Spotted Pig goes to sea

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My first interview with the chef April Bloomfield took place five years ago, just before she set off for the US to make such a success of The Spotted Pig in New York's West Village. It was delightfully easy to arrange. A quick phone call led to lunch at Kensington Place, where Bloomfield used to work for my colleague Rowley Leigh, and a fascinating discussion with an understandably rather nervous young woman.

Trying to meet her on a recent visit to the UK proved much more difficult, however. It involved numerous emails via her PR company as Bloomfield was keen to visit her family in Birmingham and to catch up with as many recent British restaurants as possible before her second restaurant, The John Dory, opens in October in New York's Meat Packing District. Finally, we managed to meet for a cup of tea at Maison Bertaux in Soho, a respite she seemed to relish.

Bloomfield, 34, looks unchanged. Petite but strong, she bears the telltale marks of her profession: her hair is neatly tied behind her head; her fingernails are cut extremely short; while on her forearms there are still the sign of burns from her years at the stove.

The Pig, as she continually refers to it, was modeled on a British gastro-pub and has had such success that, for example, it has won a Michelin star, but Bloomfield's ensuing fame does not seem to have changed her too much. Her Birmingham accent is still evident and she still speaks softly and thoughtfully. The only obvious significant difference in her outward appearance was, inevitably, her Blackberry.

Her accent was, she admitted, something of a stumbling block at the beginning of her time in New York. Having been plucked by high-profile chef Mario Batali and Ken Friedman, a highly successful manager in the music business, to become their chef/partner in The Pig, she arrived in New York not really knowing how or where to buy the ingredients she needed. "I can still remember that just before we opened we were going to produce canapés for 70 for a charity event and I was standing in an empty kitchen not really knowing which way to turn. Fortunately, other chefs in the city were really helpful."

New York, Bloomfield confirmed, is a much more challenging city for a chef to find good produce in than London, although she has now found her own favourite suppliers. "The lamb from Colorado is excellent with good fat on it and the oysters are fantastic, as are the clams from Maine, which somehow manage to be both briney and sweet. Then there are wonderful strawberries and blueberries and whatever fruit, vegetables and salads are on offer at the market in Union Square. But although there's white fish like fluke and flounder, there's no plaice - and you can't beat a nice bit of plaice," she added with a smile.

Initially, Bloomfield barely had time to take all this in as there were queues outside The Pig from the day it opened, leading to two unforeseen consequences. "The first", she explained, "was the significant increase in the amount of food we have to prepare every day. We now make 100 portions of shoestring potatoes a day and although I had anticipated making a tray, that's about 15 portions, of sheep's ricotta gnudi – Italian for naked as they are like ravioli but without the wrapping – we're now making over 60 portions a day."

All of this requires hiring and, more importantly, holding on to staff. "I came to realise very quickly that New York is a very transient city, seemingly far more so than London. Cooks will stay in New York for three or six months, rarely a year. If I can manage to hold on to one or two of my key staff for a couple of years then I really feel I have done something right."

While Bloomfield was keen to praise her partners, Friedman as a foodie as well as a businessman and Batali for his help with the media, she was perhaps too modest about her own contribution. But judging by my meals at The Pig, Bloomfield has built on the grounding she had in London not just under Leigh but also at the River Café and Bibendum (for Christmas last year she gave all her kitchen staff a copy of Simon Hopkinson's indispensible *Roast Chicken and Other Stories*). Her cooking now justifies the two-hour wait for a table at The Pig, which has doubled in size to 100 seats since it opened, in a city whose inhabitants are not known for their patience.

There have been two other factors cointributing, I believe, to The Pig's success. The first is the clever choice of a memorably simple name for both restaurants. 'I'll meet you at The Dory' may not bring quite the smile to a customer's

face as 'I'll meet you at The Pig' but it is snappy, unforgettable and immediately conveys that the place will be about good ingredients.

The second is that when Bloomfield opens The John Dory in October, close to the water near Chelsea Market, she will follow the same successful opening times as initially at The Pig: dinner only for the first few weeks and only then will it open for lunch. This policy not only allows the kitchen and waiting staff to find their feet in a site the builders will only just have left, but also makes it possible to accept reservations from those whose interest in the restaurant has been piqued by the wave of initial reviews.

Bloomfield seemed to appreciate that her second restaurant will be as big a challenge as her first even though The Dory will not involve quite the leap into the unknown that The Pig once was. But it will bring her closer to what is for her, and many chefs, their greatest professional thrill – cooking fish.

"I really like to cook fish", Bloomfield explained. "For me there's nothing quite like the excitement of first putting a piece of fish in the pan and trying to ensure that you produce a crisp, perfect piece of skin. It's very easy to mess it up. And there's the satisfaction that comes from cooking fish so many different ways: on or off the bone; steamed or poached: grilled or boned and stuffed.

"And then there's the challenge today for every chef because of declining stocks of wild fish to make some of the less well-known fish just as delicious and of using different parts of the fish. I'm working on one recipe that involves poaching monkfish liver and serving it with toast, crisp capers and lemon. It tastes terrific."

My appetite was whetted but, sadly, my time was up. Bloomfield glanced at her watch and realised she would have to dash to catch her train to Dorset, where she was going to check out one last British seaside fish restaurant before she headed back to New York. Its gain is undoubtedly London's loss.

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