

Northern Star

In a quiet corner of rural England, The Raby Hunt is not your average country pub. Meet **James Close**, the self-taught chef who's singlehandedly made it the only two-Michelin-starred restaurant in the North East

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Eight years ago, The Raby Hunt was just the sort of traditional coaching inn you'd find in any English country village, and James Close was washing dishes in a nearby hotel kitchen. Five years ago, the restaurant won its first Michelin star, and last year Close became the only chef in the North East to be awarded a second. It's fair to say his journey to the culinary major leagues wasn't exactly textbook, but it's all the more remarkable for it.

Rewind to 2009 and Close's former career as a golf pro had stalled. He was pushing 30 with no real qualifications and no idea what do next. Like many a disillusioned twentysomething, he decided to go travelling – but far from the usual clichés, he found more than himself along the way. He found food. Perhaps it was fate that he chose France, the home of gastronomy, for his year abroad – on his travels he was drawn to all manner of restaurants and bistros, markets and cantines, and on his return to the UK, took an entry-level job in a professional kitchen, just to see if he liked it. He did, and, with the help of his parents (whose background was in hospitality), bought the local pub.

The rest is, quite literally, history. “No-one in the North East of England has ever had a two-Michelin-star restaurant,” explains Close. “It puts me in an elite group of 21 chefs in the UK and sets me apart from a lot of others. I can't say I was driven to get two stars, but having them makes you realise you've achieved something amazing.” Particularly when you consider that when he started out in the kitchen, “It was just my mum and me doing simple food like steak and chips.” As the locals came around to the idea of a ‘proper’ restaurant, word spread, and Close's ambition grew along with his confidence. But it took that first Michelin star to really put The Raby Hunt on the map. Now, says Close, “It's a destination. And as the chef-owner I'm in the lucky position of being able to do the dishes I want, how I want.”

That means one set menu made up of about 15 different courses, small and large. “It's an experience,” says Close. “It takes three hours to eat through the menu from start to finish.” Backstory aside, such singularity, combined with the fact that the restaurant has just 25



covers and only operates five services a week, is impressive however you look at it. But this is no vanity project; what Close has created is a dining experience with the customer firmly at its core. “We're a small, independent restaurant run by a modest but very talented and dedicated team who are committed to giving diners a great experience,” he says – a promise delivered by the menu. “We've found since we got two stars that people want to try all the dishes from the past year,” explains Close. “We recently added a new dish – a potato soufflé executed in a very modern way with oyster and lovage – but we only change the menu when we create another signature dish that's better than what we already had.”

The result is a precisely considered tasting menu composed entirely of signature dishes, like a winter salad made up of some 40 ingredients. “We try and grow as many of them as we can ourselves,” says Close. “I'm always

striving to be more creative. We've built our own walled garden around the restaurant where we grow our own vegetables in the summer and autumn. We also grow under lights, which allows us to have year-round herbs and salad leaves.” Next on the agenda is an expansion of the kitchen “so we aren't living in a box” and a chef's table. “Having just achieved two Michelin stars,” says Close, “we're taking the time to savour that.”

When I ask what drives him, the answer is satisfyingly simple: “The desire to get better and better every time I go into the kitchen.” And it's this simplicity that powers the whole Raby Hunt philosophy, which Close describes as “not too many flavours on the plate, executed with refinement. It's all about the ingredients and the taste. If it works, we get it on the menu”. Refinement is right; Close might have taught himself the basics, but his plates are anything but. Think zingy, well-



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composed colours and elegant just-so presentation, with the occasional surprise (look out for the squab pigeon). “Theatre is important, but it has to be all about the flavours on the plate,” insists Close. “There's no point going all out for theatre if you don't get the flavours right. It's flavour first, and then presentation.”

One recurring theme that certainly feels theatrical, and gives proceedings a pleasingly quirky edge, is Close's use of the skull motif in his creations. There's a large silver skull on display in the otherwise smart but understated dining room, and every iteration of the menu ends with a hand-tempered chocolate skull – cast from a mould the chef-proprietor came across on a foodie expedition in Belgium (of course). “The skull is there to remind me never to give up and that you only get one chance,” muses Close. The proof of that – if it were needed – is most certainly in the pudding.

