

Despite losing his arm in an horrific car accident, chef Michael Caines went on to win two Michelin stars.

Karyn Miller discovers what motivates one of Britain's most innovative cooks. Photographs by **Ian Derry**

That programme really annoys me,' says chef Michael Caines of *Ready Steady Cook*. 'It's about entertainment – not food! I don't need to prove that I am a good cook just because I can turn a dish around in 20 minutes.' When the programme's producers invited him to appear, they received short shrift.

Caines, 34, is one of this country's top chefs. He is the West Country's answer to Gordon Ramsay. Nothing daunts him, not even the loss of his right arm in a car accident nine years ago. Caines was back in the kitchens of his restaurant, at Gidleigh Park Hotel in Devon, just two weeks later, the empty sleeve of his chef's jacket safety-pinned to his chest.

Six months on, he was awarded his first coveted Michelin star. Now he holds two Michelin stars – one of the youngest British chefs to do so – and is tipped to win a third. This would place him on a par with Ramsay and Michel Roux, as part of the elite corps of British cookery. In the meantime, Caines has just opened his fourth restaurant, in Bristol.

Today he is sitting at his kitchen table, cradling a mug of coffee in his left hand and contemplating his future. He has had four job offers in the last six months – and turned them all down.

Caines is something of a local celebrity. Wherever he goes, people talk to him. Later, when we drive to the beautiful country house hotel on Dart-moor in which one of his restaurants is set, he is tooted at by a passing car. The passengers draw down their windows and give him

thumbs-up signs. When we photograph him standing on the wall at Gidleigh Park, a side of Devon beef tucked under his arm, a gent leans over a balcony and calls, 'You won't make us eat that tonight, will you, Michael?' Caines takes it all in good part.

If you haven't heard of him before, that may be because he hasn't courted television fame. Caines isn't impressed with the current glut of cookery programmes, nor their celebrity presenters. 'I don't mind Delia, but I'm amazed that she writes a book about how to boil an egg – and millions of people buy it because they have forgotten. As a programme, it's not very dynamic, is it?'

And Jamie Oliver? 'That cheeky chappy thing starts to wear thin,' is his reluctant verdict. 'Oliver is a pure product of the media. But I don't think there are many chefs in Britain who would turn down the opportunity that he had.'

His own rising fame puts him in a similar quandary. 'Do I go on TV and do something cheesy, become a personality – a clown? Or do I continue to do what I am doing, that is, raising my profile but sticking to the principles I believe in?'

He admires *Rick Stein's Food Heroes* series. 'What makes a programme interesting is the life around the food. People want to know more and more about what they eat.' He thinks for a moment. 'I believe there is room for a show that is educational – me getting out and meeting the farmers in the south-west and talking about the greens, for example.'

Caines's cooking, described by this year's *AA Restaurant Guide* as 'a list of

superlative achievements', is distinguished by the wealth of local produce that he champions, such as his Devon ruby red beef fillet with shallot purée and roasted shallots.

Even a simple-sounding dish can surprise: a 'palette of ice creams and sorbets', when it arrives, is literally a sugar-paper artist's palette, painted with a brown-wood grain. Scoops of homemade ice cream and sorbet are arranged around the outside like paints; the finishing touch is a brush crafted from caramel.

'That's a take on a French idea,' he says. 'With food, you don't reinvent the wheel, but you develop ideas and keep them turning. That's what I like about it.'

Watching Caines in his kitchen is a spectacle. 'I chop vegetables with a speed that most people find hard,' he says. 'I can still do 90 per cent of what I did before.' His artificial right arm hanging at his side, he picks up a knife and knocks a thick bunch of parsley into fine green powder. His hand moves so quickly the knife is a blur. He slices vegetables carefully and swiftly, using his prosthetic to balance them on the chopping board.

Heavy lifting is a problem, but Caines isn't shy about asking for help. 'We work as a team here,' he says. Even sharpening a knife is accomplished briskly: he suspends the hand-held sharpener between his stomach and the edge of the work top, and dashes the knife against it.

Caines is brutally frank about the circumstances in which he lost his arm nine years ago: 'I overdid it.' He had been working long hours; he was exhausted. Driving home one August afternoon, ▶

▶ he nodded off for a second and the car hit the road's central reservation and flipped.

It landed on the driver's side and rolled; his right arm was torn away. 'The car landed upside down. I'll never forget that sound of crunching metal,' he says. 'I shouted, "No!" My right hand was lying in front of my head. It was here,' he says, motioning a few feet from his eyes.

He managed to wriggle out of the car, and passing motorists rushed to his aid. 'A woman wrapped me in a blanket from her car and tried to calm me. I was losing a lot of blood, and she didn't think I was going to make it – no-one did. I wanted to give up. "If I can't cook," I said to her, "what's the point in living?" I listed the people important to me, and asked her to tell them that I loved them. She said to me, "Start thinking about yourself, for their sakes." My body was shutting down. I wanted to close my eyes. But I made an effort to fight.'

Caines isn't bitter. 'I am living on borrowed time, and I intend to make the most of it.' He doesn't regard himself as disabled. In his dreams, he has two arms.

'I wear it well,' he says. He comports himself so naturally and works so deftly that people often do not realise he wears a prosthetic. Even our photographer,

Caines at home with his 27-year-old partner, Ruth, and their seven-week-old baby, Joseph, forgets.

'Michael,' the photographer calls, 'could you move your arm this way a bit?' Ruth smiles. 'Here,' she says, gripping his right hand in hers. 'Let me.'

Caines met Ruth at the Royal Clarence Hotel in Exeter three years ago. She was the head receptionist; he was there to set up his second restaurant. 'When he walked in, I turned to the girls and said, "I'm going to have his babies,"' she says. 'They said, "So are we?'

Their wedding is set for next summer. They hope for two more children: one natural and one adopted, because, Caines says, 'We can give a child a better life.' Caines himself was adopted at ten weeks old, into a close, loving Exeter family. He is now considering contacting his birth parents, for Joseph's sake.

Caines's birth father was Jamaican, but Caines dismisses the trials of growing up as one of Exeter's few black people. 'I was one of the toughest in my school,' he says. He adds that if he hadn't discovered cookery, he'd have gone into the Army.

The couple's home is a converted 17th century chapel in a village just outside Exeter. The surroundings are idyllic: outside, the only shop in sight is a saddler's and the barn opposite is piled with hay bales. Taking pride of place outside is Caines's new car: a Porsche 911 Turbo, costing £96,000.

Well-paid his job might be, but in his industry, stress and long hours put paid to many a marriage. 'The more isolated you become from your relationship,' muses Caines, 'the more appealing it seems to just eye someone up – chefs are surrounded by women. It can start to seem an easier option than going back home and getting your ear bashed in.' But he tells me he receives little of this attention.

'Michael!' squeals Ruth. 'That's absolute rubbish.'

'OK, but it doesn't go to my head,' he claims, modestly.

Despite their obvious closeness, their relationship must have its difficulties. Caines's average day begins at 9am and finishes at 1am, six days a week. But Ruth doesn't recognise herself in Jamie Oliver's wife Jools, who complained that her husband was at home too little.

Ruth looks at her fiancé. 'I wasn't like that, was I?' she asks. 'No,' he beams. 'You were really good.' She returns her attention to the baby. 'I did get really lonely,' she says, 'but I knew when I met Michael it would be like this. Now Joseph keeps me busy, I don't have time to worry.'

Joseph has readjusted Caines's priorities. He recently took a week's break to get to know his baby son – his first summer holiday in nine years.

While it is usual for chefs at his level to work through their children's births,

Caines with Ruth throughout her 42-hour labour. 'If I can't take days off when my son is born,' he says, 'I have to question what this industry is about and why I'm in it.'

This is a subject that has been troubling Caines. In his twenties he worked for Bernard Loiseau, the three-starred French chef who committed suicide this year after one of Michelin's rival restaurant guides docked two points from his rating. Caines travelled to France to attend his funeral.

He believes that it is easy for chefs to become as obsessed with their ratings as Loiseau was. 'The atmosphere before a dinner is like the atmosphere around a Tyson-Lewis fight,' he says. 'Bernard would say: "I'm the greatest." We are all motivated by ratings. It's the only industry where you're judged like this. It is absurd.'

The third Michelin star for which Caines strives would be, he admits, a mixed blessing for his team. 'It has to be our goal, or we'd have no motivation. But a third star would add more pressure: once you get it, you have to keep it. For Loiseau, failure was too much.'

Then there is Caines's acquaintance and contemporary, David Dempsey. He was a protégé of Ramsay's who binged on cocaine and fell to his death from a window in May. 'Chefs turn to cocaine because of the stress of the lifestyle,' says Caines.

Caines is very anti-drugs, but he has experienced the pressure of his trade at an extreme level. Following his time with Loiseau, he went to work for Joel Robuchon, one of France's most revered chefs. 'The hours were excruciating: 6am to 2am, with one hour's break, five days a week. I am a perfectionist, but Robuchon never gave compliments – you constantly strove for a perfection you could not reach. People fell victim to that kitchen: some gave up cookery altogether.'

After Robuchon raised a hand to strike him, Caines decided to leave. To his delight, he was immediately invited to head up Gidleigh Park.

Some time later, with Robuchon and the car accident behind him, Caines took a long, hard look at the industry he worked in. Now his chefs work shorter hours than he did in Paris. He doesn't shout at them, either – there are no tantrums in Caines's kitchen. Instead: light-hearted banter and the occasional 'quiet word' are the norm.

It is clear that his hard-working staff adore him. He believes that for his industry, this is the way forward. 'My kitchen has a calm, controlled atmosphere. It is all about teaching people excellence.'

He touches his right arm lightly. 'Life,' he concludes, 'is just too short.' ■ *Michael Caines's restaurant is at the Gidleigh Park Hotel, Chagford, Devon. For further information, call 01647 432 367, or visit www.gidleigh.com.*



The car
landed
upside
I'll never
forget
sound
crunch
metal
right
was lying
front
my head

Success
(clockwise
Caines with
Ruth at the
Exeter, with
car, a Porsche
work in his
at Gidleigh