

COAST CHARACTER

Chef ROBERT THOMPSON enjoys the ways island life can help shape his cooking philosophy

WORDS AMBER BEARD

As the youngest chef to have received a Michelin Star, not once but twice, Robert Thompson's love affair with the Isle of Wight began in 2007 and has continued to be reflected in his food.

A source of inspiration for his creations, the coastline of the island is a sea forager's heaven and Robert takes full advantage of what's on offer. Whether it's sea buckthorn, sea herbs, or samphire, the local natural larder is one to be enjoyed.

Robert explains: "I love the calming influence of the sea; from a high-pressure kitchen to the beautiful scenery across the island, it helps keep my mind focused and calm. Gathering rock samphire down on the rocky coastline in Ventnor was, and still is, a favourite. Match that with a little spinning for bass, and I'm a very happy chef!

"Locally sourced ingredients have been a mainstay of my menus since I arrived on the island. Wild garlic kicks off one of my favourite seasons and filters through to a variety of dishes on the menu.

"I take the flavour profile, colour, and texture and then look at how I can display it best for my guests or how it can marry with another ingredient. This is the same for other local produce I source, always trying to treat the ingredients as simply as possible while adding a few surprises.

"I started cooking at the Hambrough Hotel in July 2007 and we were awarded a Michelin Star later that year. It was very fast and unexpected, but of course, welcome. Helping to place the island firmly back on the foodie map was a proud moment, and I still feel very lucky to be able to help represent it today.



MAIN Island life very much suits Robert. INSET Robert loves the natural larder the Isle of Wight can provide.



Together with my team, we then kept the star until I decided to move on, having held the award for five years."

With the advent of Covid, Robert's eponymous restaurant Thompson's had to close but never one to shy away from a challenge, he pivoted, as so many others did, and his UK-wide food delivery service You Be Chef was born.

"You Be Chef essentially saved me from going under, which is why I have kept it going since re-opening. It's a great moment each week seeing our super bright white and orange boxes,

packed full of tasty dishes, being sent out. As with the restaurant, menus are inspired by what's available seasonally, and lots of ingredients, of course, are local to me here on the Island."

Roberts's hospitality and numerous charitable initiatives were recognised with an MBE in 2023 for services to hospitality and charity which underpins his significant impact on local cuisine as well as his unstinting dedication to the island's social fabric. And so his love affair with the Isle of Wight and its coast continues.