



A vision for better food

A kitchen in a quarry: why Charlie Bigham's food campus was named a Riba building of the year

The award-winning Somerset kitchen – built for the king of home meals – is designed with people, local wildlife and sustainability in mind. Rosie Mullender finds out how it was done

Charlie Bigham is chatting to me via video call from a room with a view. From his desk at his company's kitchen in Somerset, Bigham can see 30-metre cliffs, and wildlife that includes peregrine falcons. This morning, he walked to work through 20 acres of wildflower meadows where six species of bee thrive.

It's a strikingly unusual home for a manufacturer - but then the way Bigham approaches all aspects of his food business is anything but run-of-the-mill.

"When I was looking for a new site for a kitchen in the south-west, I had a few simple questions that I asked of each option," he tells me. "There were sensible ones such as: 'How big is it, and how much does it cost?' But my last and most important question was: 'Does it have a bit of magic?'"



Charlie Bigham heading to the Somerset kitchen's entrance that is used by everyone working there. Photograph: Emli Bendixen/The Guardian

"We viewed over 30 spots before we found a huge, disused quarry, which fits perfectly with what we're trying to do at Charlie Bigham's - plus it meant we didn't have to plough up a beautiful green field to build our kitchen, which was a great start."

Before Bigham built the sister kitchen to his HQ in north-west London in 2017, the quarry near Wells had lain untouched for 25 years. The plan from the outset was to work closely with architects to create a workplace that wouldn't displace local wildlife, and would be built with sustainability at its heart.

"When I first came here, it felt a bit like being on the moon," says Bigham. "It was completely empty and desolate, although there was some resident wildlife here that had found a nice place to be, which we tried to work with and even enhance.

"Five years on, we've got a population of great crested newts and six species of bat, which we monitor. We have two nesting pairs of peregrine falcons, plus various badgers, foxes and rabbits. It's really diverse - and I'm delighted to say there's actually more wildlife here now than when we arrived."





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With the help of a local conservationist, tonnes of soil were brought in to plant the wildflower meadow that surrounds the kitchen. Locally harvested seeds were used, while special lighting and drains have been built to protect the bats and newts. “We’ve also built a bat house, so they have somewhere to go if they’re feeling a bit shy,” Bigham laughs. “There’s always a lot of detail to consider, but it’s fun.”

Inside the kitchen itself, Bigham is working towards his goal of hitting net zero when it comes to carbon emissions – a target he thinks food manufacturers, in particular, should aim for.

“If you’re in food production, you’re very close to nature, and everyone has a significant part to play in the amount of carbon we’re producing,” he says. “Something like flying is a choice, but we can’t just stop eating – so that means food producers must commit to reducing their impact.”

For Charlie Bigham's, this commitment includes sending zero waste to landfill for the past 15 years, making packaging from wood and ceramics instead of plastic, and being an early adopter of green electricity, beginning more than a decade ago. And now, the Somerset kitchen is striving to do things even better.

"We had the privilege of designing a building from scratch, which meant we could design energy-saving mechanisms into it that are really hard to retrofit," says Bigham. "We're on a journey to reduce our energy and water use per dish, so we're about 25% more energy efficient here compared to our older kitchens, thanks to things such as LED lighting and better refrigeration and cooking equipment.

"Three years ago, we put £250k of solar panels on the roof, which means we generate around 10% of our own electricity, and we're putting more in soon. We also clean up our water at our own wastewater treatment plant, then discharge it, carefully monitored by the Environmental Agency, into the local river. It means we're taking responsibility for our own problem, rather than leaving it to somebody else to deal with."

The company's interest in sustainability extends beyond the site's borders. Close by is a bike path, part funded by the company, making it simple for employees to walk or cycle to and from Wells. Links to the cathedral city have been further cemented by the company taking part in the annual Wells food festival. Its involvement - including a live cook-along for festivalgoers this October - is about giving back to the local community, as well as boosting business.

"This is our sixth year of supporting the festival, and this year our charity partner, Chefs in Schools, is featuring," says Bigham. "They inspire young people to eat different foods and learn how to cook, but are currently only London-based. We're hoping the festival might create a catalyst for getting them to work with local schools here in Somerset."

Chefs in Schools is just one of several charities Charlie Bigham's works with, and the design of the Somerset kitchen reflects one of Bigham's other chief passions: people. Liaising closely with the architects he hired for the build, he ensured the kitchen was designed to create a harmonious working environment, connecting its occupants to nature and each other.

"How people get in and out of the building, and how they interact with it and other people in it was very much part of our brief," says Bigham. "For example, we've got lots of natural light here, which is very unusual in a manufacturing environment. Because we're in this amazing location, we have windows everywhere, strategically placed so our people can connect with the landscape."

One of Bigham's favourite details about his kitchen is one of the design elements that led to it being named south-west building of the year 2018 by the Royal Institute of British Architects. It's an easily overlooked feature - but one that neatly sums up both the man, and his determination to do the right thing when it comes to the business of food.



The old quarry is now buzzing with life - insect, animal and human. Photographs: Emli Bendixen/The Guardian

"It's a small but really significant thing, and one I'd love other businesses to follow: we only have one front door," Bigham smiles. "At some point in the murky past, manufacturers began building one door for the people who work in the office, and another for everyone else. And that seems to me very old fashioned and fundamentally wrong.

"When you start creating different entrances, where does it stop? Does that mean there's one set of loos for some people and another set for others? Because that's not right either. So we only have one front door, one set of loos, and one cafe, which means we all have lunch together. It's valuable, it's important - and it's the right thing to do."