

College Faces

Jimmy Hinton
Head Chef

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DONNA FORD



Food is
evolving
all the time



Cooking up a storm

Over the summer vacation, a new kitchen has been installed at Corpus. We asked Jimmy Hinton for his reaction.

Could you tell us a bit about how you came into your current role and your vision for Corpus cuisine?

I have worked at Corpus for just over four years. I arrived with the job title of Second Chef with a view to succeeding the then Manciple, Mike Curran. At the time, it was a bit of a sideways step for me but I saw it as a way in to a much-coveted role – running a College kitchen. I worked with Mike for three years and am just coming to the end of my first year in charge. It has been a challenge trying to change the team's mindset and I have enjoyed putting my own stamp on things. My aim is for Corpus to have the best College kitchen in Oxford. There is a lot of competition amongst the College Chefs; many of us have Instagram accounts so that we can show what we are doing.

The kitchens have been completely renovated and re-equipped this year. What particular improvements have worked well?

The new kitchen has provided us with equipment far superior to what we had before. We now have a Pressurised Bratt Pan and a Thermo Mix Heated Blender for making crème anglaise. New crockery has helped improve presentation. Our cooking is more precise and our results are better. We have been able to introduce new cooking techniques – dehydrating, cooking sous vide – and I now feel I can expand the menus. I am looking around the globe for new ideas and new techniques. For example, yesterday we cooked Ethiopian stew, which was extremely well received.

Do you have a particular food philosophy?

Yes. I use fresh ingredients. Bulk cooking is fantastic but I particularly enjoy planning the high-end plated dinners. My aim is always to be innovative and to produce the best. Corpus is really friendly and both students and Fellows are engaged with the food. We get a lot of complimentary emails. I believe in a calm kitchen. It is my job to lead by example. I expect high standards and I make sure to give as much praise as possible in return. Food is evolving all the time. I am gradually changing the culture in the kitchen to one of innovation. I encourage my chefs to make suggestions and I accommodate new ideas. My Second Chef does a lot of menu planning as well. One of the constraints of my job is that I have to spend more time in the office than I would like. The Second Chef is in the Office on Wednesdays so that I can cook – Wednesday night is one of the College Guest Nights.

What are the challenges of catering for such a wide range of events from student breakfasts to presidential dinners?

I particularly enjoy using the range of skills required when catering for the needs of every member of an Oxford College. Menu planning is key. For the student menus, the limitations are largely affordability, but it is not difficult to offset an expensive item on the menu against a less costly one.

It seems that over the past ten years there has been an increasing awareness of the need to cater for special diets. How has this affected your menu planning?

On one occasion last term, we had a formal hall attended by 84 people with 24 different dietary requirements. It is all about trying to condense those into two or three different dishes at any particular meal. The students are increasingly aware of what they are eating. The trend is towards healthy eating rather than quantity – we have just introduced fresh smoothies at breakfast. At both lunch and dinner, the students now have a choice of two meat dishes, one vegetarian and one vegan dish, all variations of one another and the student food rep receives a weekly menu which is circulated to the JCR and MCR. Keeping up to date with new food types is especially important. We use a lot of tofu, tempeh, seitan and vegan bacon. Food intolerances are an important concern as the consequences can be so serious. We use no peanuts and we are aiming at a nut-free kitchen. Particular care has to be taken for Coeliacs – having a separate gluten-free fryer and toaster, prepping in a separate area to avoid cross contamination.

Does cooking in an Oxford College offer the same satisfactions as working in a commercial kitchen?

Emphatically yes. The challenges are rather different, but we treat all our Corpus diners as we would the most discerning customers.