

# 'We dreamed of running a gastropub'

A love of good food and desire for a better family life led Ross and Philippa Williams to rural Herefordshire where they now run an award-winning gastropub

WORDS SALLY-JAYNE WRIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY CHARLIE GRAY



**R**oss Williams, 37, and his wife Philippa, 31, wanted more time with their three children. Ross loved cooking and entertaining. So three years ago, they both turned their backs on high-pressured PR careers in London and set out to turn a village local into a gastropub.

### Why did you make this change?

**Philippa** 'The problems started when I was pregnant with our second child and working three days a week. I felt being a part-time employee and part-time mum was too much of compromise.'

**Ross** 'Sometimes I'd work weekends as well and not see my kids for ten days at a time. It was crazy. I went to work before the children got up and came home after they were in bed.'

### Why a pub with food?

**Ross** 'I've always loved cooking for dinner parties. And I'd dreamed of running a pub ever since I ran the bar of a hotel restaurant in Sevenoaks, Kent, during my gap year. It was the late eighties and the place was full of city traders ordering Champagne – I had a great time! The idea of running a food-led pub bubbled away under the surface for a few years, but on Bonfire Night 2001, we suddenly made up our minds. Just eight months later, we moved into The Wellington.'

### How did you find the right place to buy?

**Philippa** 'We didn't have a clue about buying a pub, but we soon discovered that there are specialist estate agents. It's similar to buying a house. If you like the look of the place, you view

it – then, if you're still interested, you look into the business side. We viewed a dozen. Most had too

few bedrooms, or they needed major work, or they didn't have enough tables to guarantee the level of income we needed to break even.'

**Ross** 'The location was key. There had to be enough local people to support the venture while it was growing. The Wellington ticked all the boxes, as it's a local in a village of 1,000 residents, it has a six-bedroomed flat, a big garden, a catering kitchen and 60 covers. Three years on, I still think we were incredibly lucky to get it.'

### How did you raise the money?

**Philippa** 'We sold our three-bedroomed terraced house in London to pay for the pub'.

### You opened straight away, didn't you?

**Philippa** 'Yes. We arrived in Wellington at 10pm on a Sunday with our removal van. We closed the pub Monday night – it's normally shut Monday lunchtime, but not Monday evening – and we reopened on Tuesday with no pub experience whatsoever! Looking back, it was very brave, but we needed to keep trading.'

### How many staff do you have?

**Ross** 'When we took over there was a chef, two waitresses and a couple of bar staff. Today, we have two full-time bar people on a job-share, a superwoman called Louise who can do everything from front-of-house to bar to food prep, a roster of eight waitresses, a kitchen porter and a second chef. After a bit I took over the role of head chef.'

### How did you cope with no formal training?

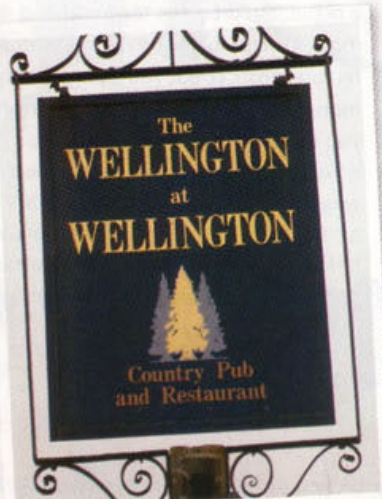
**Ross** 'Taking charge of the cooking was the single biggest decision I've had to make. I began when the full-time chef was off and stuck to the bar menu. Then we made Monday night – the night I cooked – sausage-and-mash night. But even that was a challenge at first! Cooking in a commercial kitchen couldn't be more different from cooking dinner parties at home. You need to juggle 15 different things at a time and have dishes ready to plate up within 20 minutes of being ordered. So it's all about preparation and organisation.'

### What else did you learn?

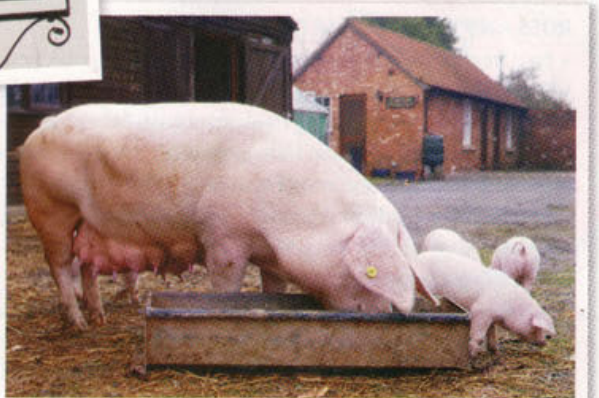
**Ross** 'To keep things simple. In one week, we might have a Sunday lunch, plus a promotional menu, possibly a bridge lunch as well as the à la carte and bar menus. It makes sense to have one dish which is sold on at least three of those five different menus.'

### Have you changed the food?

**Ross** 'When we took over, the kitchen had four freezers, two microwaves and two deep-fat ▶



Left: Ross buys his fruit and veg at Court Farm, Tillington. Above right: Ross and Philippa enjoy a rare quiet moment. Below right: As much as possible is sourced locally



## ● Working in food

fryers. Puddings were bought-in. Now there are only two freezers and a huge walk-in fridge. Everything, from hand-cut chips to oxtail braised in red wine to apple crumble, is freshly made. We keep things as seasonal and local as possible – so much so that within three months of taking over, we changed every one of our food suppliers. For example, some mornings I drive over to Court Farm, Tillington, to see what's good, so we may have asparagus picked that morning on the table by lunchtime. A butcher in Ledbury, David Waller & Sons, created a sausage – the Wellington – for our sausage-and-mash evenings, which he now sells in his shop.'

### Have you had any flops?

**Philippa** 'The previous landlord offered Dangerous Dinners on the first Thursday of each month – a 'pot luck' meal for £10. We changed this to Global Gourmet, set-menu dinners where we'd serve the cuisine of a particular country. It confused regular customers who wanted to book, but not on a theme night, and so we dropped it.'

### What drinks do you serve?

**Ross** 'This is a real ale pub and there are four real ales: two local house beers, such as Hobson's Best from Cleobury Mortimer and Wye Valley Brewery's Butty Bach, and two guest beers. Madonna's favourite, Timothy Taylor Landlord has been a best-seller. Tanner's supply our restaurant wines. In keeping with our ethos of selling local produce, there's even a Herefordshire sparkling wine, Lulham Court.'

### Do you advertise?

**Philippa** 'On the whole people visit a pub through word-of-mouth or because it's in The Good Beer Guide. Taking part in national newspaper restaurant promotions has also brought in new customers. We send out a newsletter whenever we have anything to announce, such as winning the Flavours of Herefordshire Pub of the Year award in 2005.'

### Are you making money?

**Ross** 'On paper we're making a modest profit, but

nothing that comes back to us personally! We're still ploughing money back into the business, so this is not a get-rich-quick scheme.'

### The worst and best bits about your business?

**Ross** 'Worst is it's a huge tie. You can't go away whenever you fancy or even take a two-week holiday together. You also don't get to spend evenings with your partner. On the other hand, I can take the older children to school and I can always get away to attend school harvest festivals and carol services.'

**Philippa** 'I do front-of-house at weekends. Having had the kids all week, I enjoy coming down for a glass of wine with the customers.'

**Ross** 'Three years ago, I wouldn't have believed we'd be running our own gastropub this quickly. It's a dream come true!'

### What are your plans?

**Ross** 'I'd love to offer homemade bread. Perhaps we could have a B&B, a farm shop or deli, or introduce the idea of a gastro-farm. My second chef, Chris Potts, is breeding pigs at the moment and we might even put his pork on the menu one day. You can't get much more local than that!'

*The Wellington, Wellington, Herefordshire, HR4 8AT, 01432 830367.*

#### HOW HAVE YOU MADE IT WORK?

- We bought a well-established business, in a populated area, not too far from a main road. You can succeed in a romantically remote location, but you'll need plenty of money in the bank to tide you over while you're building up your reputation.
- We introduced change very gradually. It was a shock for the villagers to hear that a couple from London, who'd never run a pub before, were going to take over their local. We had to reassure them the pub wasn't about to become a tapas bar!



Top: Future plans include running a gastro-farm. Above: With the money left over from the purchase, the dining room extension was refurbished to match the main dining room.



#### ROSS AND PHILIPPA'S SET-UP TIPS

- Be a freeholder, not a tenant landlord. Even if you fail, you should make money on your property.
- Sidney Phillips ([sidneyphillips.co.uk](http://sidneyphillips.co.uk)) and Fleurets ([fleurets.com](http://fleurets.com)) are specialist national estate agents. Bear in mind that big freehold pubs are becoming more scarce and more expensive, so you'll face stiff competition from large pub companies who are cash buyers.
- If you don't know one end of a catering kitchen from another, ask an expert to take a look. It's better to know in advance if you're going to have to invest £20,000 in new equipment.
- Respect your staff to do their jobs properly and don't be a control freak. We have heard of cases where the entire staff walked out because the new owners came in with an arrogant attitude.
- Make sure the business you buy has a premises licence. You will also need a personal licence (awarded after a one day course) to confirm that you understand your legal responsibilities. For course details contact The British Institute of Innkeepers (BII) on 01276 684449, or visit [bii.org](http://bii.org).