

The Chefs



# Will Holland

Restaurant in the waves

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**COAST**  
Coppet Hall Beach,  
Saundersfoot, SA69 9AJ

Will Holland - Coast



The last few years have been full of change for Will Holland. Having gained a Michelin star as Head Chef of Ludlow's La Becasse, working for Alan Murchison, he moved on to pastures new. Jenny Linford finds out more from this talented chef.

## The Chefs

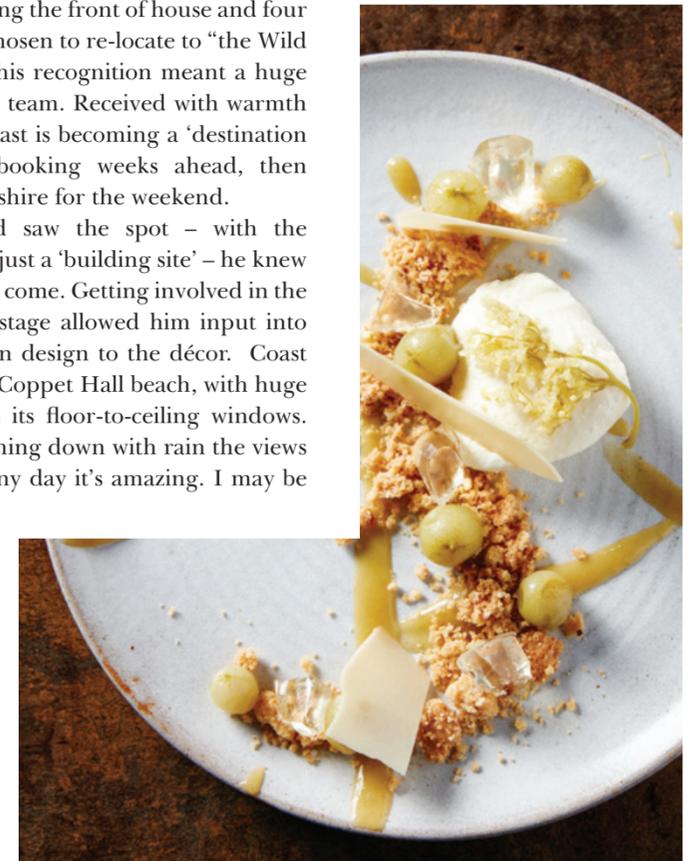


## Will Holland - Coast



**H**e has now become a chef patron, setting up his own restaurant, Coast, in a remote seaside location in Wales, moving from the world of fine dining to offering simpler cuisine in a 65 cover establishment with a relaxed atmosphere. Holland, however, has absolutely relished both the changes and the challenges they've brought. "Coming here to set up Coast felt right. It was a new build, a brand new restaurant, a massive blank canvas which I could really make my own. I'd spent all my career in Michelin-starred, high-end fine dining – classic French and British restaurants - and I wanted to do something different. I was given absolute creative freedom with Coast and that's what sealed the deal." Having opened in April 2014, his bold move was vindicated by the 2015 AA Guide award for 'Restaurant of the Year for Wales' – "it just blew us away," he says simply. With his wife Kamila, running the front of house and four of his chefs having loyally chosen to re-locate to "the Wild West of Wales" with him, this recognition meant a huge amount to Holland and his team. Received with warmth by the local community, Coast is becoming a 'destination restaurant', with people booking weeks ahead, then travelling to visit Pembrokeshire for the weekend.

As soon as Holland saw the spot – with the restaurant at that stage still just a 'building site' – he knew this was where he wanted to come. Getting involved in the development at that early stage allowed him input into everything from the kitchen design to the décor. Coast looks out over the sands of Coppet Hall beach, with huge views of sea and sky from its floor-to-ceiling windows. "Even on days when it's lashing down with rain the views are stunning, but on a sunny day it's amazing. I may be



biased, but there are not many restaurants with a location like it.” Having a beautiful but remote natural setting for a restaurant brings with it, of course, economic challenges. Having traded for over a year at Coast, Holland has experienced for himself the pendulum swings of seaside business. “I’d expected it to be very seasonal, but until you actually live it you don’t understand. Over the August Bank Holiday weekend if we had 500 seats we’d fill them all, but on a weekend in January we might just have 5 tables in.” Despite the footfall issues, Coast trades as a year-round business, with nine chefs in the kitchen during the busy summer period, when they regularly do 200 covers a day, pared back to five chefs in the quiet winter period.

Holland’s own career reflects his absolute commitment to learning the craft of being a chef from a very early age. At school he did home economics, the only boy in a class of girls. “All the lads at school thought I was gay because I wanted to cook! It was really unusual. Now I teach cookery classes at the local school and there are lots of boys and they all put on pink aprons and don’t have problem with it; times have changed.” Having worked in a local butchers, he did work experience at the Swallow Royal Hotel in his native Bristol. “It was the first time I’d stepped inside a professional kitchen; I fell in love with the whole thing straight away. I remember the camaraderie, the sense of brotherhood in the kitchen. I remember the adrenalin and buzz of service to this day.” After studying catering at Bristol College he went to work for the Michelin starred Homewood Park, Bath under Head Chef Gary Jones, a seminal experience. “I had a real 17-year-old cockiness about me because I’d been good at college, but I suddenly realised that I wasn’t very good at all!” laughs Holland. “I really started at the bottom – was given all the lesser jobs from each section. It was a real solid grounding. I loved the amount of passion, dedication that went into every single item of food that went on every plate. Today young chefs finish college and want success instantly, without putting the hard graft in. It doesn’t work like that.”

Working under Mark Raffin at Gravetye Manor in Sussex gave him an important insight into the value of working with truly seasonal, locally-grown produce. Long before the current fashion for ‘farm to fork’ cuisine, Gravetye had a huge, lovingly maintained walled kitchen garden. “I learnt how to work with the kitchen gardeners. I’m a cook, not a farmer; these guys knew a lot more than I did about what they grew. So I learnt that it’s not about picking up a phone to a supplier at Covent Garden, but talking to a gardener who tells me that next week there will be a bumper load of beetroot – sweet as anything – so

you design dishes around what is really in season, really local. I loved it.”

With his next move to Alan Murchison’s L’Ortolan in Berkshire, Holland’s career took a major step forward. “I went in as a sous-chef and came out as a Head Chef. Alan gave me huge opportunities, for which I’m very grateful. He taught me the art of kitchen management, to understand that it’s not just about the food on the plate, that you train the front of house staff about the dishes. His eye for detail was amazing. He taught me that consistency is key.” Such was Murchison’s faith in Holland, that he set him up as Head Chef in his second restaurant La Becasse in Ludlow, which opened in 2007. “It was petrifying and exciting, a huge honour. I earned my own Michelin star when I was 29 years old, 18 months after we’d opened the restaurant. It felt incredible,” he laughs.

Looking back on the progress of his career, Holland pays tribute to a number of chefs who acted as his mentors en route: Gary Jones, Mark Raffin, and Alan Murchison. “Chefs like Gary are father figures; they’re not just teaching you how to cook. Gary taught me the importance of respect, of discipline – it was almost army-like. I’m forever grateful to Gary Jones for the kick up the arse he gave me!” Holland, one feels, attracted mentors through his genuine willingness to learn, to work hard as well as his culinary talents. “If a chef asked me to do something, the answer would be ‘yes’. Now I’m the boss, with chefs working under me. I think it’s real give and take. As a young chef you give hard work, loyalty and respect and you take education, grounding and learning. It’s a partnership.”

The fish and seafood-centric menu at Coast reflects Holland’s considerable experience in the world of haute cuisine. “The food appears to be very simple on the plate. We take amazing fish from the sea in front of the restaurant, we treat it with respect, we cook it properly and serve it with a simple garnish. The backbone, the structure and the foundation of all the dishes we do are very classical.” Having been inspired by working with the kitchen gardeners at Gravetye, Holland has set up his own kitchen garden, just a few miles inland, providing him with fresh produce from herbs to vegetables. “We do things properly. We might do 200 covers a day in summer but we still make every single piece of our bread, make all our own ice cream, our petit fours, the crackers we serve with the cheese.” Holland’s pride and satisfaction at what he and his team at Coast achieve shines through. This is a chef still very much in love with what he does.