



The Chefs



The interest among chefs around the world, from Rene Redzepi in Denmark to Alex Atala in Brazil, in exploring a sense of place in their cooking continues to grow. Tapping into this movement, hotelier Andrew Wildsmith's new Forest Side country house hotel offers a truly Cumbrian experience, from the idyllic location to the food, supported by a kitchen garden and 45 acres of woodland. Jenny Linford finds out more.

Kevin Tickle - Forest Side



Kevin Tickle

King of the forest



FOREST SIDE
Grasmere, Ambleside,
LA22 9RN

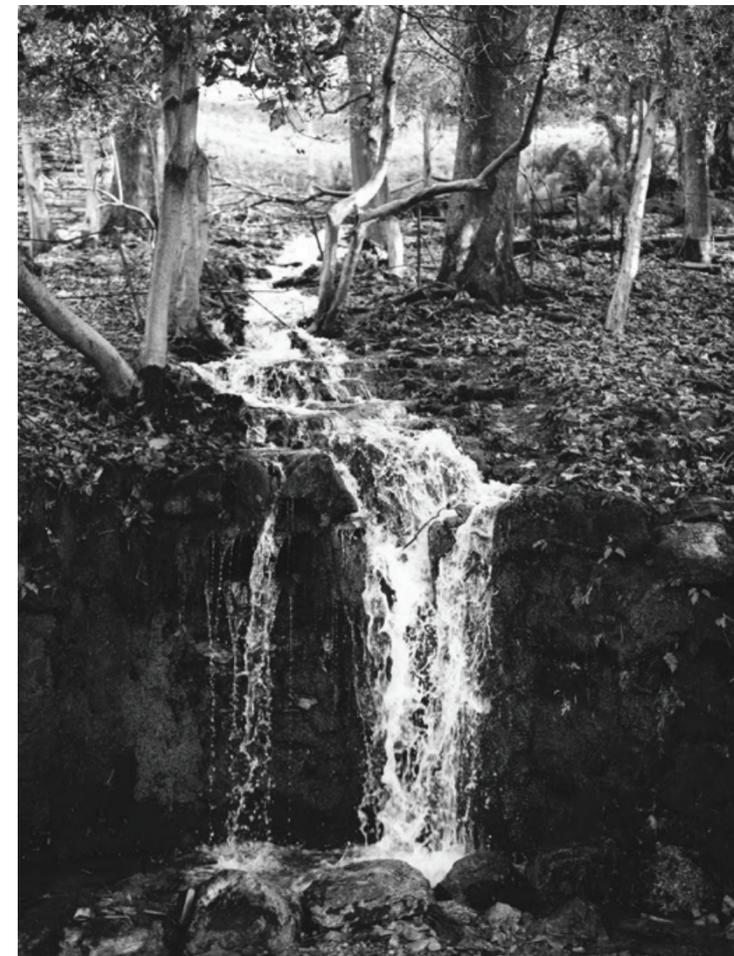
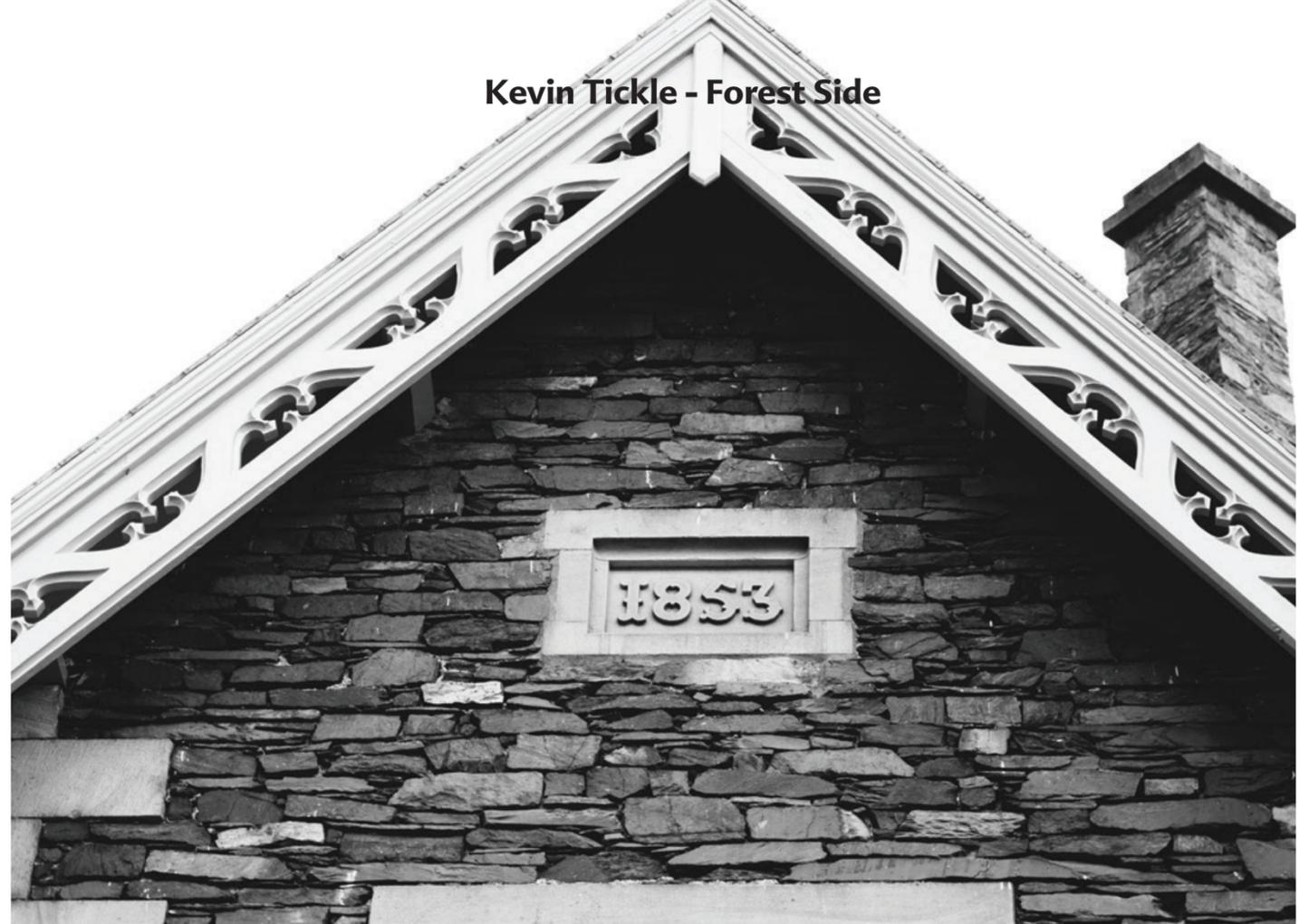
The Chefs



The food, of course, will be an important aspect of Forest Side's offer. Fittingly for this Cumbrian enterprise, Cumbrian born-and-bred chef Kevin Tickle will be cooking at Forest Side, expressing the landscape around him through his food. Growing up as he did in Kirby-in-Furness, Tickle had a rural childhood, exploring the countryside and hunting and fishing from an early age. "Being by the coast I did a lot of sea fishing," he reminisced happily. "The Walney Channel off Barrow is really good for plaice. You get a good amount of cod – some fair-sized ones there too. The waves are a bit rougher on the other side of the island so you get a lot of migrating bass coming there, some decent-sized sea bass." This intimate, deep-rooted, genuine knowledge of the local landscape – an understanding of the local geography and how it affects what grows or lives there – is an important influence on Tickle's cooking at Forest Side.

Tickle's career as a chef has retained and shaped that boyhood connectivity to a sense of place, seeing him work in the area. Having studied at Kendal College, he took a job as a commis at the Michelin-starred Sharrow Bay Hotel at Ullswater, a legendary Lake District institution. "It was amazing working there because a lot of chefs now don't have that classical training. My training was in classic French cooking and it does influence the way I work. Anyone can cook something perfectly in a water bath, but having the knowledge to do it and feel a bit of fish and meat with your fingers and understand how cooked it is by touching that's very important to me and is something I will be teaching my junior chefs here." After a period at Gilpin Hotel at Windermere, Tickle began working for Simon Rogan at L'Enclume, a seminal experience and a formative one. "Simon would go up and pick his stuff at the farm and I thought, Wow, we've got somewhere we can go and pick! I've never

Kevin Tickle - Forest Side



The Chefs



Kevin Tickle - Forest Side



had that in my career before. Simon was sustaining the restaurant with what he grew. After that, I don't think I could go back to not having a kitchen garden!"

It was during his time at L'Enclume that Tickle took on the role of Head Forager for the acclaimed restaurant, a tribute to his genuine interest in hunting out edible plants in the landscape. "I've always been interested in plants and herbs from an early age; I had the foraging bug from when I was very young." Rogan had initially used a foraging company, but was disappointed with the low quality of the products, especially given what he was paying. "That's how it started. I'd say do you want me to get some for you. It took off to the point where I supplied every single foraged item for Simon's dishes. I used to work ridiculous hours," Tickle laughs. "I'd get up before the sun was up to get to the destination. Sometimes I'd travel 40 minutes to the coast to get coastal herbs; there was the real pressure of a deadline. I'd find things like beefsteak fungus, very hard to find as they don't necessarily come back to the same patch each year." Doing thorough research on what can be safely eaten is important, Tickle emphasises. There were items, such as coltsfoot flowers, which commercial foragers wouldn't pick because of the time involved. "I looked at what the foragers were getting,

then took it up to the next level, read up on things to find out what was edible. There were around 80 items I could harvest at each stage of the season."

A deep attachment to L'Enclume saw Tickle stay there for eight years, but when Simon Rogan offered him the job as Head Chef at Rogan & Co in Cartmel for the second time, Tickle knew he had to move on. "It was time needed to take the step up to Head Chef," he said simply. Working at Rogan & Co gave Tickle the opportunity to create his own dishes but also offered valuable experience in managing a kitchen team. At Forest Side, he has 12 chefs working for him, which he feels is perfect. "I don't want an over-sized team. I like to keep it personal; that's the way I like to work. You spend more time with them and bond with them better if it's a smaller team."

Central to the food offer at Forest Side is the kitchen garden, run by Head Gardener Catherine Walsh, whom he knew from Simon's farm. "We have a great relationship; she knows what I like, and I know what she likes." During the period before The Forest Side opened, Tickle and his chefs spent a lot of time working hard to build the kitchen garden. "My pastry chef has been taught how to drive a digger!" They have managed to fit a lot into the garden: 160 beds, two polytunnels and a greenhouse. Much

work has gone into trialling crops to see which vegetable varieties will do best in the location. Tickle's satisfaction in being able to use crops he and his team have grown is evident. "When you've grown something, you look at it and it brings an element of pleasure because you know the hard work which went into getting that. We're putting in the fruit trees and I'm really looking forward to being able to pick from them in a couple of years' time."

Given his extensive experience, foraging, naturally, also plays a part in Tickle's own menu at the restaurant at Forest Side and he's been training his team in the skills. "It's great being able to step out of my kitchen door, and go into our 45 acres of woodland and find what I want within an hour, rather than having to make a long journey" he says happily. "This area is great for mushrooms." Foraging, naturally, goes hand in hand with preserving. "We do a lot of fermenting and preserving. We'll out and get ten kilos of damsons, use some on the menu, turn them into wine, gin, make a sorbet from them or pickle them. The great thing about all this preserving is it makes my life a hell of a lot easier when we get to winter. If you have a preserve with a good pickled flavour it really make the difference between a boring winter menu and an exciting one."

Working with local food producers is something Tickle is committed to doing and feels strongly about. "A lot of our meat comes from local producers. A Herdwick supplier is actually doing his lambing in our front field; we'll get the lambs off him. We're using local producers for the right reasons," he emphasises firmly, "not because it's fashionable, but because we want to support small, independent businesses that are struggling. We've had a lot of big hits over the years in the rural community – a lot of farms have gone down. It's important to do what we can to support them, otherwise we'll lose this fantastic way of life."

Tickle relishes the constraints that cooking seasonally presents. "If you are truly seasonal you only have things for a short period of time so you respect them and get excited by them." At Forest Side, he will be offering both tasting and a la carte menus based on this approach. "My food is very clean and crisp, very seasonal, and sourced locally where possible. Trends come and go, but the one thing that's never going to change is cooking based on the quality of the ingredients and keeping it simple. At the end of the day, it's the quality of the veg, the quality of the meat and the passion you're putting into it. That will never go out of fashion."