

Making a good kitchen great with La Colombe's James Gaag

 By [Robin Fredericks](#)

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At the mere age of 29, La Colombe Executive Chef James Gaag has already established a name for himself in the restaurant industry. Having been exposed to food and the kitchen growing up, Gaag's career has seen him compete in and win both the *Sunday Times* and Show Cook competitions; working in restaurants like Jardine's, Greenhouse, Terroir, Maze and Nobu.



James Gaag



His mother, Gaie Gaag – a cooking, sugarcraft and confectionary teacher at Silwood Kitchen – was influential in nurturing his passion and love for food:

"I practically used to live at Silwood Kitchen and watched demos or played with the kitchen utensils in the classrooms while my mom taught."

Through hard work and determination, he joined La Colombe in 2010 as a third-year student and eventually became a sous chef. In 2013, he made his way to England where he worked at chef Raymond Blanc's Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons in Oxford; returning in 2014 to La Colombe.

Under Gaag's direction, 2015 and 2016 saw La Colombe win the title of second best restaurant in South Africa in the Eat Out Awards as well as 76th in the World's 50 Best Restaurants Awards – a great feat for Gaag and his team.

Gaag shares his love of food; what makes a good kitchen great, and some advice for young chefs...

What does it mean for you to be on top of your game at 29?

I feel incredibly fortunate to have been given the opportunity to run such a famed and renowned restaurant at my age. I'm excited to showcase my food and thoughts and continue La Colombe's already incredible legacy.

Who has been your role model and why?

Chef Scot Kirton has been a great role model for me. He has always allowed me the freedom to experiment and try new and different things, however far-fetched the idea has been. He's allowed me to fail at dishes and ideas and helped guide the way I think about food and the construction and flavours on a plate.

He's also given me opportunities at La Colombe and in life, that I hope one day I will also be able to give to chefs in the same way.



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When did you first fall in love with cooking?

When I finished my A levels, I wanted to go into engineering. I'm very good at working with my hands and problem solving, but I absolutely hate maths. I thought I'd do a year at Silwood, where my mother also teaches cooking, to figure out what I really wanted to do. I think I was hooked after the first lesson and never looked back.

■ ***What is your favourite dish and why?***

This is probably not what you're looking for, because it's not fine dining in any way!

My favourite dish – Fresh beer battered hake and chips with a lot of brown vinegar and salt.

I have very fond memories that are linked to fish and chips and so every time I have it, it brightens my day.

■ ***What are your favourite things about working in a kitchen?***

I love the pressure and rush of service. In fine dining, I appreciate the attention to detail and the processes we go through to get food to taste and look the way I imagined it in my head.

I love the sense of comradery and family that is created in a kitchen that is working together well. We have a common goal and focus on achieving it.

■ ***In which way was your international experience most valuable to you? What were some of the lessons in life you learned from Raymond Blancs Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons in Oxford?***

Working abroad was absolutely invaluable to me. The way kitchens run overseas are completely different from the way they run here. Both in a positive and negative way.



James Gaag and Scot Kirton

I feel chefs here are really in love with cooking, not to say overseas chefs are not, but I feel SA chefs love coming to work every day and experimenting and having fun while learning. At least that's how it is at La Colombe.

What I learnt overseas were systems and techniques I hadn't come across in South Africa before. Ways of speaking to and teaching staff, cleaning routines, food preparation techniques and general management of staff. It really was an incredible experience for me and I would do it again in a heartbeat to learn and take from it what I did.

Both Raymond Blanc and his executive Gary Jones are inspirational, incredible leaders and what I learned there I will keep with me for my whole career.

■ ***What, in your opinion, makes a good kitchen great?***

Honestly, I think food is one thing... obviously, it has to be about the food first, but a good kitchen is made great by the staff that work in it.

Everyone has to have the same mentality, the same end goal and the same focus about food and work mentality and/ or ethics. They should be working together to achieve that goal, helping each other and learning from each other. I think in that way you constantly improve on the quality of the food being served... which brings you back to the beginning – "it obviously has to be about the food first".

▣ ***What has been most challenging for you in building your career?***

I think the most challenging part of my career has only just started. I think this is the point I now get to showcase MY food and try to leave an impression on the guests that eat at La Colombe; especially having such incredible chefs running the restaurant before me.

▣ ***Any advice for other young chefs?***

I think the age-old saying still rings true – "Hard work pays off".

I feel I have been incredibly fortunate and lucky to have been given a lot of opportunities in my life and career, but I also like to believe that I have worked very hard to achieve them and that this was recognised.

Young chefs need to know; hard work always pays off, because someone is recognising it, and their opportunity will come one day – so stick with it!

ABOUT ROBIN FREDERICKS

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