



MENU MASTER

Meet the chef who has been adding spice to the life of residents at a Darlington retirement village

It takes a great deal of dedication, perseverance and hard work to become a head chef, and Ian de Hoedt, who is in charge of the kitchens at Middleton Hall retirement village, Middleton St George, Darlington, has all three attributes by the ladleful.

Ian's journey is all the more unusual as it is hardly a straightforward tale of catering college to commis chef to head chef.

Born and raised in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Ian's first foray into the hospitality sector was working front of house at a three-star beach front hotel in his native Sri Lanka, employed as a trainee waiter, which was, says Ian, "a dream come true for 16-year-old boy. I loved working front of house. I like meeting people and it was a whole new world for me, which was very exciting."

While the restaurant had a great reputation amongst local diners – the head chef later found success in Melbourne, Australia –

ambitious Ian was looking to further his career by taking the step up and working at a five-star hotel.

After just two years in the hotel business, Ian, just 18-years-old, gained a front of house position at the five-star Meridien Hotel with its highly rated French fine dining restaurant, where Ian was given his first taste of cooking. Certain dishes were cooked tableside, a part of the dining experience which Ian enjoyed.

Ian's enthusiasm and hard work did not go unnoticed and he was offered further promotion.

"I was asked if I would like to further my career and take up the position of restaurant captain at the 450-room Meridien Hotel in the Gulf.

"There was a lot of overtime going in the kitchen, and the French chef asked me if I would like take up some of that overtime.

"In the day I would work in the restaurant, then after my shift I would put on my whites and work in the kitchen as a commis chef,



helping prep for service, and that's how I started cheffing.

"I did the two jobs – restaurant captain and the cheffing – for three years, when the head chef decided to move to a new hotel in Cairo and asked me to join his brigade, but for personal reason I decided to return to Sri Lanka."

Home in Sri Lanka, Ian had a complete career change, moving from hospitality to sales of office interiors. It was a whole new adventure.

Following the success of one project Ian had managed, he was approached by the Korean owner of a garment manufacturing business and asked to join his company as a sales executive, exporting garments to the UK and USA.

But neither selling office equipment or manufacturing clothing had the appeal of working in hospitality, so Ian and a group of friends retrained as tour guides, initially working for an established company, before setting up their own firm.

"We started off with just four cars and when I left, we had a fleet of vehicles."

Eventually, Ian met his partner Tania, who was visiting Sri Lanka. Tania took up a teaching post in Colombo and after a few years they returned to the UK. Here, Ian spotted an advertisement in the local newspaper about a recruitment open day at Middleton Hall. There were a number of vacancies available.



'Since I stepped through the door in 2013, I have felt at home here'



"I had filled in two job applications, one was for front of house, the other was for kitchen assistant. I was introduced to the then head chef, who invited me to look around the kitchen. After he showed me the kitchen, he asked me when I could start!"

And so began Ian's journey to head chef.

Initially, as a kitchen assistant Ian was washing pots and pans, but after a few weeks he was asked to put on an evening of Sri Lankan food, which he did to great acclaim, and they remain popular to this day.

With the support of Middleton Hall, Ian developed his skills and gaining recognised qualifications in catering and management, taking on more and more responsibility, until eventually, in June 2021 he was appointed head chef at Middleton Hall running a team of nine and in charge of the dietary requirements of over 200 residents. And more recently, putting on sold out cookery demonstrations showing local people how to make perfect Sri Lankan dishes.

"In eight years, I have gone from kitchen assistant to head chef. I've enjoyed all my jobs here in the kitchen at Middleton Hall and I love my job and I love working at Middleton Hall.

"Since I stepped through the door in 2013, I have felt at home here. When I come into work in the morning, I feel a part of it all.

"It is a privilege to get to know all the residents and staff at Middleton Hall and to bring a smile to their faces. Good food brings colour and happiness to all our lives."