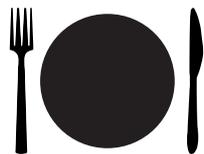


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My life in food

This week: **Chris Lee**

In all honesty I didn't grow up wanting to be a chef. Like many young men of my generation, I saw myself City-bound and life as a banker! A "D" grade in maths gave a swift tug on my aspirational red braces and pulled me back to school for a retake. I sat maths once more and got an "E"!

A complete reboot in all senses, I started worked in the pot wash at a local hotel and embarking on a career that would eventually lead to me running my own business.

Over the years I've had some great highs – holding three rosettes for eight years, winning Taste of England Gold, being described by Giles Coren for being "the best little progressive kitchen in Suffolk", beating The Hairy Bikers in a cook-off on their Food Tour of Britain TV series. But I've also had a huge sense of achievement seeing members of my team grow and develop into great chefs and entrepreneurs. These include Zak Deakins (1921, Bury St Edmunds), Duncan Barham (The Salt Cellar, Tenby), Nick Alvis (Folly by Nick and Scott, Dubai),

Phil Skinner (head chef with The Chestnut Group) and Owen Sullivan (executive chef with the Gordon Ramsay Group).

But it is not only high flyers who inspire. One of my chefs, Stuart Darton, has worked with me for 23 years! Alfie Bloomfield, who accompanied his foster sister when she cooked with us as part of the National Fostering Agency's Cooks 'n' Kids initiative, is now a trainee commis.

We need to encourage and support young chefs. Cooking recently with Eastleigh College

students in a cook-off with Hampshire-based Olly Rouse, I'm pleased to say that Suffolk won!

Life as a chef is not easy. Challenges are many but rewards can be great. I may have started off in the pot wash but over the years I have learnt many lessons – cook what customers want and not what you think they want. Get out of the kitchen and talk to your guests and when working long and unsociable hours.

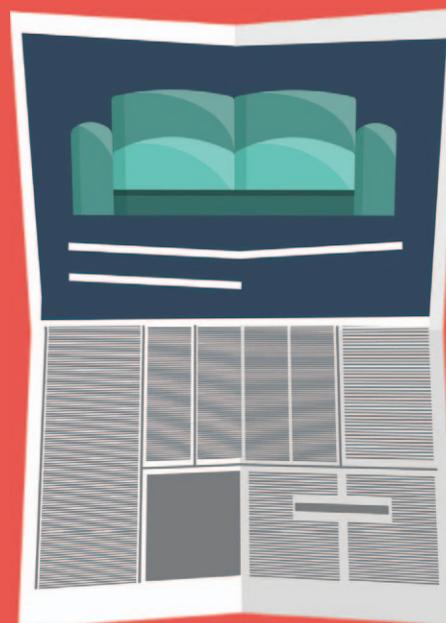
It helps if your business partner is also your wife!



Chris Lee with the Cooks & Kids group.

Picture: CONTRIBUTED

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