



# Life on a **plate**

Carolyn Robb held the position of executive chef to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales for 11 years, before joining Chef's Larder in October of last year. Here she talks to Nicole Fleming about her pet project, food principles and passions.

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**What is Chef's Larder and what exactly is it going to do?**

Chef's Larder is part of The Al Seer Spinneys group and is a new venture set up in the spirit of entrepreneurship. We will provide services and products not presently available in Dubai. Our link with Spinneys has enabled us to research exactly what the consumer most needs and wants. Richard Thorne, general manager of Spinneys, stresses the importance of innovation in the

local market. We will have delicatessens within all the new Spinneys stores which, as well as stocking an exciting range of products, will provide a unique service to the customer. We will also be providing a high-quality service to hotels and restaurants, giving them access to an exclusive range of products and product information. The third part of the project is the training initiative that we are running with local hotels and resorts. ▶



**How will Chef's Larder differ from the delicatessens within existing Spinneys stores?**

The concept behind Chef's Larder is one of premium service, quality and innovation. We will deliver a very special service to the customer. This will include tastings of the products, product information, preparation advice and assistance with menu planning. Our staff will all be experts on the products that we offer and their potential uses. We will also be providing 'meal solutions' – ready meals with a difference. This is a concept not previously seen in Dubai, enabling consumers to entertain in their own home and serve fresh, gourmet meals with the minimum of preparation.

**Is Chef's Larder going to sell only unusual or difficult-to-find food?**

No, we have a carefully selected range of products with something for everyone, but the emphasis will be on quality. I think that perfection in the simplest things is the true sign of quality! What could be nicer than a bowl of fresh spaghetti with great olive oil, fresh tomato sauce and shavings of traditionally produced

Parmesan, finished off with a few fresh basil leaves? The gourmets among us might prefer their pasta dressed with fine truffle oil and topped with shavings of fresh truffle! Of course, we will have speciality products, but as well as that we will have a great selection of traditional foods and some fun items for gifts.

**You've been in Dubai only since October of last year. When do you expect Chef's Larder to be fully operational?**

The training programmes are already up and running. I'm doing a week's promotion in The Bray Restaurant at The Metropolitan Hotel from the second to the sixth of June. We're also doing a 10-day programme at Al Maha Desert Resort in the next few months. The delicatessens will open at the same time as the new Spinneys stores, with the first one opening in the autumn.

**What sort of approach are you taking when running the training programmes?**

Before compiling each programme, I spend time working with the kitchen and front-of-house teams in each venue to assess exactly what their

requirements are, so that we can tailor the training to their very specific needs. With a resort of the calibre of Al Maha, for example, the tuition will concentrate only on fine-tuning an already very slick service, and introducing new ideas and techniques with which the chefs are not familiar.

**How many people are going to be working with Chef's Larder?**

At the moment there are two of us but, once the delicatessens are open, we will have specially trained staff to provide customers with assistance and information. We will also be working closely with Spinneys staff.

**How did you come to be involved in Chef's Larder?**

One of the partners in Chef's Larder used to supply me with wild mushrooms for the Prince of Wales when I was cooking at Balmoral in Scotland. When I resigned from my position in the Royal household, he discussed the concept of Chef's Larder with me and suggested a visit to Dubai, and here I am!

**Had you been to Dubai before?**

Yes, I had accompanied the Prince of Wales on several state visits to the Middle East and had spent a couple of days here. Unfortunately, those trips were always too busy to allow for time to explore each location.

**Tell us a little about your background.**

I was born in South Africa. After studying languages at university I spent a few months working in a Swiss hotel (and learning to ski!). Once I had decided that a career in cooking was what I really wanted to pursue, I embarked on a Cordon Bleu diploma at the Tante Marie School of Cookery. My time there was very happy and made me realise just how passionate I am about good food!

**Carolyn, your previous job was obviously very high-profile.**

**How did you manage to get a job like that?**

On completion of my course, I was offered a position with Their Royal Highnesses The Duke and Duchess of Gloucester. I spent an enjoyable two years cooking for them at Kensington Palace, before moving to my new position in the household of TRH The Prince and Princess of Wales. Kensington Palace is home to several members of the Royal family, each with their own apartment.

**What exactly did your job with the Prince of Wales entail?**

I looked after all aspects of both the private and official entertaining. Initially, I cooked for both the Prince and Princess of Wales, and after their separation I cooked for His Royal Highness. We travelled a lot within the UK as well as abroad, so I had the opportunity to cook in a lot of different kitchens. I did the menu planning, sourcing of produce and preparation of meals.

**What was the nicest part of the job?**

From a cooking perspective, I had the opportunity to cook with the most fabulous produce, very freshly picked from the gardens at Highgrove. It's a great treat for any chef to have access to the finest ingredients. From a personal angle, I was very fortunate to have a boss who was so passionate about his food, from its production through to its presentation. His Royal Highness was always enormously appreciative, so it was a very rewarding job.

**For how long did you stay with the Prince of Wales?**

It's now hard to believe that I was there for 11 years! The time was full of opportunities and culinary challenges. Life in Dubai couldn't be more different from life in the Royal household, but I believe that Chef's Larder is a brilliant concept and I am enjoying life in Dubai!

**As someone who has cooked for one of the most high-profile people in the world, what do you cook for yourself?**

Jacket potatoes with cheese and salad are a favourite! Just as professional gardeners traditionally have messy gardens of their own, chefs tend not to cook when they don't have to. I enjoy a healthy diet with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and simple foods, especially Italian dishes. I do enjoy cooking a special meal when I have friends to visit.

**Finally, what do you think is the most important thing to remember when cooking?**

Begin with carefully selected produce, and remember – it doesn't need to be expensive to be good. I always look for locally grown produce. Keep it simple, prepare and cook it perfectly, and present it attractively – that way, you can't go wrong. ■