



Bridging the gap from COLLEGE TO KITCHEN



Hitchin's place on the culinary map of Britain was undoubtedly raised a notch when Anthony Gascoigne of North Hertfordshire College (NHC) was named Teacher of the Year in the Times Educational Supplement's Further Education Awards.

For those in the know, the TES award in 2021 came as no surprise. They include MGB Fellow Cyrus Todiwal, who says: "Anthony is one of the most dedicated teachers I have come across during my involvement within education in the UK, since we launched Zest Quest Asia."

Since joining the college in 2013, Anthony has been gradually forging ever-closer links with his industry peers, helping to close the gap between education and professional kitchens.

After graduating as a chef from Scarborough TEC, he worked with Michelin starred chef Andrew Pern at the Star Inn at Harome, and worked in Australia and France. It was a diagnosis of epilepsy which initially prompted his decision to move to culinary education, where his passion for the profession has seen him support hundreds of young chefs into careers in the catering industry.

Anthony says: "I worked to a high level, in some very good kitchens, but my transition into teaching was smooth, and I feel like I'm now a better teacher of food than I ever would have been a chef."

Based on the Hitchin campus, students of NHC's Hospitality and Catering courses gain practical experience working in the Hart Kitchens restaurant and the recently opened Hart Deli

venture, which provides hot street food. Hospitality students also run the college's hot coffee stand, maintaining the stall, taking orders, and preparing hot drinks.

Anthony regularly invites his industry connections into the classrooms to support students in gaining skills and experience they need. Recent masterclass sessions have been led by Jason Morrison, Managing Director of Riso Gallo, and Saurabh Prabhakar, Lead Culinary Learning & Development Chef of Hilton Hotels.

As the industry works to tackle its recruitment challenges, Anthony says: "I think chefs are now far more willing to come into colleges. There was a time when you just couldn't get anybody in, but now they're realising they need to engage with the youngsters and the colleges."

"The best colleges are those that work very closely with industry, both to align expectations and to drive up standards. Even our ex-students want to come in, so I've almost got chefs on waiting lists. It's fabulous for the students to have that input." Another strand to the course is a focus on hands-on experience, with students completing their courses with practical experience gained through 'stages' and work experience opportunities.

These have included Pub in the Park, The Star at Harome, and Fortnum & Mason's.

Andrew Pern of The Star at Harome, says: "Anthony has arranged for 'stages' in the kitchens of our Michelin starred



restaurant for a number of his students. We've found NHC's students to have a very good level of entry level training, and they have generally adapted well to working alongside our chefs, to the extent that one of the students joined our team in July 2021 and is proving a valuable staff member. NHC clearly has excellent training standards."

Students are also regularly encouraged to participate in competitions, with notable successes including:

Emily Simkins, James Wheatley, and Phil Maddison, (Level 2 Professional Cookery in 2022, now completing Level 3 Professional Cookery) reached the finals of Zest Quest Asia in 2022, winning Best Use of British Produce and Best Wine Pairing. Emily Simkins also won Zest Quest Asia Autumn Challenge in 2022.

Luke McDonald, Level 3 Professional Cookery (Class of 2022) reached the finals of Young Risotto Chef.

Gemma Gant, Level 3 Hospitality (Class of 2022), competed in the regional finals of Nestle Toque D'Or in 2022.

Anthony says: "If I just taught the curriculum, the students would come out with a qualification. When I add on the great work experience, the competition work, the guest chefs, and the demonstrations, it gives the additional value for the students. It's the fun stuff, it's what the students really enjoy doing, and it raises their aspirations as well."

He makes the point that by coming into colleges, chefs also get an understanding of students, which can help with putting tailored workplace induction programmes in place. For students, "previously it might have been that they weren't meeting anyone from industry. Now, they're regularly meeting people who can help them in developing a career."

Traditionally, there has been criticism – from some quarters, at least – of a perceived mismatch between the skills colleges teach and those needed by professional kitchens. The gap has closed, believes Anthony, but he makes the point "the qualifications haven't changed that much, it's just that the way we engage with industry, and industry engages with the colleges, is much better aligned."

"We're all trying to get to the same point, to develop young people who are able to step into the industry and start working. In colleges, it's not just about developing chefs, it's about developing well rounded young people who will have a career in the industry with longevity."

"We have high expectations, and students know the standards you need to meet to have a career in the industry, but we're realistic as well. It is a challenging industry, and you can't set people up to fail, I don't see success as completing the course, I see success five or ten years from now. Are they still in the industry, are they still developing?"

For Anthony, amongst the most rewarding aspects of his role is "those moments when the students just get it. There's something that they've struggled with, such as a particular skill, and suddenly it just clicks."

"It's not about Michelin starred chefs or five star hotels, sometimes the most magical thing is simply making someone employable, even if that's in a local café or takeaway. Giving young people the tools to go out there and get a job. It's incredibly rewarding to see the students fly in competitions, but the real value is when a student turns themselves into something more than they were they started with us."

