

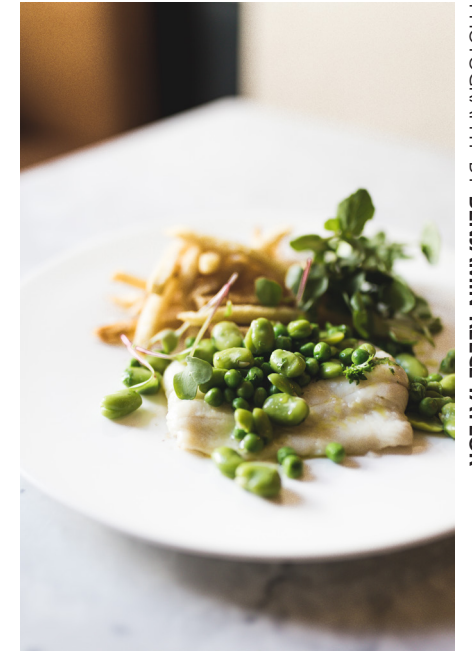
MEET THE CHIEF

Gabor Katona at Castle House Hotel

Gabor Katona's earliest memories are of his grandparents, mother and father in the kitchen cooking for the family and helping his mother make her fresh bread and sponge cakes. Like most children, he loved licking the bowl clean, so much so that when, on one occasion, he was allowed to make his own sponge, he ate the whole mixture!

Born in Hungary, Gabor's early years were spent on a farm, where he learned all about rearing chickens, pigs, cows and skinning rabbits. Later, his family moved to the city and at school he discovered a skill and love for carpentry. However, his life took a different route when, encouraged to attend a catering college, he discovered a deep passion for food and cooking. After graduating, Gabor spent his year's national service working as an army chef, cooking for regulars and five star generals alike.

Positions as a sous chef in a sports complex and as head chef in a well-known city restaurant followed before, at the age of 27 and learning that The Left Bank restaurant in Hereford was looking for staff, he moved to England. When The Left Bank closed, Gabor moved to Castle House Hotel, where he is now head chef, taking the baton from Claire Nicholls, and continuing the hotel's popular tasting menu and introducing a new fine dining menu in the evenings.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY BENJAMIN REECE-TAYLOR

‘I am inspired by anything, everything and everywhere! I feel like a volcano brimming and sizzling with ideas’

Do you have a favourite time of year for produce?

I love all four seasons! However, if I have to choose, then autumn would be my favourite time of year for produce. Autumn and winter offer so much in terms of robust flavours. I love the smell of roasted pumpkin, salt-baked celeriac, onion and apple soup with a twist of Herefordshire cider, roasted pear and walnut with Roquefort and so on.

Do you have a favourite menu?

My favourite menu would be starter: roast squash ravioli with Parmesan and kale. Main: Herefordshire rib eye (Ballingham beef preferably) with creamy mushroom and crispy onion on top. Pudding: Lemon Tart with fresh raspberries.

Do you get wow moments when you try new combinations – and does anything stand out as having been especially successful?

I am constantly thinking (even dreaming) of new menus. I am inspired by anything, everything and everywhere! I feel like a volcano brimming and sizzling with ideas. I have already introduced a new menu at Castle House which has been very well received. The lite bites and Buddha Bowls (main pic, left) have been really popular. I'm currently experimenting with a dish which combines coffee, orange, caramelised carrots and duck's liver, but one that has been very

successful is my honey and walnut cake with goat's cheese which is a bridge dish on the tasting menu.

Who is your cooking role model?

Tom Kerridge – he is normal and unusually self-effacing for a modern day celebrity chef.

Are there cookery books you regularly read? Which books would you advise home cooks to have on their shelves?

My go-to cookery book is the American chef Thomas Keller's *French Laundry*. Keller has a three star Michelin restaurant in California which constantly wins awards. I think Prue Leith is inspirational and a living legend. She came back to Castle House recently and we had a great chat. I like her new book, which features some of her favourite recipes. Also, I like any book by Ottolenghi, although you may have to pop out quite a few times to make sure you have all the ingredients!

What's the best thing about being a chef?

The best thing about being a chef is having the freedom to do what you want to do. I am lucky at Castle House because George (Watkins, general manager and owner) lets me run the kitchen while he runs the hotel.

He is very knowledgeable about food and we have great chats about the food we want to offer our guests, what's currently growing in our kitchen garden and what would I like

to grow. There are no boundaries, within reason, regarding creativity. Also, I get to make my own bread which I'm strangely addicted to. One thing I am really looking forward to is the opening of Castle House's new garden restaurant later this year, which is a really exciting prospect.

What's the worst thing about being a chef?

Well, one of the worst things is the hours, which are limiting and not very sociable. However, with a good team and forward planning you can make it work for you.

Sweet or savoury?

Savoury, but sometimes I get a sugar craving and my kids' sweets are very tempting.

Guilty food secret?

Apart from eating anything cooked by my mother, working late hours I have little or no time to eat. My guilty pleasure/secret is what I call a 'naughty sandwich'. Two slices of my sourdough bread with everything I can find in the fridge in between them.

Marmite – love it or hate it?

I don't really like it. It's ok mixed in with some good butter on my home-baked sourdough bread though. ①

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