

# > Wanderer returns inspired



Food writer **CAROL GODSMARK** talks to **Steven Ranson**, chef and co-owner of **Annie Jones** in Petersfield.

**S**teven Ranson, chef and co-owner of Annie Jones, a five-star, laid-back restaurant if ever there was one, is one of those rare chefs – a self-taught man done good.

'School didn't really capture me,' says the 36-year-old chef.

At 15, Steven upped and left school and his Petersfield home and took a bus to Andorra.

This early wanderlust continued with a four-month trip to Namibia, Mozambique and

South Africa and a solo trip to climb mountains in the Annapurna regions of Nepal.

'I just had to jump ship,' this engaging chef reports, adding that a more food-related job picking grapes in Epernay was also part of his Great Escape.

A spell in the army ('I got drunk and signed up.') in a Newcastle barracks soon had him plotting to do something else. 'Being a southerner in Newcastle wasn't the smoothest of times,' Steven says with typical British understatement.

Nor were the cramped conditions while he worked on a Carnival Cruise liner in the Bahamas. Steven was soon back in the UK working in bars and then at the Ram's Nest, Chiddingfold, with a 'very temperamental' Israeli chef.

'I really didn't know a lot about food then, even though my parents had the Market Inn in Petersfield,' Steven says. 'My mum was an awful cook and she'll kill me for saying this!'

Steven, now fired up about cooking, read Nigel Slater's books to hone his burgeoning skills. The accidental chef was born.

Serendipity took over in the shape of John Blake, an architect and now business partner who set him up when Annie Jones came on the market five years ago.

Andrew Parker, his sous chef, and Steven buy the best Scottish beef and lamb from the butchers next door and the fish from Portsmouth. They make their own bread, flavoured with onion, the dough rising in the window next to a plate showing Steven's AA Rosette.

The menu – slow-braised lamb shank, parsnip puree, polenta and mascarpone cake with



Steven Ranson, at Annie Jones, Petersfield

Sicilian aubergine stew, chicken breast with squash risotto, cod with gnocchi – reflects Steven's love of seasonal food. If he can't get good local produce then he'll spread his net.

There is not an ounce of arrogance in this fine chef. The restaurant's aim is to make people feel at ease. His marriage to Jacqueline Kennedy in August will be celebrated at the restaurant.

■ Annie Jones, 10 Lavant Street, Petersfield. 01730 262728.

**SWEET-ROASTED GARLIC SOUP WITH GARDEN THYME**  
For four

Steven suggests that this soup is best eaten on the day it is made.

Three whole bulbs of garlic  
One-and-a-half litres of home-made chicken stock  
Olive oil  
Vegetable oil  
Two carrots, leeks and 1 large potato, peeled and roughly chopped  
100g smoked bacon  
Dash of cream

**FAVOURITE DISH**

Salt and pepper  
Chopped thyme

Slice the garlic bulbs in half, drizzle some vegetable oil over them, cover with foil and roast in a pre-heated oven (gas mark 4, 180C, 350F) for around one-and-a-half hours or until lightly browned. Sauté the carrots, leeks, potatoes and bacon in some olive oil in a large pan then add the stock and the garlic cloves (push them out of the skin). Cook until the vegetables are soft then blend. Season and add cream to taste. Add the thyme just before serving.