



Joyce James & Matt Pitman

Is Joyce Britain's Oldest Working Chef?

Joyce James has been fulltime chef at the Benett Arms, Semley for 45 years. Nothing very remarkable about that perhaps - except Joyce is 80 and is still slaving over the same hot stove she always has, making her arguably Britain's oldest working chef.

Born and bred in Semley, and still married to retired farmer Ralph, Joyce began working at the pub in 1966 when her son Chris, who still lives in the area was just 10.

"The publicans at the time, John & Jenny Hynde wanted someone to help in the kitchen and I've been here ever since," she said. Most of her time as the Benett's resident chef was spent under Joe Duthie, landlord for some 40 years before his retirement in 2006 and under whom Joyce's cooking won the pub Egon Ronay recognition.

Entirely self-taught, she specialises in "good old traditional English cooking" but she can also turn out Mediterranean fare to order such as her famous chicken liver pate, lasagne and Greek cheese pie.

"I listen to what people want. If they want it I'll make it. I make all the dishes myself, nothing is ready-made. The only thing different is young Matt helps me these days."

'Young Matt' is 19-year -old Matt Pitman, a local boy who came to the Benett straight from school and has been helping Joyce in the kitchen ever since.

He hopes to carry on when Joyce decides she's had enough but there seems little sign of that just yet. She still works fulltime, including Sundays, and says she'll carry on "as long as my health lets me."

Pubs - like landlords - change (the present landlord is Amy Lanchester), but at Semley's Benett - not to be confused with the pub of the same name in Tisbury - one thing never ever changes: the lady in the kitchen who is possibly Britain's oldest working chef.

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Original Article written by Richard Thomas