

## **Cheffed to bits**

**Adam Palmer is a man on a mission to change the face of healthy eating – and it looks very likely that he’s going to get his way. Sarah Clark tastes the evidence...**

I almost missed the opportunity to speak to Adam Palmer, executive chef at Champneys Health Resort in Tring. It seems he ‘forgot’! He’s the consummate workaholic, totally focussed on his art, providing food to tantalise the taste buds of discerning spa visitors. Adam is partly responsible for changing the image of spa food from that of the soggy lettuce leaf to the fantastic array of flavours it is now.

He arrived in Champneys drawing room at 30 minutes notice, still in his uniform. I felt obliged to confirm that I wouldn’t keep him long – apart from the fact he was obviously extremely busy in the kitchen, all Champneys staff had a lot to think about with the very recent takeover of the Champneys Group by the marauding Perdeu dynasty (The Perdeu family also owns Springs Health Hydro, Ragdale Hall and Forest Mere, and has recently added Inglewood Health Hydro to the list.)

Adam is an affable man, and full of admirable enthusiasm for his work. He joined Champneys in 1987 and progressed to Head Chef within two years. He has also been credited with ‘changing the life’ of Lord Thurso, the outgoing owner, converting him to healthy cuisine, and reducing his weight by an amazing three and a half stone in the process. He is quoted as saying of Adam’s food, “It looks good, tastes good and by golly it does you good!”

I complimented Adam on the previous evening’s offerings – seared monkfish on a bed of wild rice, accompanied with wok-fried vegetables. Never had healthy eating seemed so easy. “I just take ordinary, restaurant style dishes, and I ‘Champnify them” he shrugged. ‘Champnifying’ a standard dish is no mean feat, but to Adam it’s a passion, and his love of food means that cottage cheese and dry crisp breads are unlikely to feature on any menu while the current executive chef remains in residence.

Once the dish has been reduced in fat, sugar and salt, and salt is Adam’s particular bug bear; “The message is beginning to get through but we still consume far too much” it’s presented with an enticing selection of vegetables. He likes to pamper the guests, and doesn’t believe in over-zealous application of anti-fat principles by any means. “We’re in the business of entertainment as well as health – and I want people to enjoy their meals”

**CONTINUES**

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Adam's philosophy is to do away with obsessive calorie counting, and focus instead on the benefits of food. Every menu item is rated according to total fat, beneficial fats, such as oily fish, and fibre content. Adam is withering in his opinions about the recent popularity of high protein, low carbohydrate regimes, dismissing them as unhealthy. "I have no doubt that people will lose weight on this type of diet, but it's not safe!" he exclaimed. "We only need around two ounces of protein per day, for a start."

Having revamped Champneys kitchens, and gone some way towards introducing spa-style cooking to the masses with two successful recipe books (move over Jamie Oliver, and take your cream and butter with you) Adam has now set his sights on revolutionising the high street. He's been working with a very well known supermarket on a range of spa meals. All are based on the Champneys principles of good, delicious, healthy dishes, and he expects the range to be a success.

Adam is also working on a 'Spa Food Bible' extolling the virtues of healthy eating, and explaining basic 'Champnified' cooking. "People aren't taught home economics any more, they don't know how to cook!" he laughs. "They watch the TV cooks, buy the glamorous cook books, and leave them on the coffee table while they eat their ready meals."

So how does he see the future of healthy eating? "I have a great idea for supermarkets" he smiles. His theory is that we would all love to cook healthy meals really, but just don't have the time or the inclination. The solution? "Selling fresh, ready bagged ingredients separately, to make up a balanced meal." I asked him to elaborate. "Well, you'd have a protein, a carbohydrate, ready prepared vegetables, and your fresh sauce. All the customer would have to do is put it together and heat it up!" He's convinced that it won't be long before the ready meals section of the local superstore is heaving with gourmet meals that you cook yourself from fresh ingredients. But, he adds, "It's going to be in the premium price range...."

Just like Champneys itself – but by golly it's good for you...

**ENDS**