



The Shellfish Giant

When carpenter Neil Hall booked himself onto a cookery course in London, he never could have imagined where it would lead. The father of two developed a flair for cooking while he was working as a fireman in Stratton and Shrivenham, and took part in a three-day shellfish course a couple of years ago. From there he went on to start his own seafood business, The Fish House Seafood Company, and now travels around markets selling fresh fish and shellfish to people across the area. Neil, 52, of Stratton St Margaret, said "When I was working in the fire service, it was the ideal time for me to experiment and really get into cooking in a big way. I had a very ready audience. I honed my skills there and then, a couple of years ago, I went off on a three-day Red Letter Days course in Billingsgate. I bought it for myself. I absolutely loved it. The passion everybody has for shellfish down in the market is incredible". Unknown to Neil, he had been spotted by industry experts during the course and was invited to take part in a six-month City & Guilds vocational course. Someone put my name forward because of the work I produced and because of my enthusiasm. They only have 12 places a year, he said. After finishing the City & Guilds course, Neil bought an ex Ocado refrigerated delivery van, and had his logo put on it. Neil, who also owns his own carpentry business, TFH Woodworking, now balances being a fishmonger with being a carpenter. He attends Swindon Farmers Market at Swindon Designer Outlet on Sundays from 10am until 4pm, as well as Melksham Market on Tuesdays from 8.30am until 3pm. He is hoping to start attending more markets soon.

When I approached the farmers' markets they were jumping at the chance to have fresh fish. It fits in with the market ethos of sustainability and knowing where produce comes from. It felt really natural as soon as I started at the markets. It wasn't nerve-wracking at all. It took me about three months to get ready and I was really keen to get out there and do it. Neil's selection of fish includes sea bass, cod, bream, gurnard, plaice, lemon sole, dower sole, salmon, snapper, mullet and trout. His shellfish selection includes lobster, crab, scallops, whelks, winkles, mussels and clams. Salmon and cod are the most popular but because I'm there and advising people how to cook other fish, people are taking more chances. I give them tips on having a go with things like gurnard, which people wouldn't normally buy because they wouldn't know how to cook it. In the last few weeks, the feedback I have had from the customers has been brilliant. Even in that short time, I have built up such a regular clientele. People like the fact they can see the product and it's not behind packaging or a piece of glass. I do everything at point of sale. I will do whatever people want – I fillet and gut it for them if they want. I have had people watch me and then ask if I can leave the rest so they can try it at home. They learn what to do by watching me. People are willing to have a go. I love it. I love the enthusiasm other people have got for it too – not only the customers but the people I deal with too.

Neil picks up the shellfish from Billingsgate, which has mostly been sourced from around the UK. The oysters are from the Essex coast, the mussels and the clams are from Devon, the lobsters are Scottish and the crabs are from Devon. Neil's fish includes varieties from Dorset, Cornwall and Devon, and he selects it all personally from his suppliers. I wouldn't sell anything if I thought it was a bit off. There is no point, because as soon as you have sold it someone is disappointed and you will probably never see them again. The initials of 'The Fish House' Seafood Company spell TFH, in memory of Neil's father, Terence Frank Hall, who died in 2012. Neil, who has been a carpenter for 30 years, has also renamed his woodworking business after him. My dad would be really chuffed. He was really into his fish and shellfish, whelks in particular. We would always go to

Weymouth or Poole to go mackerel fishing,. This has all come round for a reason. He would absolutely love it. I know he would come to the markets even if it just meant sitting in the van. As well as fish mongering, He also provides catering for outside events, village shows, fetes and private functions. Options include; traditional shellfish, whelks, cockles and winkles; oysters and champagne; authentic paella, seafood and meat; seafood chowders; or classic English fish and chips.

Evening Advertiser 16th May 2014