

TASTE THE SUCCESS

THE CELEBRITY-CHEF
INVASION GEARS UP AS
BRITISH BAD BOY GORDON
RAMSAY OPENS TWO
RESTAURANTS AT THE
NEW CONRAD TOKYO

BY MATT WILCE

GORDON RAMSAY IS REMARKABLY LAID-BACK FOR SOMEONE WHO HAS just walked out of a grilling by the Japanese press corps at the new Conrad Tokyo hotel, the site of his first restaurant in Asia, and straight into an interview. Friendly and relaxed, Ramsay has hardly answered our first question before he hops up to go get milk for his tea, refusing the protestations of the hotel PR people, who are eager to oblige.

Considering the 38-year-old chef is almost as well-known for his temper as he is for his cooking, we are somewhat relieved. The obscenity-screaming TV persona who harangues hapless celebrities trying to cook in *Hell's Kitchen*, and who attempts to fix the slovenly ways of failing restaurant owners in *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares*, doesn't seem to have made it to Tokyo. Instead we get a more low-key and relaxed Ramsay dressed casually in jeans and a black leather jacket. Ramsay has every right to be in high spirits considering that the previous Sunday he ran the London Marathon and walked off with a BAFTA award (the British equivalent of an Emmy) for *Kitchen Nightmares*, and now he's about to open two establishments at the Conrad Tokyo—the upscale Gordon Ramsay and more casual Cerise.

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"YOU COULD BE THE BEST CHEF IN BRITAIN WITH THREE STARS, BUT IF YOU'RE SAT THERE WITHOUT A FULL DINING ROOM ON A MONDAY NIGHT, THEN WHAT'S THE POINT?"

Gordon Ramsay at Claridge's was voted best restaurant by Tatler in 2002

With a string of destination restaurants at some of London's most prestigious addresses, including his signature eatery at celebrity-studded Claridge's Hotel, Gordon Ramsay is probably the most talked about British chef of his generation. Creations such as baked baby sea bass with aubergine caviar, roasted fennel, confit garlic, black olives and a lobster nage have earned him three Michelin stars, and have won him a reputation as a master of impeccable haute cuisine—that comes at haute prices.

Ramsay has such a following for his high-end modern French fare that getting a table at Claridge's or the stand-alone Gordon Ramsay in Chelsea involves doing battle with 2,500 other hopefuls who call each day. The 2000 Catey Award winner for Chef of the Year has also built a stellar restaurant group that includes The Savoy Grill, Petrus and trendy Boxwood Café. Together, the group has amassed an unprecedented seven Michelin stars.

Things didn't go quite so smoothly for Ramsay in the first profession that he pursued, when injury brought an abrupt end to his soccer career for Scottish champions Glasgow Rangers, a turn of events that led him to enroll in a vocational course in hotel management.

From then on, he's worked with a *Who's Who* of the world's greatest chefs, including Marco Pierre White, Albert Roux, Guy Savoy, Joel Robuchon and Alain Ducasse. Ramsay rattles off what he learned from each of these greats: "Guy Savoy was a light interpretation of fine cuisine; Marco was a great executer; Albert Roux was a phenomenal flavors man; Robuchon was incredibly classic and has a very rich style of cooking; Ducasse was a Mediterranean style combining the Italian and French influences."

Until Ramsay arrived, Ducasse had been the latest star to land on Tokyo's culinary map when he set up Beige in Chanel's Ginza flagship in December (a second Ducasse operation is planned for Aoyama in the fall).

Robuchon has the Restaurant Joel Robuchon in Ebisu Garden Place and a branch of his Paris flagship, L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon, in Roppongi Hills.

So why is Tokyo becoming a dining Mecca? "The level of quality here is staggering, second to none. There are very few cities in the world that can sustain that kind of level and competitive edge," Ramsay says, adding that he is not intimidated by the competition. "I worked with Robuchon and Ducasse, and I get turned on the more difficult it is," he says. "I love going to the extreme, so now I'm rubbing shoulders with the best of the Japanese and your Ducasses and Robuchons, and I'm excited."

His enthusiasm for Japan, a country he has visited many times for pleasure but never for work, is obvious, and stems in part from the quality and variety of the local produce. Constrained by declining stocks of fish in Europe, Ramsay is looking forward to experimenting with some species not normally seen on his menus. "I quite enjoy regional Japanese styles. It's the homemade rustic influences that get me turned on, like they do in the UK," he says.

Naturally Ramsay plans to incorporate elements of the local cuisine into his cooking. "I'll use marinades, oils, vinegars and the sort of sweet and sour effect you find here. Of course, I don't need to start cooking total Japanese, but I'll certainly be cooking up and mixing 15 to 20 percent of what we do and incorporating that into our style."

Considering that he has a good Japanese following in London, Ramsay seems confident that his creations will appeal to Tokyo foodies. In addition to a version of his signature spot, Gordon Ramsay at Tokyo Conrad, which should feature stunning views over Hamarikyu Garden, Ramsay will also oversee Cerise, a more casual location offering breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Ramsay is also beloved by his new Japanese staff, a refreshing change from some of the failing chefs he's encountered on his TV shows. "There is an amazing amount of etiquette in the kitchens here. →

→ The Japanese manner is so good. I wish they were that well mannered back in the UK," he says. "I admire how they are so methodical and so direct. They're so polite, and when you show them something, it's like turning on a light bulb."

After Tokyo, New York will be Ramsay's next challenge—his first US venture will open next summer—although he's quick to note that it is "not mission accomplished" as far as the British end of his business is concerned. "We've built an amazing infrastructure there with 1,000 staff and a group of professionals that now turn over more than 40 million pounds (¥8 billion) a year." And then there's the job of keeping the three Michelin stars he personally holds.

"It's no different to trying to win the Premier League every year," he says, falling back on his soccer roots. "I've enjoyed having three stars and I'll continue to enjoy them. Somebody asked me yesterday what I would do if I lost one, and I said, 'Fucking win it back!'" Ramsay's attitude is a good deal healthier than French chef Bernard Loiseau, who committed suicide in 2003 following his demotion in the popular GaultMillau guide. "We're not complacent. We're consistent in what we do. I'm not in danger of losing my third star because I'm a control freak. I know what's going on each and every day," says Ramsay.

"I think the misinterpretation is that you get judged in January on what you cooked the year before. So like every guide, you take it with a pinch of salt. Your biggest critics are ultimately your customers. The guide is only there to confirm how good you are. Three Michelin stars was a dream come true, but maintaining that is a lot harder. You have to be careful because you could be the best chef in Britain with three stars, but if you're sat there without a full dining room on a Monday night, then what's the point."

Pointing to the *World's 50 Best Restaurants* magazine that he walked in with, Ramsay makes it clear that he considers such specials to be fluffy marketing soufflés. "It's promotion for the magazine, nothing more. It's all about 'you stroke my back and I'll stroke yours.' There are good restaurants around the world that deserve recognition, but this kind of thing is just a self-perpetuating marketing tool and nothing more." He does, however, listen to *The Good Food Guide* and the *Michelin Guide*, which he believes have integrity. "Very few chefs ever focus on their customers and are more concerned with what other chefs say, but that doesn't equate to more than 1 percent of your business. I'm close to my customers and know what is going on."

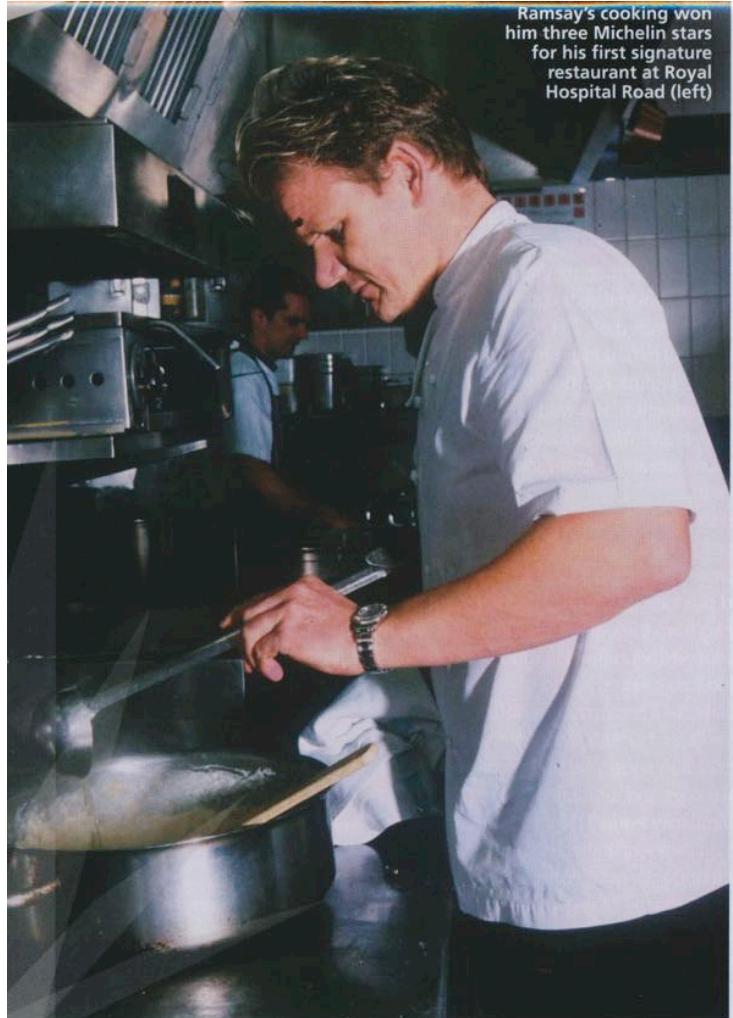
Rising to the top so young and having a high media profile from his cookbooks, a column in *The Times*, the documentaries *Boiling Point* and *Beyond Boiling Point*, and the reality show *Kitchen Nightmares*—where Ramsay tries to turn around some of Britain's worst restaurants—has meant that there are many who would like to see this chef's sauce curdle. Nevertheless, Ramsay certainly doesn't think of himself as a TV chef in the mold of many of his contemporaries, such as

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Conrad Tokyo 1-9-1 Higashi Shinbashi, Minato-ku. Tel: 03-6388-8000. Nearest stn: Shiodome (Oedo line) or Shinbashi. Gordon Ramsay at Conrad Tokyo Open Mon-Sat 11:30am-2pm, 6-11pm; Sun 11am-2pm, 6-11pm. Cerise by Gordon Ramsay Open daily 6am-2pm, 6-11pm.

Ramsay's cooking won him three Michelin stars for his first signature restaurant at Royal Hospital Road (left)



"Naked Chef" Jamie Oliver. When we ask whether he plans to spend more time in front of the camera, the answer is emphatic: "Fucking hell!" he exclaims. "I don't fit around [TV] and it doesn't fit around me. I don't go in there with a format or a calling card like on 'Ready Steady Twat,'" he says, lampooning a popular UK cooking game show. "Channel 4 has been brilliant about letting me be myself."

Whatever his protestations, it seems doubtful that the media has seen the last of him, with a second series of *Kitchen Nightmares* coming to the end of its UK run and the first series in 20 markets worldwide. "If you thought the first one was fucking hairy, then this one's even scarier. It is hard to believe that there are restaurants out there that function like that."

Behind the on-camera swearing and tension, it is clear that Ramsay has a real desire to show people how it should be done. "If you work in this industry busting your nuts like a donkey for 20 or 30 years and you don't have a pot to pee in, then you fucked it big time. Businesses are there to be viable. They're not about standing there looking stupid."

His TV shows mix a big slice of entertainment with the attempt at culinary education, but Ramsay has found a better way to foster professionalism in the industry by founding a scholarship program. "When I won my third Michelin star, I thought about how I could keep evolving, and creating a scholarship was a beneficiary of that desire," Ramsay says. "It was fresh and vibrant, a way of trawling through Britain and finding talent and then propelling that talent. And last year we went international and went over to New Zealand and found a great chef there who came over and competed against the best of the British," he adds.

Next year the scholarship program will go to America, and in 2008 Ramsay hopes to bring it to Japan. "We are all in a position to do something when we hit the top of our career," he says. "Going through the back door of any kitchen is far more exciting than going in through the front. You get a phone call from a young cook and you catapult them from Thomas Keller to Alain Ducasse in Paris and Tetsuya Wakada in Sydney, and they come out of these kitchens excited and vibrant and ready to go."

With his star set to shine on Tokyo, Ramsay certainly seems enthused. So what's the big secret behind all the success? "We fucking work at it!"