

'I don't want to hear anyone in Edinburgh complain about tourists ever again'

Chef Stuart Ralston of Noto and Aizle in Edinburgh, talks to Liv McMahon about the impact of the pandemic and his determination to keep going

When I ask Stuart Ralston, the chef extraordinaire who's worked under Gordon Ramsay and launched Aizle and Noto to great success, how he's getting on amid current circumstances, his answer emerges initially as a sort of groan. "I'd give it a six out of ten, I guess" he says.

This makes sense given I'm speaking to Stuart just days after he's made the tough decision to close Aizle at the Kimpton Charlotte Square Hotel, until Tier Three restrictions are lifted for the capital.

The financial strain of the summer, where restaurants struggled to rebound after months of lockdown, has been further stretched by new circuit breaker rules on cafes, pubs and restaurants around Scotland. For Aizle, which bases its fine dining experience largely around a unique tasting menu complemented by fine wine, the cost of staying open without alcohol sales to stimulate profit was simply too high. "We lost so much money over the summer that wages just don't work out without alcohol sales", says Stuart. "Even in stripping back completely we are still struggling, so unfortunately it felt like the best thing to do right now."

The peaks and troughs of this rollercoaster year for Stuart can be measured not merely in business terms alone. After Aizle's most successful year to date last year alongside opening Noto, 2020 was off to an exciting start before the pandemic set in, Stuart explains: "My wife and I had another baby in January. We've got Noto up

and running, as well as my second restaurant, and lots of things are happening – with some other projects also on the go."

Then lockdown hit. "It was literally the worst month it could have been for us, because March is the month where all our costs and our VATs collide." Cancelled bookings and sweeping changes, with Scotland's capital grinding to an eerie halt, meant that the following three months in lockdown were a struggle for Stuart and his team of hard-working, international staff. The original Aizle, based in Edinburgh's southside, closed its doors for good as Stuart set his sights on reopening Aizle at the Kimpton Charlotte Square Hotel in New Town. "It's certainly no mean feat to open up a restaurant, especially one in a hotel, during Covid times" he adds.

Reflecting on the difficult months of March and April, Stuart says he's glad he was able to stay level-headed and think rationally about the unknown road ahead. "No one does know how to manage a restaurant at this time" he explains, "so whatever decisions I'm making or anything that fails, at least I know it's not because we don't know how to run restaurants – it's because this moment has been so incredibly difficult."

Juggling so many responsibilities alongside caring for his young children, too, has brought its own challenges. Not that Stuart would shy away from these in a year of having to work twice as hard to get by. "I don't mind any



↑ Dishes, above and far right, by chef Stuart Ralston, main. His restaurant Aizle is closed at the moment but Noto is open three days a week and also offers a click and collect food service

amount of hard work" he attests, as we reflect on the fact that working running both a kitchen and a restaurant (or two, in Stuart's case) is quite a challenging job in itself.

"Even before Covid, being a chef or working in industry means you're always asked to do too much. There's always too much to do. Now, it's just like another level of that," he tells me. "You buy all the necessary PPE, all the equipment, sanitisers, screens, masks and then you are still shut down," Stuart adds, echoing the frustrations and fears of many like him who have had to reckon with climbing costs of constant pivoting.

With Christmas around the corner, the hope is that Stuart and his team will be able to enjoy some freedom from the pressures of Covid on the industry. "As with most things in the company, if something is good for me it should be the same for my staff, so no one works at Christmas."

He goes on, "that's something I still want to stick to even this year, especially because I've had staff that have been stuck here all year - who haven't had their holidays, haven't been able



to go and see their families abroad."

Rather than try and spend more time "trying to figure out what we should do, what we're allowed to do", Stuart will be enjoying a more toned down Christmas with his family. Usually, he tells me, Christmas sees him and his brothers (also chefs) take turns at cooking Christmas dinner for the family. But this year he'll be enjoying "a much quieter Christmas" with his wife and children,

taking advantage of a somewhat calmer period as we enter the new year.

For 2021, Stuart's main hope, he says, is "to hold onto both my restaurants and not lose any of my staff". As the promise of a vaccine boosts our collective yearning to get back outside, and indeed back into actual restaurants once more, Stuart is keen to give his customers the fine dining experience he loves to provide at both Aizle and Noto.

"Going forward all I can really do is hope that the goodwill of our customers is still there, because that's really helped us to stay true to ourselves and not have to do things we don't want to do or our guests don't expect from us."

When I ask, finally, how it will feel to see tourists flock to Edinburgh once more, Stuart's response is simply: "I don't want to hear anyone in Edinburgh complain about tourists ever again."

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