

CHEF NETWORK

KITCHEN CULTURE

Meet the chefs & teams of Ireland's professional kitchens, with Chef Network. The Chef Network community brings together almost 3,500 member chefs across Ireland. In a new Hotel & Restaurant Times regular column we will meet some of those members and hear from them what inspires and motivates them, their career challenges and opportunities, and how they believe we can improve the industry.



In this edition, we meet
Michelle Crehan, Chef/Proprietor of
The Kitchen at Galway Museum



“As soon as I put that uniform on I knew, I was so happy, this is where I wanted to be”

Why did you become a Chef?

I had been a journalist, then I was a stay at home Mum of three for a number of years. I knew that if I was going to be leaving my kids to go out to work I needed to do something I really loved.

I had always had a huge interest in food and a real love of cooking. My family were getting dishes like slow cooked lamb shank with Moroccan spices, homemade dumplings. I spent huge time on meals and cooking was always a pleasure for me. I was always the one cooking for family gatherings. My sister-in-law is involved with a theatre company here in Galway. They had an event coming up and the caterers let them down late in the day. She asked me if I would cater for the event. That was my first foray into professional catering; cooking for big numbers, presenting all of the food on big platters...it completely lit a fire under me and it gave me the confidence to think that maybe I could do it professionally.

What was your path to where you are today?

You can only learn so much from books. I had huge passion but I wanted to get some training. I applied for the Total Immersion programme at GMIT. I planned on lying to them in the interview, I was going to tell them I had experience in a professional kitchen. In the end I came clean and told them I had none but promised to get some before the course. Obviously my passion and commitment came across because I was accepted. GMIT were so supportive of me and still are. When I started in GMIT, as soon as I put that uniform on I knew, I was so happy, this is where I wanted to be. Then Jess Murphy [of Kai restaurant in Galway], who was with Bar 8 at the time, was looking for someone for baking and I got the job. I was lucky; the fact that I had children was

recognised and I was able to fit my work with my personal life, working weekday shifts from 8am-3pm. But after a while I saw that the chefs who worked Saturdays were getting the adrenaline buzz of a busy service and I wanted that too!

The lease came up for the café at the Museum and it was offered to me. I was blind going into it. It was like a crime of passion. We opened up with myself in the kitchen, one person front of house and a part-time kitchen porter. We had 6 or 7 dishes on the menu, everything prepared entirely from scratch. I had a 2-ring cooker, I rented the furniture from the previous owner, my mother went to IKEA to buy the plates. It was insane. I was lucky I had great support, lots from our neighbouring businesses and others in the industry in Galway.

What is the most important ingredient in your success to date?

We have such a fantastic team – and it one of the main reasons that I love coming to work. Somehow we are managing to attract great people. I have an amazing head chef, Gavin, who has been with me for 5 years and another chef, Louise, who is about to go on maternity leave but has been with me for 6 years. We have such an incredible team, many of whom have come through GMIT.

We are a day-time café and I do worry sometimes about keeping the chefs stimulated, but our daily changing specials keep them interested and they all have scope to input into the menu and try out new things. It is so important to truly work as a team. We are all in it to win it! Everyone has an input, front of house and chefs; they all have the chance to input creatively. We have one front of house person who made all these beautiful paper flowers to decorate the restaurant – the staff are really into the business, they are invested in it. We really do try to have a mix of different kinds of people and we have huge diversity on our team. We have staff that come from lots of countries and backgrounds, and they all contribute new things and particular skills to our food and our business. We currently have slightly more women than men in our kitchen, generally it is about half in half across the restaurant. Funnily enough, having people who are so different actually leads to less conflict. It is important to be truly open-minded – all we ask is that you be a team player.

Have you seen a negative side to the industry?

Before GMT I got a job in a local hotel doing breakfast and baking and general prep. This was the first and really only time I saw the bad side of professional kitchens. Sadly the whole culture of that kitchen was affected by a head chef who was jaded, tired and sick of the job to the point where he had no respect for the food, the customer, or the staff. One chef who wanted to get me a bit more involved was told to "keep her peeling onions".

It is so important that we are all committed to creating a learning environment in our kitchens. If I had gone in there as a 20-year old I probably would have left and never gone back to the industry, but because I was more mature and focussed on what I wanted, I stuck with it.

"Treat everyone with equal respect and it will filter down"

How can chefs create a positive culture in their kitchen?

Treat the head chef the same way you treat the kitchen porter. Treat your supplier as you would a customer. Treat everyone with equal respect and it will filter down.

I am surrounded by amazing young people, who are full of energy and creativity, they all bring something to the party...and everyone of them needs to feel valued.

BEING A CHEF....

What I love most is...the delight of when someone takes their first bite of something delicious. When we have new specials on the menu, I can often be seen peeking out of the kitchen to watch people's reactions.

The biggest challenge is...staying on top of costs You want to have decent ingredients, but people are only willing to pay so much for their lunch. And you want to pay your staff well; my accountant keeps telling me my staff costs are too high, but I argue that this is a service industry, the staff are key.

What makes me most proud is...that this is where lots of chefs around the city come to eat.

The most difficult thing I have had to face is... resolving conflicts between staff members. You have to try and diffuse situations, but conflicts do arise. My advice is to nip it in the bud, don't let things stew. Try to get the staff members the chance to sort things out. But if it can't be resolved, sometimes ultimately someone has to go, and that is really hard.



Michelle pictured during Galway Food Festival with participants of the Slowfood "My Granny's Recipe" competition

The most rewarding thing I've done is... being involved with community and arts events. During the Galway Food Festival we collaborate with Slowfood on the 'My Granny's recipe' competition where children make a dish based on a recipe from their grandmother and write a piece about it.

I have learned that...

Having a good accountant is really important. I had the passion and sheer stubbornness to make it happen but made a lot of financial mistakes. You really have to keep on top of that stuff.

You need to be both passionate and level-headed, and they are sometimes at odds. I nearly always follow my heart.

Being able to manage people is massive...and never be afraid to hire people who are better at things than you are, these are the people who can push your business forward.

You can create a better workplace by being willing to compromise. Sometimes the best person for the job is the person who is not available 24/7. Being flexible can pay off... you're not losing out by hiring a woman with kids.

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