**By Lorraine Mallinder**

**Lorna McNee**

Lorna McNee is a proper *teuchter* – that’s someone from the remote Scottish Highlands to you. Growing up in the tiny village of Dallas in the northeast, there was absolutely nothing to suggest she might one day become a culinary superstar.

Ask most chefs about their inspirations and they’ll wax on about the home cooking of childhood, made with the freshest produce straight from their back garden. But not McNee, who had an unremarkable pie-beans-and-mash type upbringing.

Yet here she is, at the top of a highly competitive game. Scotland’s only female Michelin-starred chef, no less. She’s come a long way from her first job as a kitchen porter in a local Italian restaurant. When the boss asked if she enjoyed it, she told him straight up that it wasn’t what she wanted to do.

Years later, the lassie from Dallas is head chef at Cail Bruich in Glasgow, creating some of the most exquisite dishes in the British Isles. Isle of Skye langoustine, west coast crab, Exmoor caviar, Wye Valley asparagus, are just some of the items gracing the menu.

Her ethos is simple: to ensure her food ‘hits everywhere’, from the front of the mouth to the back of the throat. Imagine for a moment her wild mushrooms on toast, covered in a cream Madeira sauce with truffle, black garlic and lemon adding sweetness and acidity. Every bite is a ‘full mouthful’, she says.

Her journey started after secondary school. Having failed to get into photography school, she stumbled onto a catering course at Moray College in Elgin. Recognising her flair, one of her lecturers encouraged her to try some fine dining.

They ended up at the Michelin-starred Restaurant Andrew Fairlie in Gleneagles. Dining on sea urchin risotto, her tastebuds exploded into life. Finally, she had understood what good food could taste like.

She cut her teeth at that same restaurant. After three days of work experience, she plucked up

the courage to ask Mr Fairlie himself for a job. Initially sceptical owing to her lack of experience, he advised her to go away and think about it for a week.

But McNee knew. And so she ended up working for one of the most inspirational characters in the business, a man known for his kindness and generosity. When Fairlie passed away in 2019, the team pulled together to retain the restaurant’s two Michelin stars, in honour of their beloved boss.

‘At Andrew Fairlie’s, you become a real person,’ says McNee. ‘You learn lots of life skills. It’s about being a leader and an individual.’

You might say she was well equipped for her next challenge, running her own kitchen at Cail Bruich. At the beginning of this year, she received a call from Michelin, ostensibly to interview her about the impact of the pandemic. It was only at the end of the call that she was informed she’d been awarded a star.

It was an emotional moment, the culmination of years of hard work. But McNee didn’t let the success go to her head. ‘When guests tell you how much they’ve enjoyed it and what a great night they’ve had, that’s the real winner,’ she says. Spoken like a true *teuchter*!

**CURED SCOTTISH SALMON**

**INGREDIENTS**

400g salmon steak

100g salt

200g water

200g rice wine vinegar

Juice of 1 lemon

3 tbsp sugar

1 tbsp cumin seeds

**METHOD**

Cover the salmon with all the salt and leave it for 20 minutes. Toast the cumin seeds in a pan to release the oils and then add the lemon juice, sugar, water and rice wine vinegar. Warm in a pan until the sugar has dissolved, cool down until completely cold. Place the salmon in the wet cure (liquid you have just made) for 40 minutes. Dry on a towel once cured and slice the salmon.