



Michael and Jean-Christophe in the kitchen. (AW8103-0006CM)



Michael impresses Novelli at The Rag

When celebrity TV chef Jean-Christophe Novelli made a special guest appearance at a village pub, Mercury reporter Sam Schofield went along to meet the Michelin starred man.

A MAIN course of sea bass cooked in fennel and Carlsberg Export is being prepared by a chef in a bustling pub kitchen on the edge of Cannock Chase.

Lunch has been fully-booked for a week, after prospective patrons quickly snapped up available tables, and the staff are bristling with excitement.

One man, the head chef and owner of The Rag on Ironstone Road in Rawnsley, seems more nervous than excited, or maybe it's a mixture of both, but he has good reason to be feeling the heat and it's not that he has to serve 85 three course meals in an hour's time.

Standing over his stove, basting the fish in a mixture of herbs, oil and various other ingredients, he is being closely watched by a multi-Michelin starred chef, as well as a bank of cameras, reporters and a film crew – not to mention the rest of the pub's staff.

However, Michael Benniston – who opened the pub with his wife Stephanie four years ago – keeps his calm and continues talking to the audience, as though playing the role of anchorman on a prime-time TV cookery show.

"We're going to be cooking the sea bass in Carlsberg Export; a recipe created by Jean-Christophe Novelli," says Michael, as he continues preparing the dish.

This isn't a random recipe picked from a Novelli cookbook though, the culinary maestro himself is stood to Michael's right and he is interjecting, in his strong French accent, 'a little bit of sugar to reduce the acidity', 'a bit more milk', 'finish it with a touch of lemon and a bit of basil'.

The celebrity chef – who has made many TV appearances on popular programmes such as *Hell's Kitchen*, *Saturday Cooks*,

Loose Women and *Friday Night with Jonathan Ross* – is making a special appearance at The Rag.

Having been dubbed 'the nation's favourite French chef', the 47-year-old Novelli draws media attention for two reasons; one, simply explained through the *New York Times* decision to vote him the 'sexiest chef in the world', is his good looks.

However, it is the second, arguably more important, reason that has been the driving force behind his success – despite the well documented collapse of his restaurant chain in 1999 – which is his passion and mastery of the culinary arts.

Some of Novelli's accolades include; five AA rosettes, AA Chef of the Year 1998, European Chef of the Year, Best Restaurant of the Year, as well as his collection of four Michelin stars.

Three years ago he also opened the Novelli Academy, at his 14th century Hertfordshire farmhouse, which was voted among the top 25 cookery

schools in the world within three months of its opening.

It was here, at the academy, that Michael Benniston took part in a competition, between five establishment owners from around the country, to cook the best medium-rare rib eye steak atop a crostini with cheese and tomato sauce.

Michael's prize for winning the competition, having cooked the best steak on the day, was a visit from the celebrity chef to The Rag.

"I tell you what is so great about Michael is that he is very passionate about what he does – that really reflects in what he does and it helped him win the competition in the academy," Novelli told the *Mercury*.

Sat in a relatively quiet corner of The Rag, the exuberant French chef is sipping a beer and singing Michael's praises as he weaves pre-chosen topics into the conversation like an experienced PR manager.

The whole scenario has been organised by Carlsberg, a company Novelli works for as a consultant, but he is also here filming part of a television show for the BBC's *Money Programme*, which is covering the topic of pubs struggling in the economic crisis.

"This place has got a lot of attractions and I think he's doing very well – I know because I own a pub, so I know he's doing

very well," Novelli tries to explain whilst battling with the English language.

Even though he's lived in the country since 1983, he still seems to struggle getting his ideas across and occasionally turns to his 'right-hand man' and chef, the aptly named, Steven Kitchen for help translating a concept into English.

"Michael is a great example of someone who knows what he is doing because we can see clearly that he can cook and he kept that idea of what a pub should be," said Jean-Christophe.

"A family time is what a pub should always be about because pubs get lost being too controlled."

"What I am trying to say is that Michael has a good pub because he knows local people can enjoy all this amazing opportunity – it is very different to many places.

"I could bring my family here and I've got everything that I like very much – it is still a family pub."

A pause in conversation, as he takes a sip of beer, leads to the obligatory plug of the organiser's product – the Carlsberg executive is only a few feet away.

"I think at a pub I enjoy a beer, I do not usually drink wine at a pub."

"I enjoy my Carlsberg," he



Jean-Christophe (left) meets The Rag's owner and head chef Michael Benniston. (AW8103-0001CM)

says, before taking another sip, then grinning and adding, "make sure to say that."

Having been in the media eye for so long, Novelli seems to have developed a finely honed PR instinct.

When he sees an opportunity to plug the idea behind the television show he is working on, he slowly changes the subject with a short story.

"On the way here we were travelling on the M6 and we stopped for coffee," says Novelli, pulling a hand full of notes from his pocket.

He places a receipt from a service station on the table and exclaims: "Three coffees was £7.40 – it wasn't even a coffee!"

Continuing on the money theme, he says: "I was watching the BBC news and it says everybody is panicking and was saying it's very simple, pubs should charge less because they are expensive, but if someone goes into Michael's pub it will save you money – £20 for three courses, it is not expensive."

With a full lunchtime contingent of 85 customers, will Novelli be helping Michael in the kitchen and treating the guests to a Michelin starred

feast?

"What I don't want to do is go into that kitchen because I don't like people telling me what to do in my kitchen – you have got to get respect and they don't want someone walking in and telling them what to do – the last thing I want to do is interfere," he explains.

But do you still get into the kitchen often?

"I try to be like Michael as often as possible but I don't want to be in a kitchen just cooking because I've got to do other things now – I've done my time in the kitchen."

"I am 47-years-old, nearly 48 now, and I have been cooking for more than 30 years.

"The thing is I would never stop cooking but there is cooking and there is cooking."

"Cooking for me was about being able to express yourself and I am quite happy that I never lost that – but I do still cook every day."

Lunchtime is quickly approaching and the interview must come to a close, so, on that note, Novelli is whisked away to meet a television crew.



Jean-Christophe charms The Rag's staff. (AW8103-0018CM)