

Braxton's relish

Charlotte Reather interviews man for all seasons –
auctioneer, TV regular and publican – **James Braxton**



Words by:
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Charlotte is a leading
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WITH LOCKDOWN forcing rural businesses and individuals to be increasingly agile, BBC 'Antiques Road Trip' star, James Braxton, has turned shopkeeper from his pub, The Lamb Inn at Wartling in East Sussex.

"I didn't expect when I was studying to be a chartered surveyor that I'd be running an 'Open All Hours' corner shop," chuckles James, on the phone from his village pub. Perched above the Pevensey Levels between Herstmonceux Castle and Pevensey Castle, the antiques expert bought the 16th century former coaching inn in 2012.

"The last day the pub opened normally was Wednesday 18 March. Then we had our Last Supper with chef, Matt Pask, sous-chef, Leah Foster, and the team on Friday 20th. We were closed for the Mother's Day weekend – usually one of our busiest times – and on Monday 23rd we re-opened as a village shop!"

James acted fast to make the necessary arrangements. "I knew if I was going to do it, I would have to do it early and keep my suppliers onside – that was key. My fish supplier, Michael from MCB Seafoods, is doing so well he's now in two minds as to whether to go back to pubs and restaurants - he's doing well with internet sales and small shops like mine."

"Everyone's dreading going to large supermarkets, so

they've rediscovered village shops and farm shops again. When I set up my shop I did it so it's totally contactless and I can take payment through people's car windows. Wearing disposable gloves, I put the shopping in the boot, close it, and take card payment through the closed window."

It's sounds a bit like a drive-thru corner shop. "Yes! Except people ring up the day before and order what they want. I want everyone to eat fresh, so I supply fresh meat, fresh fish and fresh vegetables because one of the most important things people can do right now is eat healthily."

James is a passionate advocate of fresh British food. "We've been conditioned by supermarkets which offer value through bulk and not necessarily through quality. The other day our amazing fish supplier got sashimi grade 2 tuna for a customer who is lockdown from London and is missing sushi. He said it's the finest he's ever had. We can get the most amazing produce in this country and we can have it all fresh."

Slow-cooked lamb

James uses local butchers Gunne in Bexhill who source high quality and local meat products. "During lockdown The Lamb shop is supplying villagers with 35-day-matured 8oz ribeye steaks, whole chickens, Cumberland sausages and back bacon."

Gunne Butchers also supply the lamb. "When it's business as usual, our popular pub dish is slow-cooked lamb. We slow cook the shoulder and leg, tear it all up, take the fat out and roll it in cling film into a long fat sausage. It's put in the fridge then we slice it into two-and-a-half-inch pieces, cook it with Dauphinoise potatoes, and serve with haricot verts beans and red wine gravy."

"We sell a lot of 35-day ribeye steaks at weekends – which are very flavoursome, accompanied by everyone's guilty pleasure, chips. We handcut ours, blanch at 130 degrees and cook in rapeseed oil at 180 degrees. The ladies tend to go for the seabass, which is cooked whole until the skin is crisp and served with samphire, sautéed new potatoes, and a beurre blanc sauce. It looks like a fish that's

SMOOTH OPERATOR:
James's easy charm has made him a firm favourite among viewers of 'Antiques Road Trip'



OPEN FOR BUSINESS:
James inside his pub turned village shop, and, below, the pub interior is unsurprisingly stylish

floundered on a seaweed-strewn rock. We get the seabass and samphire from Michael. Samphire is such a great vegetable and is relatively cheap. You can eat it raw or cook it quickly in butter."

Other delights on The Lamb menu, and now at the shop, is their selection of British cheeses, including Godminster from Somerset and local delights such as Brighton Blue and Mayfield Swiss, which James describes as a 'creamy gouda cheese'. "Our eggs are from the village, too, and we buy yoghurt from behind the pub at Court Lodge Organics," he says.

I ask who supplies his bread. "I make it!" says James enthusiastically. "I seem to be the only man with flour during lockdown because my boys (Ned and Charlie) make pizzas at their 'Brewing Brothers' brewhouse in Hastings. Through their Italian connections I've got so much flour I sell it by the loose kilo. I'll either be the community hero

of lockdown or a black-marketeer - only time will tell. It used to be only estate agents that had dodgy shoes, but maybe shop keepers like me will have dodgy slip-ons as well!"

So, when did he start making sourdough? "I've been doing it for about five years and it's bit of a family joke. I've been banned from doing it at home because the flour creates so much dust in the kitchen – it's bad enough with the dog... so I do it at the pub now."

"My sons gave me a fabulous Hobart dough hook made in the 1950s," he explains. "It's about the size of an 11-year-old child and weighs about as much as me! It's takes all the hard work out of making sourdough and I've got a friend from Sicily, Angelo, who gave me a bit of sourdough starter yeast at Christmas which he's had for 25 years."

"I've got two pots, which I call Gav and Rod, who make all the bread for me. Gav and Rod are old friends who come every year to the opening day of Royal Ascot with me. Gavin – a classic 1970s name – loves the queen and Rod is mad about racing. I regularly text them saying 'we've had a good rise out of Rod today.' Or 'Gav's doing the business.'"

He uses Italian Double 00 flour from his 'connections'. "I leave it to prove over night and in summer I'll put in the fridge. It's really gentle on the tummy."



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He perfected the art after a lot of trial and error. “You start off with an original recipe and refine it. Often people tell you to put too much water in, but the secret is not to make it too wet, otherwise it sticks, you can’t get it out and it flops. It’s all about keeping air in your dough.”

During his lockdown role of Arkwright, James has noticed a large amount of customers buying flour to make bread. “People have had the time to make things. A lovely Italian man in the village called Giuseppe asked me to get me some clams, so I got him a kilo and he made spaghetti alle vongole with an old recipe. It looked superb. He said he’ll make it one night after lockdown; we’ll have an Italian night.”

Perhaps a positive to come out of the crisis will be a greater respect for our food and farmers? “I definitely hope so – go to a local farm shop, buy something fresh and eat it fresh.”

A confirmed foodie, James doesn’t have to think long about his favourite plate and tippie. “Obviously my boys’ Brewing Brothers beer is outstanding. If I was on ‘Come Dine with Me’ (James’s guilty TV pleasure) I would start by making a Sussex Smokie, with smoked haddock in a Godminster cheesy béchamel sauce, with spinach put through for colour, Parmesan on the top and baked in the oven. And, for the main course, I would serve our signature slow-cooked lamb.”

ANTIQUE FAVOURITE:

James has a penchant for octagonal and circular Islamic tables



Does he cook in the pub? “Only when the chefs are on holiday, but I’m away a lot filming the Antiques Road Trip (March to September) three times a week. We film two series a year normally, along with Celebrity Antiques Road Trip where they give me the awkward people!”

James started his TV career 20 years ago on Bargain Hunt. “I’ve loved working for the BBC all the way through, but my favourite show has to be Antiques Road Trip – and it’s become a well-regarded daytime staple.”

How does he think the antiques trade will emerge from Coronavirus? “There are still some auctions online, but I think people are itching to get back into the auctions rooms to actually view stuff. The auction houses were doing well thanks to glossy catalogues and attract more private buyers than trade buyers now.”

What does he collect? “I have a very broad taste, but I particularly love Islamic tables. If it’s octagonal or circular with Kufic scripts, inlay, made in Damascus or India, I want it. Liberty sold them in the early 1900s when Moorish taste was extremely fashionable. I love the travel aspect of Edwardians getting on boats and finding amazing things in places like Libya.”

It might be a while before we’re back to travelling in the style of the Edwardians, but, meantime, James’s inn offers six en-suite rooms welcoming cyclists wanting to explore the quiet roads of the Pevensy Marshes and the coastal roads to Hastings. As well as walkers exploring The British Pilgrimage Trust’s newly-rediscovered medieval pilgrim route from Southampton to Canterbury, which passes right outside The Lamb Inn.

And hopefully, as things return to normal, James will have hung up his storeman’s coat and removed the pencil from behind his ear. 🐕

● lambinnwartling.co.uk

CLASSIC STYLE:

Family, food and beer make for a great combination