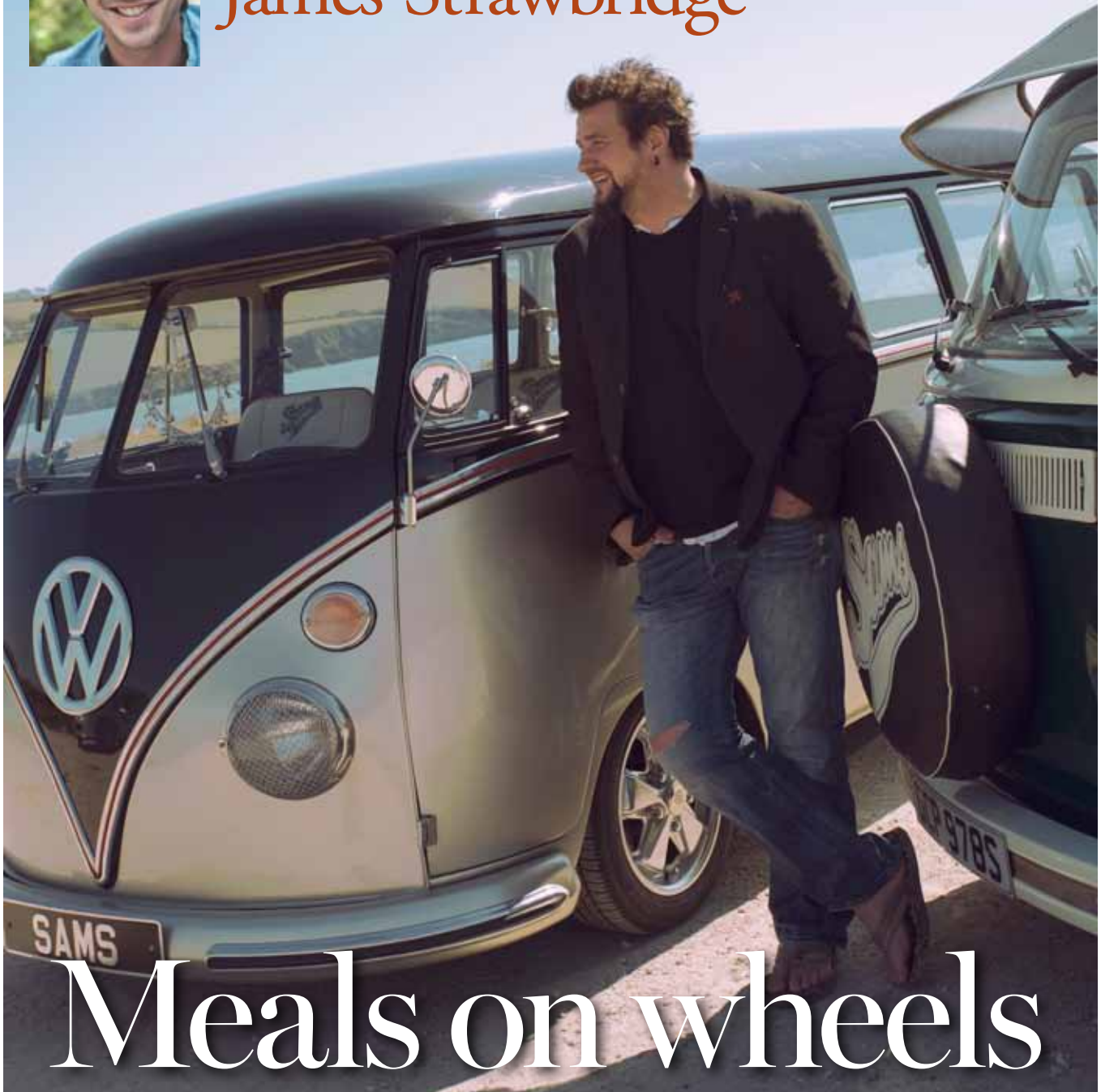




A Taste of Cornwall Life with **James Strawbridge**



Meals on wheels

Welcome to my town! Fowey is a beautiful haven on the Cornish Riviera, home to both the wealthy gentry and proper Cornish locals alike.

It's a boaty, foodie, and literary hidden gem...

Burgers and chips or pizza used to conjure up images of poor quality junk food and greasy-spoons, but over the years there has been a growing scene for fast-food lovers with a conscience. I count myself as a major fan of the genre - local produce and seasonal ingredients served up with

style, fries and no frills - indulgent comfort food with a strong American influence. This is why I admire Mr Sam Sixton - for giving me cheeseburgers to die for, pizza that leaves you guilt-free and now pop-up menus with a host of great food to enjoy on the beach - all with a killer soundtrack.

Sam founded Sam's in Fowey back in 1988 and has more than 25 years experience in the food industry. I met him to discuss the inspiration behind the relaxed burger joint and how his vision for 'simple and delicious' food has grown into a surf-dudes empire with a convoy of rock 'n' roll VW vans.

Sam's

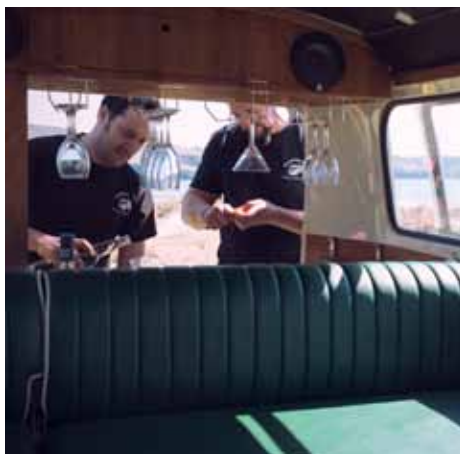
Sam had no real plans to open a chain of places to eat and his approach has been that 'if the right place opens up we'll have a look at it'. At various stages he's owned a chippy in Fowey; previously Sam's Other Plaice, a tearoom called Samuels and his dad ran a bakery called SAM's Deli. It's not surprising that he comes from a foodie family where his parents were both publicans - running businesses that sold both beer and were also very foodie. When I asked him if he would describe himself as a chef, he explains how he has always worked in kitchens, but is not chef-trained and that 'good restaurants are kitchen-led'. Also Sam 'doesn't like the word foody' but he's 'passionate about food and likes to deliver the whole package'. After all a plate of food without the service and atmosphere, however delicious, is just like eating at home.

"It started up as a burger joint where they 'just dabbled with scallops' and the fish thing grew"

As you can imagine Sam's doesn't fit with the standard restaurant you'd expect to find in a Cornish seaside town. 'Fowey used to be very pasty and chips, bus holidays', the traditional type of tourist town. He explains that amongst other things, with Nathan Outlaw being based in the town during his growing years, there became a shift in the food interest. Sam describes how 'it started up as a burger joint' where they 'just dabbled with scallops and the fish thing grew'. Despite some fantastic seafood now available on the menu he admits that 'fine dining is not really my bag'. Sam's on the Beach continues the honest focus on bold flavours and good ingredients. He tells me



Far left and here: Sam Sixton
Below: Sam's also has a converted VW camper with its own cocktail bar (Photos: Charlotte Strawbridge)



how Polkerris came about as a pizza place simply because there was no power, so a wood fired pizza oven was the way forward. This organic approach to food and restaurants he sums up as 'falling into place'.

I have a self-confessed love of branding and am always interested in how a place comes up with its image so I also asked Sam about where it all started. He explains that they were 'sat talking about what we're going to call it and his parents pushed it.' Despite the obvious danger of naming a place after yourself - like a recipe

for ego-disaster, Sam remains very humble about it all and was eventually convinced. I think it works as a great name with a cool logo that captures the very Cheers-y style. The floral logo was courtesy of an american designer who was staying with them at the time and hasn't changed since. Sam aims for there to be 'something for everybody - from two years to 80 years old, poor to rich'. The other unique aspect is that the staff wear shorts and flip-flops - so don't feel you have to dress up for the occasion of eating out. He wants people to be >



Sam's growing convoy of VW vans (Photo: Charlotte Strawbridge)

comfortable and relax.

Sam is 'not into the fancy side of food' but he does tell me that 'I eat out as much as I can, for inspiration, market research and I enjoy it - all sorts of different establishments.' I love the fact that Sam has corrected the way that a lot of chefs don't eat out anywhere by actually paying for his guys to go eat out for meals. It's not really a surprise then that he won 2013 Employer of the Year award for Cornwall.

Holiday season

When I asked Sam what was the greatest success so far he said he's 'most proud of working with guys that I've worked with since we've opened. The longevity of staff and fun times we've had in there.' He also reveals that seasonality has changed over the years. In the early days Fowey was dead from November to March so the benefit was that he had five ski-seasons. The downside, that it was 'not very good for keeping staff on'. 'Basically after the Eden Project there was a lot more going on all year round and Cornwall also has gained a growing reputation for good food. Gone are the days of streaking around town naked in winter, when you knew you wouldn't see anybody...' by naked we can assume that they were still wearing flip-flops?!

Where's the party?

If you want a quality party with a cocktail bar and lounge, then the idea of booking an evening at Sam's restaurant sounds cool but after enquiries from customers it proved too expensive and difficult to organise. This was in part how the idea grew to go mobile, hit the road and kick-start the trendy food truck scene here in Cornwall (shameless plug here - also check out my @PoshPastyCo for another Cornish twist on wedding catering) Sam's vision was to 'take the party to them - turn up in shorts and t-shirts with flip-flops just like the restaurants'. Sam saw a VW van in the Polkerris car park and bought it on a whim as it was Sam's green. Then during the process of renovating and putting their logo on the outside he realised that it could be so much more. The middle became a lounge, they put a cocktail bar in the back, and towed a BBQ trailer as the kitchen. 'Sam's on wheels was so we could take it to people - small functions with the whole music, food and drinks'. Hosting for parties of 30-70 people has now grown as a concept so he is taking on a full-time team to work at festivals, pop ups and nice top-end venues. If you have a private party, birthday, or weddings and fancy it Sam's style then get in touch! ■

Meals on wheels

The whole Sam's Vans experience is a bit like the ultimate Cornish road trip. 'Kind of like a band on tour, turn up, kit ready to go, one-hour set, busy, busy then roll off again'. He admits that you need to be a member of both the AA and RAC, 'so the AA can get you where you are going and then RAC can bring you back'. The vans are like a convoy that roll up and leave with great music at the heart made possible after years of playlists compiled from the restaurants and linked to Spotify - a kind of mobile jukebox to suit any occasion. On a personal level Sam loves off-grid family camping and the menu, whilst very tasty and with gourmet ingredients, maintains a rustic quality with BBQ fire pits, wood charcoal embers smoking into the night, Lobster Dogs, Pulled Pork baps and Mojito Steve mixing up the drinks. These events are on a roll with the knock-on effect spreading the word to bookings in Hampshire, Cirencester and beyond. For up to date info on where Sam's Vans will be next - stay in touch with twitter @Samscornwall.

The future

What's next? Maybe a Pimms Van but also a base. Sam is opening up in with a new Sam's in the City. Of a similar style, bar upstairs while you're waiting with a drink and 'as tight as we can on food service so it's a place where people want to go'. I asked if the staff will still wear flip-flops in the city? Sam said 'I don't know, but I will be...'

QUICK KERNOW QUESTIONS:

- Q. Cream tea or pasty?
- A. Pasty
- Q. Favourite band?
- A. The Stranglers
- Q. Favourite spot?
- A. Changes all the time - beauty of vans.