

Modern Apprentice Chef Experiences the UK

Three months ago I began the journey of a life time to the United Kingdom. This would take place over five weeks and cover five restaurants with five totally different experiences.

The journey began with a twenty four hour flight up to London with Air New Zealand. I was met at the airport by the UK Link Foundation and taken to a local London hotel. Next day, weary eyed and feeling like death I would have my first meeting with Peter Gordon and his team at Providores which would be my first restaurant to work at. Peter and the team at Providores could not have been nicer and it was great being able to use it as a base for the remainder of my stay in London. The restaurant is split into two different parts the Tapa Room, which provides a tapas style menu and is renowned around London for its brunch on the weekend. The other upstairs part is the Providores Restaurant, which is fine dining and serves the fusion style cuisine which Peter is so famous for. The week was spent working along side the team of mostly New Zealand chefs which was fantastic and was a great starter for the weeks to come.

Week two involved working at The Square, a Two Michelin Star Restaurant and a real step up from anything I had previously experienced. Run by chef and owner Phil Howard, who was very welcoming, this was a true London kitchen fast paced and full on. Work usually consisted of a 7.30am start and a finish some time close to midnight. I was paired up with the veggie section for most the week, so spent days removing peas and broad beans from the pod. The jobs I was given were usually fairly mindless, but I didn't mind as the exposure to this whole new level of cuisine was great for me. During service I would stand up at the pass and watch and help out for the plate up, which meant a bit more involvement and a real chance to see this high level of kitchen run at full steam.

Week three and getting a bit more settled to London life meant I was off the Murano, a restaurant under the Gordon Ramsay Empire. Chef Patron Angela Hartnett is in charge of this One Michelin Star Restaurant. Only eight months old this meant a new kitchen and a nice feel to the place. The food there has an Italian influence but is still very much in the French style. Angela and her team were extremely friendly and I was able to have a bit more involvement, as oppose to the Square. I was able to move around the different sections and see every aspect of the operation. Another bonus while working here was the visit of Mr Ramsay himself and the chance to meet a personal hero of mine; this was a definite highlight for me. And for the record he does swear a lot but is actually very nice and didn't swear at me. I was also fortunate enough to be invited in for lunch on the Saturday after finishing my weeks' experience. This meal was absolutely superb and even better for the fact that it was on the house! I defiantly enjoyed my week at Murano and would happily work there in the future.

Week four meant something very different to the previous three, a chance to work at Roka, a Japanese restaurant with a kiwi head chef. The restaurant was split into six different sections and I was able to move around all these and get a feel for some very funky Japanese food. First section is the Maki roll, which is your standard sushi roll that we are all to use to. Then there is the Sashimi section which is your raw fish, tempura which is exactly that, then a dumpling style section and a fusion mix match section which used some more uncommon Japanese style foods. The highlight of the restaurant is the Robata live BBQ section in the centre of the restaurant, this is done over hot coals with the meats, skewers, fish and vegetables all cooked over this. Something very different but again a very cool experience.

The final week of my work experience was a trip up to Scotland and a chance to work at the world famous Golf Resort of Gleneagles. A seven hour train ride up to the cold north was a great way to see the countryside. Waiting for me at the train station was executive chef Alan Gibb who really went out of his way to look after me and make me feel at home for the next week. The weeks work involved moving around some of the different outlets. The first day was spent in banqueting, doing a high profile function for ten people, day two was spent in the hotels fine dining restaurant The Strathearn, which has the ability to do numbers as large as three hundred ala carte which I would have loved to have seen in action as the quality of food was very high. Day three was spent in Deseo, one of the restaurants on site that offers pastas and tapas food and also charcoal ovens. The next day I had free so got a train to Edinburgh and had a look around this very old city. I was able to have lunch at Kitchin a one star restaurant owned by former Gleneagles employee Tom Kitchin, again a very nice lunch and I was well looked after. The next day I was fortunate enough to have a day in Andrew Fairlie's restaurant which is based at Gleneagles, this is a two star place offering a very high level of cuisine, possibly some of the nicest food I came across. The kitchen was very easy flowing and I enjoyed my days work there. Before I left the resort and my staff supplied accommodation I was able to go shooting and enjoy some of the activities the resort has to offer.

So by the end of my five weeks I was well worn out after seeing and learning so much I now had a new drive to do my best to get myself back up to the UK and get a job. Luckily before I headed home I had planned a two week Contiki around Europe, this was a fantastic trip also and really a great way to cap off a wonderful two months in the UK.

The trip was made possible through winning the HSI Modern Apprentice Chef of the Year 2008 and was sponsored by the NZ – UK Link Foundation; the flights were covered by Air New Zealand. All the planning of my work experience was organised by Peter Gordon. A big thankyou to all the people who helped to make this trip and experience of a life time happen.

Thomas Townsend
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