

Putting the passion into dining out

Pubs that offer fine dining and luxury accommodation, and city restaurants that aim to pass on their passion for food – **ABIGAIL SALTMARSH** continues our series on Norfolk's eating establishments.

Name: Flying Kiwi Inns

Signature style: Comfortable yet stylish pubs selling good, tasty food and offering accommodation

USP: Being prepared to go 'the extra mile' for customers

Signature dish: Water melon curry made with freshly caught Norfolk fish

In quiet Hingham, chef Chris Coubrough is helping hang pictures on the wall, deciding exactly where tables and chairs are to be positioned and ensure bars will be stocked with the right drinks come opening night.

The White Hart Hotel will be his fifth Norfolk venture – another fine dining establishment that will also eventually offer accommodation. Somewhere that serves good food made with fresh, local ingredients and that attracts residents and holiday makers alike.

"I have always said that doing this is not rocket science," said Chris, a New Zealander and TV chef known for his appearances on programmes such as ITV's Coastal Kitchen and Channel 4's Eating for Britain. "I try to offer good service and good food at restaurant prices. I am not trying to be either a Michelin-starred restaurant or a greasy spoon. I want my pubs to be stylish and comfortable, and to go the 'extra mile'."

He went on: "If someone wants to eat at 3pm or to sit out in the garden, then why shouldn't they? If they want coffee at 5pm then they should be able to have it."

"When they ring up, we need to make sure they know how to get here and that if they don't, we will send them a Google map. It is about going the extra mile wherever you can, and exceeding expectations."

Chris, who came over to the UK in the early 1990s, and worked in some top London kitchens, took over The Crown, at Wells, in 2002. He refurbished and relaunched it to offer 12 en-suite bedrooms and food ranging from traditional British favourites to dishes with influences from around the world.

He readily admits that, for the years following his success in the north Norfolk seaside town, high property prices and the booming economic climate were not conducive to the expansion of his business. And it was not until the smoking ban came into force, and many traditional pubs started to struggle, that his empire really began to grow.

"At that time a lot of these places were being run very differently by their owners, who had not perhaps thought about turning them into modern gastro pubs," he said. "I have come in and done a similar thing in all of mine – created restaurants, bars, snugs and outside eating areas – and filled a gap in the market."



Chris's second pub was The Crown Inn at East Rudham. He then went on to open The King's Head, at Letheringsett, The Ship Hotel, at Brancaster, and now The White Hart, at Hingham.

Today, he employs some 160 members of staff and his company, The Flying Kiwi Inns, has its own business headquarters in East Rudham.

The business may be growing rapidly, but Chris remains hands-on, making an appearance most days in all of his establishments, and still finding time to be in the kitchen and front of house.

"I try to spend as much time as possible in each place, maybe talking to customers, being behind the bar or in the kitchen. It is busy – lunch happens at 12pm in each place and I cannot be there in all of them at the same time – but what I can do is be in one place for lunch and another for dinner," he said.

HIGH-FLYING KIWI: Chris Coubrough, main picture, at his latest venture, The White Hart Hotel in Hingham. His other establishments are, above left, from top, The King's Head at Letheringsett, The Crown at Wells, The Ship Hotel at Brancaster and, above right, The Crown Inn at East Rudham.

"And for me it has been a question of getting good people to work with, and then keeping them with me."

He added: "My success is down to the people who work with me. Without them, I could not do this."

The White Hart at Hingham opens on Saturday, March 12. To start with, it will offer food and drink in its restaurant and bar areas, but Chris plans to set to work on the rest of the building as soon as possible, opening five en-suite bedrooms to hotel guests in the near future.

"People do seem to be looking forward to it opening. We have had lots of emails and within two minutes of announcing an opening date we were fully booked," he said.

He has already met local suppliers and producers in the area and is eager to put the feelers out and to get to know more as the business grows.

"Geographically, this is a new area for us but I felt there was a gap in the market," he said. "There were a couple of football-sized areas on my map of Norfolk where it made sense to do something like this."

Chris said that with more people now holidaying in the UK, and appreciating good food and drink, he was not ruling out expanding his empire yet further.

"I am keen on Norfolk and I will still keep my eye out for other places here but I will only do it if it is right," he stressed.

"I think a lot of people go wrong by having a certain total in mind that needs to be reached. I don't want to do that. If the right place comes up then I might go for it. If not, then five is a great number."

■ For more information on Chris's establishments visit www.flyingkiwiinns.co.uk