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## Great Pub Chefs - Cabinet Reshuffle - Paul Bloxham

By Max Gosney, 01-Mar-2005

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**Paul Bloxham turned his back on the city in favour of country life.. and it's not just the now-stunning Cabinet gastro that's changed.**

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Avid Thespian Paul Bloxham has some advice for Hollywood producers who might look to bring his story of East End boy turned TV chef to the silver screen. "I'd have to be played by Joe Pesci. He's famed for playing fiery characters in films like Goodfellas and Casino and he's short just like me."

The Hoxton-born chef's back catalogue of controversial outbursts include chucking a bucket of water over a crabby customer whilst working at London's Fire Station restaurant at Waterloo and slating Gordon Ramsay whilst dining at the restaurant featured in ITV's Hell's Kitchen.

But the chef, who is a regular guest on TV cookery shows including UK Food's Good Food Live, is now content to channel his passion into the Cabinet in Reed, Hertfordshire, where he is a co-owner.

Rural life, he admits, has had a calming influence. "I've discovered myself since moving to the country. In London I'd finish my shift at 2am and go out for drinks until 4am. I'd be back in the kitchen early morning. That's fine when you're 24 but you can't keep on doing it."

The Cabinet, a beautiful white clapboard inn, provided an opportunity to escape the strains of city life says Paul. "I used to drink at the pub with my wife and it was a real spit-and-sawdust place," he says. "It was a drinkers' pub which only did about 20 covers but I just knew that I could transform it." Unable to afford the freehold price, Paul set about finding the financial backers to fund his dream. "It took me almost two years of lobbying to raise the money and bring a team together that could run the pub."

In August 2002 the hard work paid off as Cabinet Rooms Ltd, comprising Paul; John Davy, a comedy club owner; David Humphrey, formerly of pub company Regent Inns; and Paul John, a surveyor, bought the Cabinet.

The new landlords were quick to ring the changes recalls Paul. "There was a beautiful inglenook fireplace that had been bricked over by the previous owners. I took a sledgehammer and smashed the bricks away to a round of applause from the locals."

However, simple DIY proved ineffective for more complex modifications explains Paul. "To get into the restaurant you'd have to walk out of the pub and through a separate exterior door. It was freezing during the winter and would put people off." A new menu, a revamp of the pub's interior and an extension to increase the restaurant's capacity to 70 helped build trade from £3,000 a week in July 2002 to £8,000 a week by autumn of that year.

But, admits Paul, the early days of the Cabinet were a struggle. "It was overhead city during the first few months and I was working seven days solid." A lack of financial savvy meant that the chef faced mounting pressure. "I spent too much on furniture because at first I was frivolous with money," he admits. "I went to ask for more funds from my shareholders. If they'd refused then that would have been the end, but luckily they agreed."

The board's faith has since been repaid as Paul's culinary skills ensured a profitable turnaround at the pub. A modern British menu featuring dishes including chicken liver and foie gras parfait with fine bean salad and Melba toasts (£5.95) and local game shepherd's pie with sauerkraut (£13.50) has secured the pub a listing in Michelin's Eating Out in Pubs guide and driven turnover to £15,000 a week.

"At first people would criticise me and say I was overcharging but the added cost is because I source the best ingredients. I think it's finally hit home to customers that they are getting premium ingredients they would struggle to find in restaurants."

Sourcing fine Hertfordshire produce is a personal passion. "I believe in putting the best possible dish on the plate. I won't buy any food without a story behind it." Paul recalls each supplier with a smile and a warm anecdote. "The guy who supplies my beef cheered me on when I knocked down the fireplace wall and bought me a basket to keep my logs in. Jenny and Ty Gardener, who supply my eggs, are regulars and they feed their hens Weetabix. The eggs taste amazing." Others among his favourite suppliers include Jeff Pigg from local butcher Mark Doels and the Hertfordshire based Melbourn Mushroom Club.

But despite a bias towards British favourites, the Cabinet also offers dishes with an international edge. "I was in France skiing recently and people would cook from heated rocks so I thought why not do it here?" he says. The introduction of hot rock platters, which offers diners a selection of local raw meat and their own heated pebbles to cook on, has been a great success. "You can have the best food in the world but the atmosphere is vital. The hot rocks are great theatre."

Paul's desire to entertain will see him pursue his TV career over the coming year. He was a regular guest on channel five's Terry and Gaby Show and craves further exposure. A thirst to be in the limelight will also trigger a return to London he says. "I'm thrilled with what we've achieved at the Cabinet but would love to launch a second gastro pub in West London. I want to bring all the great things I've found in the country back to the city."

If he achieves his ambition Paul, who is expecting another child with wife, Sam, in the spring, will return to London a more mellow character. "I've always had a short fuse but I'm beginning to realise there's no rush. You don't have to have everything tomorrow."

#### Best-selling dishes

Beef steaks - "They are always bestsellers probably because the quality of the meat is so good. We do sirloin (£17.50), rib eye (£16.95), fillet (£22.95), côte de boeuf (£39.95 for two) and fillet of beef chateaubriand (£49.50 for two).

Loin of local venison - "Venison is always popular and we once went through a whole animal in one day."

Scallops - "We serve these seared with haggis mash and confit of pink grapefruit as a starter. Definitely one of our biggest-selling starters."

Langoustine and crab - "We offer a shellfish paella with a blend of fresh seafood. It's delicious and customers realise they are getting something they couldn't find at the local supermarket."

Pork - "We receive free-range pork from Blythburgh. The meat is top quality and I find it a very versatile ingredient."

#### The Cabinet factfile

Covers per week: 400 to 450

GP: 65%

Wet:dry percentage split: 50:50

Freehold value: £800,000 to £1m

Owners: Cabinet Rooms Ltd

Money spent on property: £700,000

Average spend: £30-£35

Famous faces: Richard and Judy, members of the England rugby team, Gaby Roslin, and Kenny Logan.

Best business-boosting idea: Hot Rock platters to share have been hugely popular with diners. Customers are given Suffolk chicken (£16.25 per person) locally-aged beef fillet (£19.95), or Suffolk chicken, Breckland duck and locally-aged beef fillet (£24.95). They are invited to cook the meat themselves over the hot pebbles provided. The idea stemmed from a ski trip to France.

Beers: Adnam's SSB, Greene King IPA, Leffe.

Number of wines on list: 80-plus

Wine list description: "A few special gems from the Cabinet's cellar personally tried and tested by us and specifically chosen to help you through those long winter evenings in front of roaring log fires." The list includes a strong selection of Old World reds and whites such as Chateau Tour St Bonnet, Cru Bourgeois and Medoc 1998 (£34 a bottle). There are also wines from Spain, Lebanon, South Africa and New Zealand. Prices per bottle range from £12.95 to £95.

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