

Catch of the day

Jim has landed the perfect business

by Katrina Ashford

There's nothing that Jim Cowie doesn't know about fish. Indeed, it could be said that he has the sea running in his veins.

"I've been in the fishing industry pretty much all my life," the chef/proprietor of the Captain's Galley in Scrabster told *Executive*.

"My father was a fisherman, as was his father. I was destined to go to sea.

"My mother had terrible problems getting me to go to school," he recalled. "It was all I ever wanted to do – go to sea."

But his family had different ideas. Jim's father

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insisted that he was not allowed to go to sea before learning a trade so he had something behind him.

"In those day, most apprenticeships were for five years," Jim went on.

"But I found out that the butchery apprenticeship was for just four years so got myself a post with a butcher in Dornoch.

"It meant I could get to sea a year earlier!"

It could be said that the gods were conspiring against Jim's seafaring ambitions because during the time he was serving his apprenticeship, his father left the sea and started in business marketing fish. And so Jim joined his father in the fish trade, never to set sail commercially as a fisherman.

That was in the 1960s.

But Jim's training wasn't to be wasted because when the old salmon station in Scrabster came up for sale in 2001, Jim and his wife had a spark of inspiration.

"When the piers at Scrabster were built up, the salmon run changed," Jim explained.

"There used to be two salmon stations here as well as one at Thurso and another at Dunnet.

"Some of the older people round here have fantastic stories of those days. You get really good vibes.

"We were given the opportunity to breathe life into it. The building wouldn't have lasted – the walls were green.

"But we're not the owners of this place," he declared modestly. "We're caretakers.

"If you pass it on better, you have contributed something."

Jim had a good feeling about the building, that it had seafood restaurant written all over it.

And given his success since opening, he was right.

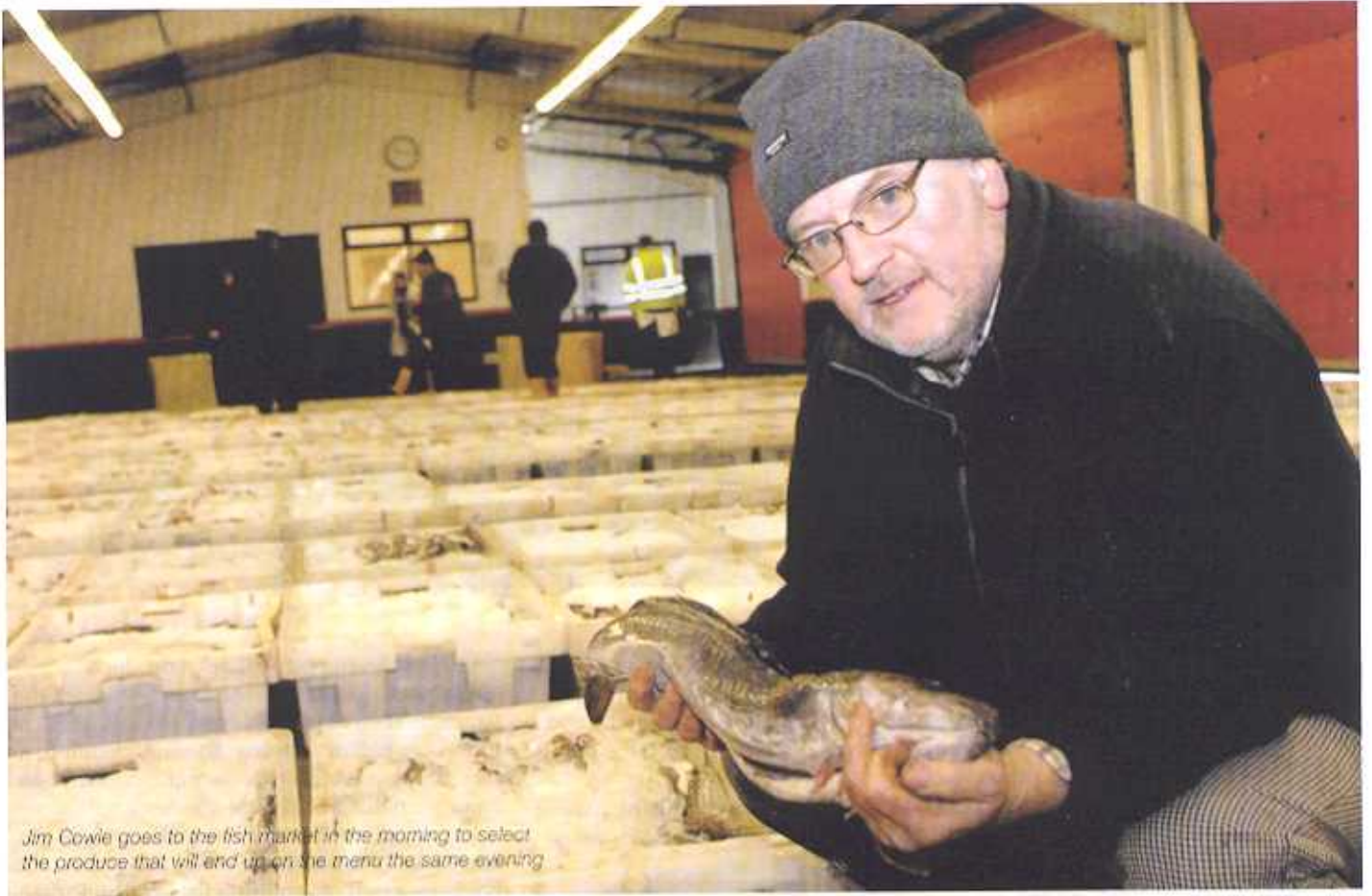
While the building was being renovated, Jim did a professional cook's course at the local college.

"I didn't want to go in with no knowledge," he said. "I looked, listened and learned."

With the fish market just yards from his



Pictures: Bobby Neilson



Jim Cowie goes to the fish market in the morning to select the produce that will end up on the menu the same evening





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restaurant, Jim is ideally placed to make the most of what is on offer.

Fresh and local are catchwords regularly used in the restaurant trade these days, but there aren't many chefs who can honestly say that they watched the boats come in, walked to the market and brought back the seafood for that night's menu just a few hours earlier.

There are generally around 10 types of fish used in an evening and around 20 over the course of a week. And until Jim has been to the market, he has no idea what's going to be on the menu that night, then he has to decide on the accompaniments!

"With seafood you have something over which you have no control," he continued. "Sometimes people phone to book for a party and want something specific and I have to say, 'sorry, I can't do that'.

But he takes it all in his stride.

"Over there is the market, that's where it's at," he smiled.

"Scrabster is geographically in a good situation. There are thousands of square miles of sea out on our doorstep - the Orkneys, Rockall, the Norwegian fishing grounds. All those different waters - and depths - so many species.

"Food's the start - not the chef. That to me is the real deal."

But Jim doesn't consider his earlier careers a waste of time.

"I do find that my business knowledge serves me as well as my cooking knowledge," he said.

"I feel that a chef with no business knowledge would really struggle. You've got to know portion control, costings, expenses and the like.

"The business side is so important; I'd say it's a 50:50 balance."

They say that behind every great man is a great woman and that is certainly the case at The Captain's Galley. Although, in reality, the woman is out in front.

Jim's wife Mary runs front of house at the restaurant.



Jim's wife Mary runs front of house at The Captain's Galley. The small window in the background is where the ice used to come in when the building was a salmon station

Sample menu

Entrées

Fish Cake - Galley's fish cake with melted leeks and fresh home made scampi

Langoustines - Local langoustines split and grilled with lime chilli butter

Shellfish Duo - Steamed spoons (razor clams) and mussels with garlic shallot butter

Sea Bass - Fillet of wild sea bass with sweet & sour cabbage and Oriental sauce

Main

Tusk & Catfish - Duo of catfish and tusk with leek mash, garlic sausage and creamed sweetcorn (scotash)

Saithe - Loin of saithe marinated in sweet miso with sesame steamed rice served with carrot and ginger emulsion

Cod - Roasted fillet of cod with Moroccan couscous, sweet pepper sauce vierge and crispy chorizo

Beef - Fillet of Caithness beef with haggis, celeriac puree, braised oxtail and port jus

Pudding

Pannacotta - Coconut pannacotta with coconut tuile

Chocolate Pudding - Galley's infamous hot chocolate pudding with vanilla ice cream

Crème Brûlée - Ginger crème brûlée with orange and armagnac soaked prunes and sesame tuile

Cheese - Selection of Highland cheeses with home baked oatcakes

With a background in nursing she's dealt with people all her working life and likens her vocation to nursing and mothering people.

"I feel strongly that the service is more important than the cooking," said Jim.

"I would put the overall experience at 35 per cent front of house.

"It's a good atmosphere. There are no egos here."

"It's like being on stage," said Mary. "Till the last person goes out of the door, you're the entertainer, that's the audience.

"Sometimes we're like Basil and Sybil," she laughed. "But it doesn't come through the kitchen door."

From the meet and greet to the nuts and pre-meal drink, through to dinner, Mary ensures that all the guests are dealt with professionally and efficiently.

But her talents don't stop there.

At the Cowies' home, she nurtures herbs and salads in their polytunnel, grows rhubarb in the garden and cultivates flowers such as nasturtiums for garnishes.

And ducks and hens are kept for eggs at the restaurant, too.

"I love that part of it," she told *Executive*. "Sometimes I go home and think, 'I wish I didn't have to go in tonight!'"

The herbs and salad leaves are cut fresh late at night or early in the morning, then put in the fridge to crisp.

"I'm always suspicious of the salads you get in the supermarkets which are there for three or four days," Jim said.

The Cowies have a very strict policy of sourcing their ingredients from within a 50-mile radius of the restaurant and use only what is in season. Supplies of meat come from local

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crofters and Jim has a keep creel containing crabs in the harbour.

Their strong ethical policy maintains a commitment towards all aspects of fish conservation and other environmental issues.

Fish are only used in season and from sustainable waters. They are so fresh that Jim doesn't need to cook them beyond medium.

"There's no need to fly fish half way round the world," Jim said. "There's a fish for every dish and a dish for every season."

Jim's passion for fish is clear and he loves to mix and match.

"Fish is so flexible," he went on,



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"You can combine two fish in a dish – spoons or scallops with a piece of fish on top, for example.

"You can't really do that with meats."

He also demonstrated how well fish goes with meat, cooking up a delicious sea bass with squid and chorizo sausage served with Moroccan couscous and sauce vierge as he chatted.

The Captain's Galley boasts an intimate eight tables, seating around 20 diners. Guests can enjoy their pre-dinner drinks in what used to be the bunkhouse for the salmon workers. It's tastefully decorated with comfy seats and a selection of fish paraphernalia – all done by Mary.

The dining room itself is where the salmon used to be stored. The small window at the top of the building is where the ice used to come in. Jim explained that locals would bring ice from their lochs in the winter and take it to the station. In the summer, when the salmon run started, it would still be frozen – the walls are several feet thick!

The restaurant may have only been open since 2002, but in that short time it has clocked up an array of prestigious awards including achieving gold in the Green Tourism Business Scheme, winning seafood chef of the year in the Seafood Awards 2007 and being runner-up in the seafood restaurant of the year category of the same awards.

"Seafood is what we know," Jim concluded. "Eating – and cooking – have to be fun.

"There is room for 3 Michelin Star restaurants, but for us, food is to be enjoyed for what it is."

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