

The Potting Shed Cafe feasts return

FIONA CULLINANE talks about reviving the Potting Shed Cafe at Asthall Manor



A feast evening at the Potting Shed Cafe last summer, which are set to return from Saturday for a series of summer events running until Sunday, July 10

THE Potting Shed Cafes tucked away in a corner of the walled garden of Asthall Manor, which you could easily pass without realising its existence for most of the year.

However, for the past couple of months I have been brushing off the cobwebs and giving this lovely old stone building some serious TLC (with much help!).

And so it is that the Potting Shed is now feeling very loved and is looking forward to feeding and welcoming the many visitors who come to the biennial On Form sculpture exhibition at Asthall Manor until July 10, with the first feast planned for Saturday.

Guests are understandably thrilled to find a quiet spot to rest their legs and contemplate the 268 stone sculptures placed throughout the garden, with a table groaning under seasonal salads and delightful dishes made with produce from the kitchen garden.

I first met Rosie Pearson, owner of Asthall Manor and curator of the exhibition, at Worton Organic Farm in 2012 where I ran the kitchen for six months.

She loved my rustic style of cooking and use of herbs and vegetables and so when I found myself with some time on my hands she suggested that, rather than jump into another hot and sweaty restaurant kitchen, I might like to have a look at the Potting Shed if I wanted a new project.

A couple of weeks later, chalk boards and bunting up, we opened, offering homemade lemonade, elderflower cordial, almond and strawberry tarts, fresh focaccia and a choice of simple greens and vegetables from the garden.

I adored the simplicity of this offering, which seemed perfectly in keeping with the setting, and loved the reaction of those who had just stumbled across us on a day out.

Fast forward a year and I hosted a series of summer suppers which were huge fun and developed a bit of a following.

After a couple of years in London restaurants learning the basics, followed by a few years on the road cooking authentic Italian food in the confines of a motor home in the Formula One paddock, I was

back earning my crust in restaurant kitchens, designing the format of the menu and the dishes at The Anchor gastropub in Jericho and developing a more rustic, continental-style menu for The Crown in Woodstock.

However, the Potting Shed was always in the back of my head, with people constantly asking when it was opening again.

So this year I really wanted to share the Potting Shed with other foodies and find out what they could bring to it – with the added bonus that I will actually be able to enjoy an evening there myself.

I have created four delightful summer evenings which combine the sensory experience of the gardens and sculptures, and invited some very different chefs to “pop up” on Saturday nights during on form.

Everyone will catch Asthall and On Form in its prime – I will be collaborating on a vegan mid-summer feast with Will Pouget of the Vaults and Gardens to kick things off on June 18.

There will also be a Moroccan-style supper from our favourite café in Lechlade, a fun paella and

pizza night from an old Oxford favourite, and a Michelin-trained chef pushing our little kitchen to its limits – a far cry from my early Enid Blyton-type days with fresh lemonade and cake on the lawn.

However, my aim is that the Potting Shed will always retain that old charm that people have fallen in love with. I will be making the most of the summer at the Potting Shed with foodie events and openings planned throughout July and August – please check our Facebook page for updates.

It means there is a definite buzz in the air in Asthall in the lead-up to the sculpture exhibition this year.

■ **The Potting Shed is open until Sunday, July 10, 11am- 6pm, closed Mondays and Tuesdays and late opening till 9pm Thursdays. We will also open for long weekends and for private parties for the rest of the summer, with big, casual suppers on Thursday nights for the rest of July and August and opening Friday, Saturdays and Sundays. See onformsculpture.co.uk/the-potting-shed.**