

FOOD AND DRINK

‘I like to go against the grain’

Top chef Rowley Leigh starts his FT cookery column this week and tells **Caroline Phillips** about his robust, refined style

Rowley Leigh was doing a cookery demonstration – his first and last – in Perth, Scotland, in 1989. Most chefs prepare assiduously for such presentations. But Leigh decided to improvise, choosing to extol the wonders of wild salmon to the 100 housewives who had gathered to watch him.

After five minutes, he'd lost their attention. "Suddenly I realised the town hall was full of people involved in salmon farming. People who didn't think wild salmon a very good idea," laughs Leigh. "I dried up totally." He cut himself slightly, filleting the fish. He called on the next demonstrator (the lesser-known Gary Rhodes) to assist him. Then he spluttered something about checking his potatoes and ran offstage – never to return.

Leigh, 53, is head chef at London's perennially fashionable restaurant, Kensington Place, and executive chef of the Moving Image group, which includes Launceston Place, Avenue, Circus and East at West. He's the renowned author of *No Place Like Home* – a witty cookery book about dishes that are better cooked at home, from stew to steak and kidney pie and summer pudding, and which focuses on the ingredients Britain grows best, from sea kale to quinces and wild sea trout – for which he gained a Guild of Food Writers Award.

He has won the coveted Glenfiddich Award for the quality of his newspaper writing. He also owns one of London's leading wet fish shops. And his cookery has had an enormous influence on gastro-pubs.

His driving force is the seasonal ingredient. "The last two or three months I've spent cooking cabbage," he laughs. "And I've been doing lots of different lamb recently – from the almost gamey Herdwick Northumbrian lamb to baby lamb from the Pyrenees."

He is looking forward to indulging his hobby horses in the Financial Times. "It'll be exciting to pursue excellence. To write about golden beetroot from a tiny organic farm, truffles, or Middle White pork – which is only available by mail order," he says, sipping a glass of Mosel Riesling. "And I'll probably be doing things with

rhubarb, which was last year's trend ingredient."

He dismisses foodie fashion. "I like to go against the grain a bit. At the moment, people serve treviso with fish and belly of pork with just about everything. There are trends not just in ingredients but also techniques. Velouté, cappuccino and fruit slices confited into thin, tasteless pieces," he snorts with derision. "I particularly loathe deconstruction – when you get a long, rectangular plate with five different ways of doing a pig – a slab of pork, a pig's trotter, a piece of pork loin. Instead of having a focused, intelligent meal, you get the chef showing off. To me, it's denatured and tasteless."

Leigh dislikes pandering to our obsession with variety. "We need seasonal food, stews in winter and salads in summer. As the world gets smaller and markets more international, there's a danger of everything we eat becoming standardised and tasteless," he says. "If we care what we eat, we should buy seasonal food from small

‘My philosophy is to make proper plates of food and to make simple things good. It's what you leave out of the food that makes it special’

producers." He supports farmers' markets, small producers, small butchers' shops, fishmongers, greengrocers, delicatessens and buying by mail order or through the internet.

"Personally, I shop at Notting Hill farmers' market and Damas Gate, a brilliant Syrian grocer in Uxbridge Road who does halal meat, amazing spices and pulses." He's also interested in the difference between urban and country fare. "In the country, people have milk, bread, pheasant and hunks of meat in their freezers, whereas townies have ice cream, chips and frozen peas," he remarks. "Townies regard pheasant as a luxury – but



Rowley Leigh at Kensington Place: 'The problem is some cooks are not in love with food'

Charlie Bibby

people in the country don't know what to do with the damn things. Country cooking is rather more genuine."

There is a peppermint-coloured Smeg fridge in the kitchen of his west London home. Nearby is a book on fruit juices, the *River Cafe Cookbook* and Nigella Lawson's tomes. "Very misleading," says Leigh. "Those are my wife's books!" His own arcane and disparate collection lines his study walls: from the yellow, crumbling pages of J.B. Reboul on bourgeois French cookery (one of his favourite books) to Simon Hopkinson (a friend) and two huge volumes of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* – due to be returned to Kensington's Central Library in 1978.

In 1977, aged 27, he was broke and picked up a copy of the London Evening Standard. It contained an advertisement for a grill chef at Joe Allen, the American diner in Covent Garden. "I thought, 'I'll try that.'" What drew him to cookery? "Greed and poverty." He began at Joe Allen and loved the drama of the kitchen. He started devouring cookery books.

In 1979, he applied to Roux Brothers – Albert Roux was then Britain's leading chef – and commenced at Le Poulbot in the City. Three weeks later, Leigh was fired: Roux had been in the restaurant and noticed that Leigh was unable even to turn a potato. "I appealed to Albert to let me stay." Roux transferred the determined young chef to Le Gavroche. There Leigh graduated to run the patisserie, butchery

and buying arms of the business.

Five years later he became head chef at Le Poulbot – where the Gault Millau Guide awarded him 16 out of 20, against 15 for Le Gavroche. And in 1987, he opened Kensington Place, an Anglicised French restaurant which becomes increasingly Anglicised.

In the 1980s, when his style evolved, Leigh's cookery was dubbed New Wave. "That's very *vieille vague* now," he responds. "I hope my cookery's robust and refined. Refined in the sense of paring things down. But with strong, clear flavours." His signature dishes are a much-plagiarised chicken and goat's cheese mousse with olives, and scallops with pea purée and mint vinaigrette.

"I come from the Elizabeth David school. I'm a middle class guy who got into cooking and wanted to demystify it. My philosophy is to make proper plates of food and to make simple things good. Every chef quotes Escoffier's '*fait simple*'. But I really believe in refining and simplifying. It's what you leave out of the food that makes it special." He has never fol-

lowed a recipe, but reads cookery books avidly for inspiration. He admires Paul Bocuse, Alice Walters and Anna del Conte.

"I hate to single them out. There are so many people that I admire." He is categorically uninterested in television chefs. "I get my ideas by dreaming of faraway places and times. Recently I've been doing roast cod with anchovy sauce, which is a 17th-century recipe, and a 19th-century hot pot."

He refers to *A Catalan Cook Book* by Noel Davis. "It's basic Catalan cooking, like roast partridge with picada – an aromatic mixture of garlic, peppers, nuts and almonds which they fry up briefly and add to the stew at the end. It's the spirit of place that inspires me."

Another book that fires his imagination is *The Food of Italy* by Waverley Root. "In Calabria, they do mussels with garlic and a bit of tomato. In Liguria, they do them with basil and cream. I'm turned on by places with a strong regional identity." Leigh, the third of four children, is the son of Robert, a businessman and farmer.

Born of an Irish Catholic mother and Jewish father, he describes himself in his rich voice as a "complete mongrel". His mother, Shelagh, was an adventurous, Elizabeth David-style cook. She liked to make meat with fruit, such as guinea fowl roasted with a peach inside, and cooked according to her obsessions. "She did sour cream with everything for six months," he says, fiddling with his half-moon glasses and pulling at his hair. "Then it would be apricots or rice for meal after meal."

He had a peripatetic childhood in Northern Ireland, Bedfordshire and Gloucestershire and settled young into an anarchic lifestyle. "I spent most of one term at school in disgrace – with my desk facing the wall," he explains. "Then I moved to Clifton College in Bristol, only to be expelled aged 15."

Leigh wasn't accepted by any of his UCCA universities, so he decided to sit the Cambridge entrance exam. He won an exhibition to read English at Christ's College. Did he dine in hall? "Never," he responds, vehemently. "I tried it once," he adds. Instead he cooked dry curries or ate at the local Cypriot restaurants. "But Christ's did good breakfasts."

He left Cambridge without a degree. "I walked out of Part Ones. I was in a contemptuous, drug-induced, political state of mind." He drifted to work on his father's new venture – a dairy farm. There he grew his own vegetables and immersed himself in Elizabeth David. He left and wrote 40 pages of an "academic" detective novel and played lots of snooker. Then he went to Joe Allen's.

He thinks the best food in the world is in Italy. "I love their respect for their ingredients and rules. They have a very clear syntax to a meal – antipasto, pasta then meat or fish – and are endlessly creative within the basic formula." His favourite meal is oysters and grouse. But at least once a week he eats a take-away curry from Pyasa in Shepherd's Bush.

"I try to eat healthily, but I still eat far too much," he opines. Has he ever followed a diet? "No." Does he ever cut foodstuffs out of his diet? "Pah." Indeed, he thinks the main difference between amateur and professional cooking is seasoning: "People would be horrified if they knew how much salt chefs use."

Leigh enjoys cooking at home. He's twice married and has three children living with him. "We don't entertain a lot. But I cook for my wife two or three times a week. I find it relaxing." On Sundays he'll often do roast chicken with roast potatoes. "I'll chuck in something playful that makes the children throw up their hands in despair. Something like onion squash with spring onion and chilli or with fennel seed and sage. That's quite experimental for me." He pauses. "The problem is some cooks are not in love with food. My problem is that I love food too much."