the summertime the entire menu is Scottish. If you're going to say you're doing Scottish food, you need to have oatmeal on there," he says. So he has insisted on using ethnic names on the menu – *purry* (purée) and *hairst bree* (lamb and vegetable mixed broth), for instance, "to give an identity to Scottish food. If you do the research, which any good cook should do, you'll always find traditional ethnic dishes with their traditional names".

Smith reads extensively. "I don't think chefs do enough research, but that's been drummed into me from working with Jeremy [Lee] and Shirley. Anyone who aspires to work in a restaurant kitchen or cook commercially should be reading things like Elizabeth David."

He has plans in the next few months to introduce a dinner tasting menu – the Seven Courses of Summer in Skye – part of an overall upgrade and recruitment drive. Meanwhile, service for the six luxury rooms, known as the House Over-By, will also be expanded with the Spears beaver away in the background. "Shirley's done a hell of a lot and is known for championing Scotland," says Smith. "I do feel a responsibility to keep pushing that forward and saying Scotland has a great restaurant scene." This scene, he says, has flourished during the past 15 years and has encouraged him to stay put in Scotland.

Smith gestures towards the loch. "There's completely unspoilt surroundings. You've got as much of your own space as you want, I cycle into work when I can and I won't see anybody. All I'll see are seals swimming in the sea, eagles flying overhead, I can look at the seasons growing day to day." He seems in no hurry to leave the country he's championing. 🍷



Chimneys champion: Michael Smith shouts his praises of Skye from the rooftops

Skye's the limit

On the menu? Talisker-Cured Hebridean Organic Salmon with Sweet and Sour Cucumber, Mixed Cress and Local Quail Egg; Bourride of Mallaig Dover Sole, Red Mullet, Squid and Clams with Saffron Potatoes, Purple Sprouting Broccoli and Aioli; Marinated Fresh Pineapple with Lime and Mint, Passion Fruit Jelly, Coconut Ice Cream, Rosemary Sorbet and Cardamom Biscuit.
Size? 40 covers
Where? The Three Chimneys, Dunvegan, Isle of Skye IV55 8ZT 01470 511258
threechimneys.co.uk