

ANDREW CLARKE



Flesh & Blood

Andrew Clarke is Britain's premier rock'n'roll chef, with an award-winning restaurant and vital charity campaign to his name. But it's been a long, hard road. Mark Blake hears a hair-raising tale of drugs, booze and 70-day matured beef.

◆ PHOTOGRAPHY: ROB BLACKHAM ◆



“I had a possible life sentence hanging over me. I couldn’t sing, couldn’t write songs, couldn’t play guitar.”

Wearing a chainmail apron and brandishing a heavy metal cleaver, chef Andrew Clarke looks like he’s about to chop heads at the Battle Of Agincourt rather than barbecue a side of beef. Only the richly-coloured tattoos snaking down his forearms and knuckles give the game away. Despite the Middle Ages vibe, this isn’t a 15th-century French battlefield, but Clarke’s Shoreditch restaurant, St Leonard’s, on an autumnal Wednesday morning.

While his staff prepare for lunchtime service, Chef fires up the hearth and gives Outlaw a tour of his domain. There’s the cleaver, the metal apron (“as used in French abattoirs,” he explains), the prehistoric-looking tuna carcass and the hearth’s impressive bursts of flame – like pyro on another farewell Kiss tour.

Andrew Clarke is a very rock’n’roll chef: long-haired, bearded and with a sideline playing guitar in his own band (called Khandahar Giant). Since 2018, though, he has been the chief director of St Leonard’s and a tireless champion for Pilot Light, the campaign he launched in 2017 to raise awareness of mental health in the hospitality industry.

As the slogan ‘Damaged Goods’ on the back of his denim cut-off suggests, the 41-year-old’s journey has not been without challenges. Over cups of bracing artisan coffee, Clarke tells a story involving martial arts, drugs, jailtime, Guns N’Roses and the cathartic, life-changing power of a restaurant kitchen.

Growing up in Dartford, Kent – “home of The Rolling Stones” – he originally wanted to join the army. But dreams of a military career were derailed after hearing The Doors. “One of their songs was on the soundtrack to that movie Lost Boys,” he explains. Echo & The Bunnymen’s take on The Doors’ People Are Strange soundtracked the opening scenes in the 1987 vampire drama. “And that was it. I thought,

OK, I’ll forget the army, I’m into Jim Morrison and learned to play guitar instead.”

Clarke listened to his parents’ Eagles and Lynyrd Skynyrd records. Then, in 1991, Guns N’Roses released You Could Be Mine, their thundering contribution to the cyborg shoot-‘em-up, Terminator 2. “And I lost my shit,” he laughs. “They became *my band. My first gig, aged 14, was Guns N’Roses, Soundgarden and Faith No More at Wembley Stadium.”

From here on, rock music became all consuming. “I saw everyone, from 1991 to ’94, Metallica, Biohazard, Type O Negative, but also Kiss and Aerosmith.” Before long, he was playing in a group called Niobium. “We were named after a metal on the periodic table,” he grins. “And, yeah, our logo really was the chemical symbol.” Niobium even recorded an EP, but success proved elusive. Instead, Clarke built a recording studio at home and made plans to go to the US and study music production.

Then, aged 20, and in a momentous example of wrong place/wrong time, his life changed overnight. Clarke was attacked while on an evening out with four friends. What his assailant didn’t know was that Andrew was a Thai boxer and exponent of the Japanese martial art, kenpo. He came off a lot worse.

The ensuing legal case saw Clarke facing a possible life sentence. “All I was doing was minding my own business when this prick attacked me,” he says, grimacing at the memory. “I had to spend a year on bail with this huge jail sentence hanging over me. I felt physically sick, I couldn’t sing, couldn’t write songs, couldn’t play guitar. I didn’t know what the hell to do, and it was the start of a big depression.”

After 12 months of crushing uncertainty, the case went to trial where Clarke was found not guilty. “It was a huge relief, but my life had been on hold for a year and I had no direction.”

Clarke threw himself into music again, but took a detour away from





“There are a lot of tortured souls in this industry. Pilot Light is saying, **You don’t have to go through this alone.**”

rock. “I started using my studio to make electronic music, and got into dance music and playing gigs as a house DJ.”

He took his first job in a kitchen purely as a means to an end. “I needed to earn money to pay for the music,” he explains. “I kept telling myself, This is temporary, I’m not going to be a chef, I don’t *want to be a chef, but I realised I was better than most of the places I worked in. So I’d take a job in another kitchen, telling myself I didn’t want to be a chef, and the same thing would happen again.”

Like a musician flitting between bands looking for the right one, Clarke realised he’d found *the place when he arrived at The Swan in West Malling, Kent. “Now all of a sudden, we’re buying fish from the market,” he says. “We’re getting whole chunks of meat, full carcasses, that needed to be broken down. I’m learning about butchery, filleting, scaling... and my engagement rate was huge.”

To begin with, he juggled kitchen shifts with DJ-ing. “But the gigs dropped off as I started to get better at cooking and was given more responsibility.”

Another influence on the career change was New York’s wild-card chef Anthony Bourdain’s 2001 memoir, *Kitchen Confidential*. The first book to address the industry’s hedonistic culture, it struck a chord with Clarke. “In my early days when I didn’t want to be a chef, I read that book and thought, OK, I could be a chef,” he admits. “Bourdain was the first person in the industry I’d come across who had the same background as me.”

Clarke was already tattooed and often showed up for work in a bandanna (“Like I was in Bon Jovi or something”). Inevitably, his appearance raised eyebrows. “You’d see chefs thinking, Who the fuck’s this? There was no-one else with tattoos and beards in the kitchen. I’m a big guy, nobody’s going to bully me, but it was a hurdle to overcome.”

However, four years after starting work in the business Clarke was promoted to head chef at The Star. He was 26. “It wasn’t the top, but it

was my first real bit of exposure – like a band doing their first album.”

With the job came money and temptation, though. “I became pretty reckless with drink and drugs,” he admits. “People who work in this industry are often adrenaline junkies. There’s a high from doing a really fast-paced service, and when you’re done, you’re deflated.”

Like a musician at the end of the gig?

“Exactly like being on-stage. There are so many analogies between this and the music business.”

Clarke stayed at The Swan until 2008 before moving to London. His career in the ascendant, he became head chef at Salt Yard, an Italian-Spanish tapas restaurant, and set up a food pop-up, *Fleurs De Lys*. He worked hard, but played just as hard. “Think about it. You’re in a restaurant where booze is always around, and if you want something more, you make a call and it’s a 10-minute drop away.”

In 2016 Clarke became chief director of Brunswick House in Vauxhall, south London, crafting delicate dishes at odds with his rampaging Viking demeanour. It was a talking point. “My cooking has done all the work,” he smiles, ‘but, I can’t lie, my image has played a big role too.”

That same year, The Sunday Times’ AA Gill, the Phil Spector-meets-Jim Steinman of restaurant critics, arrived unannounced at Brunswick House. In his subsequent review, he grumbled about the pork terrines (“as disappointing as pork terrines invariably are”), but raved about the saddleback neck fillet stuffed with smoked cod roe and calçots. Gill’s 4-star review was a turning point. “That guy used to destroy people in print,” laughs Clarke. “So it was great he had some good things to say.”

However, Clarke’s saddleback fillet might have been magnificent, but his private life was in turmoil. No sooner had he joined Brunswick House, then a personal relationship ended, tipping him into depression. “I’d not had a great 2015 and when that happened, I was



Food for thought: Andrew Clarke shot exclusively for Outlaw, St Leonards restaurant, Shoreditch, London, October 16, 2019.

“When I first heard Guns N’Roses, I lost my shit. They became my band.”

like, That’s it. I’m done.”

Putting in 100 hours a week in the kitchen helped ease the pain, but he blotted out the rest with booze and cocaine. “I turned up for work every day and that helped get me through, but when I went home I was on my own. Fortunately, I had good friends and family looking out for me. The turning point was seeing my old man so upset when I told him the truth about where I was. And that’s when I thought I’ve got to get some serious help.”

In October 2016, Clarke posted a photograph of himself on Instagram sat with a bottle of spirits and a teacup. “This was me 10 months ago,” the post read. “Inside I was suffering from a pain so extreme that I could barely cope... I hated who I was and wanted to kill myself every time I came home from work... I never believed in depression and only ever saw the world in a positive light. But it’s not until you experience it, that you realise just how real it is.”

Having posted, Clarke went to bed and woke the next morning to a numerous missed calls, text messages and emails. “I realised so many people in the industry had experienced the same as me,” he says. The post was the spur to setting up Pilot Light with fellow chef Doug Sanham, aimed at raising awareness of mental health issues, specific to the restaurant and hospitality industry. “It seems there are a lot of tortured souls in this industry. Pilot Light is saying, You don’t have to go through this alone.”

Breaking down barriers within a traditionally macho culture hasn’t been easy, though. “When I became a head chef at 26 I didn’t know how to manage anyone,” Clarke admits. “I was that guy, throwing stuff around and being a complete shit. Drink and drugs certainly didn’t help. I was crazed! Horrible!” He pauses and laughs dolefully. “I always say, I’m not better yet, I am still work in progress.”

Nowadays, Clarke gives up alcohol for six months straight starting every November (“In the cold months I’ll go to India and sit on a beach for three weeks, meditating”), and fills his time with rock music, Pilot Light and his greatest passion: food.

In recent years, Clarke has become a fixture at the annual weekend festival Meatopia (slogan: meat, drink, fire, music) and helped set up the exquisitely-named Glandstonbury offal festival. “Not to gross people out,” he insists, “but to demonstrate that you can use it for some wonderful dishes – and it’s a great source of protein.”

St Leonards’ current menu offers hearth-roasted pork chops and hair-of-the-dog beef stock Bloody Marys. But, as befits a chef who has the name of the German turnip kohlrabi tattooed across his knuckles, it’s not a complete fleshfest.

“My diet is 80 per cent vegan,” he insists. “We get such amazing meat here, I can’t eat what they have in supermarkets.”

You must be a nightmare to go food shopping with?

“I know!” he laughs. “But once you’ve had beef that’s been aged 70 days, super-rich and funky, you can’t go back. It’s killed beef for me. Nowadays I eat it once a year.”

Clarke’s raised profile has led to invitations to cook as a guest chef at establishments around the world, including New Orleans, Hong Kong, Ohio and Moscow. “Another analogy with the music business,” he grins. “It is like going on tour.”

Besides St Leonards, Clarke’s plans for 2020 involve raising Pilot Light’s profile (“A number of musicians I know want to get involved, so maybe we can bring something together”) and playing more guitar. Khandahar Giant, the group in which Andrew plays with another of his chefs on bass, have just made their debut at a club in neighbouring Hackney.

“I want to do more of that,” he says, finally. “It’s a fun thing to say, but it’s true. I first jumped into a kitchen to pay for my music.” He laughs. “Twenty odd years later, I can finally afford it.”

With that, London’s most rock’n’roll chef returns to the hearth, cleaver in hand. Let battle commence. ♦

MORE INFO: [STLEONARDS.LONDON](https://stleonards.london) AND [PILOTLIGHTCAMPAIGN.CO.UK](https://pilotlightcampaign.co.uk)

