

How Scotland's national chef loves Island life

Exclusive interview by **Katie Macleod**

Although he diplomatically avoids my question on whether he has a favourite among them, it's clear that Scotland's National Chef, Gary Maclean, has a strong affinity for the Scottish islands. "They've all got their own personality, they've all got their own uniqueness, you know?" says the 2016 MasterChef: The Professionals winner. "Even looking at Lewis and Harris, they're completely different. You know where you are between the two. It's really quite dramatic."

He may be the National Chef of Scotland, but Gary's work takes him around the world as well as across the country: he's cooked for celebrities like Jennifer Lopez, Bon Jovi, and Billy Connolly, and in locations ranging from 10 Downing Street to Hollywood. But nowhere feels quite as different as the islands. "I feel further away from home when I'm on the Outer Hebrides than I do when I'm in Asia, even though it's only an hour away on a plane. It just amazes me that it's so beautiful, it's so untouched. It's an amazing place."

Gary was last on the Isle of Lewis in August, where he showcased his award-winning skills by creating a six-course "Taste of the Outer Hebrides" menu at the Harris and Lewis Smokehouse in Stornoway, before opening the Lewis Carnival Food and Drink Festival with cooking demonstrations using Native Hebridean salmon supplied by Scottish Salmon Company.

Speaking before the dinner, Gary explained the events were about "bringing people together with food. The food on the island is amazing, and food is a great leveller for people, because everyone needs it, it brings communities together."

While he was there, he "got a chance to get out and about to pick up produce and look at what else is going on in Stornoway. It was a nice opportunity to see what else was going on in the food scene. We went down onto the harbour and bought some fish from the local fish supplier as well. It's great, getting in and speaking to people... It puts things really into context."

Gary grew up and still lives in Glasgow, and it was family holidays to Cumbrae during childhood, and a teenage road trip with a friend to Skye, that first introduced the chef to the landscape and culture of the Scottish islands. In terms of food, his relationship with them began in Arran more than 20 years ago, when he was involved in organising one of the first food tours for chefs to the west coast island.

Since then, Gary has island hopped to Mull, North Uist, Benbecula, Lewis, Harris, and Shetland. He even presented BBC Landward from Mull in 2017, where he was tasked with finding and cooking with local ingredients. His episodes featured some personal favourites, like the famous Tobermory smoked trout, Mull haggis, and Arran mustard on Scotch beef.

It wasn't Gary's only turn in front of the camera, either. As a chef ambassador for the Scottish Salmon Company, he spends a lot of time in various islands filming, whether it's walking



Gary Maclean on a recent visit to Isle of Mull

on the sands of Luskenytre in Harris, cooking up a storm in Lews Castle in Stornoway, or exploring in Shetland, which he describes as "a special place" with a "real community spirit."

His food journey began at age 15, when he applied for a dishwasher position at a country house hotel in the Trossachs, after showing an affinity for Home Economics in school – and ended up as the chef. "It was in an amazing location, and everything we got in was really local," Gary remembers. "We had a lot of wild game that was shot, there was a lot of fish that was handed in... I was boning out stags and plucking pheasants and grouse and all that at 15."

The experience was an "amazing foundation" for a career that has gone from strength to strength. Gary was Head Chef of a restaurant when only aged 20, and head-hunted by Glasgow Museums to run their kitchens a few years later. He then went on to open more than 80 restaurants from scratch, not to mention win countless awards, both nationally and globally. He was appointed Scotland's first National Chef in 2017, released his first cookbook in 2019, and is also the Senior Chef Lecturer at The City of Glasgow College.

For the teenager who loved Home Economics, it's a dream career. "My whole job now is bonkers, it really is. That's the thing about the food industry, it's ever-evolving, and you just never know what's around the corner. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd be getting stopped in the street for selfies."

And despite all his career adventures and awards, the Scottish islands still surprise him – both in terms of their landscape, and their food. "I've done a lot of travelling, and a lot of travelling in Scotland, and it's still excites me when I turn a corner [in the islands]. It's awesome," he says, adding that when it comes to Scottish island produce, "getting that connection with the people that catch it and make it and produce it and work every day with it is really special."