

Better late than never

A midlife career change led Paul Bellchambers to give up his global marketing role in the IT industry to follow his passion for cooking.

At the age of 52 he has launched his own business, offering restaurant-quality meals made from locally-sourced ingredients, which he delivers free within a six-mile radius of his home in South Oxfordshire.

Mr Bellchambers put his toe in the water cautiously at first with a part-time course at Thames Valley University to qualify in professional catering. Then he took the plunge by working in the kitchens at Raymond Blanc's famous restaurant, Le Manoir Aux Quat Saisons at Great Milton.

He said: "It was fantastic experience, but it's a young man's job. Some of them start at 8am and don't finish until almost midnight. It's a tough environment.

"With my corporate experience, I felt I would rather do it for myself."

He converted half his garage into a dream kitchen, and put into practice his 'think local' philosophy by cooking 40 individual meals and delivering them to 40 of his neighbours in Moulsoford.

"I think they were a bit surprised to get a free meal. Some of them contacted me to say they wouldn't be using me regularly, but they would consider it for special events. It's certainly raised awareness."

He also sold his services at a local charity auction, to raise money for Moulsoford

Pavilion, and leafleted local villages such as Cholsey and Goring.

Business has been growing slowly since he launched his company, The Late Chef, in November — helped by his regular appearances at Wallingford's Saturday Produce Market.

He said: "I've done several dinner parties and buffets, and canapes for a drinks party for 40, as well as selling meals at the market. I've got several customers who order regularly from the website."

He is passionate about using local suppliers where possible. Vegetables come from a producer in Benson, and he uses local butchers.

"I aim to cut down on food miles as much as possible and be

environmentally friendly. My motto is 'buy local, cook local, eat local'.

When he needs help with large functions he can call on his partner, Carolyn, though he aims to do most things himself.

"It's a very different life," he said.

"If things had been different, I might have started this when I was a bit younger, but I'm enjoying it. Put me in a kitchen and I'm happy. It's a much better life than sitting in an office, like I used to.

"It's taken me a bit of time to work out exactly what to do, and I'm still developing it."

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