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Extracts from article written by Fiona Sims – photo by Tom Stockill

There was a great picture in *Taste* magazine of John Burton-Race hunched over a plate, moving like a surgeon, sweating concentration. In his shadow was **Nigel Marriage**, moving in tandem, tuned in to a frequency sharpened after 10 years together at L'Ortolan.

Both men speak at a racing pace, arms waving, eyes red. The actor Lenny Henry takes lessons for his obsessive TV character in *Chef*. Raymond Blanc, on his last visit to their kitchen declared them insane.

"We leave them behind, me and John" admits Marriage, talking about the rest of the kitchen staff who suffer their private jokes and try to keep up.

Marriage already knows what Burton-Race is going to do before he does it, he says "In the kitchen on a Saturday night it can get quite scary. You have to have total concentration. I have to know what he's just about to do and how it works – he'll look at the board and I already know what he's reading, know what he's about to call next." They bounce off each other, emotionally that is – aggression in the kitchen is verbal only, I am assured.

Marriage cheers Burton-Race up when business is not so good, when "chef gets a bit depressed. I can always tell, so I try and dig him out." How? "I start talking about food".

This is how Marriage gets his kicks. "Honestly. I never complain about anything, I never ask for a pay rise. John gives me money when its due. If the food's good, that's the driving force. Second Chef. Second best? No. Not at all. Not here.

His story starts at Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons in 1983 where Burton-Race and **Marriage** vied for supremacy. "There was a bit of a fracas between us," confides Marriage, "but it was good after that. Now we're like brothers."

Burton-Race brought Nico Ladein's old place within humming distance from the M4 and opened L'Ortolan with his wife Christine in 1986. Marriage went with them.

"I suppose most sous chefs want to open their own restaurant one day. I look at this place and I think this is all I want in life," says the 39 yr old **Marriage**. "I am really happy to see people out and enjoying their food. If they say the food's not good, I get upset, John gets upset."

The carrot is Michelin. Three stars is what they want and nothing or nobody will stand in their way. "If John said 'sorry Nigel, your sauces aren't three stars – you have to go,' he would do it. I'd love to be part of a team (all British) that gets three stars, adore it in fact," he adds, "anyway, my sauces are three stars."

Limping slightly, Marriage goes to pour himself another coffee. Polio weakened his right leg when he was a child. "I left school at 16 and wanted to go into the Navy, but was told I wouldn't be able to balance if the ship was rocking around."

Marriage went off to Portsmouth Catering College instead. A job at the Savoy followed.

"It was Trompetto in charge in those days. He was a hard man. He used to walk around with an apron rolled up like a truncheon under his arm – put the fear of God into you!"

Marriage softens when he mentions Joyce Molyneux. He talks fondly of his time at Dartmouth's Carved Angel. Molyneux started **Marriage** off as a waiter so he could appreciate their job. "I wasn't very outgoing at this stage. I found it very difficult to talk to people, so it was good for me." Marriage's face lightens up when he remembers how he used to cook and serve when the restaurant was short-staffed. "We did this dish with Calvados and apples where you would flame it in the kitchen and run through the dining room with it – wonderful!"

Marriage travels, collecting recipes from restaurants and produce found along the way which he takes back to Burton-Race. Mentioning a recent trip to New Zealand gets him going about Hoki. Forget the tasteless version available here: fresh out of the kiwi waters it rivals cod. A visit to Jeremiah Tower's Stars in San Francisco unearthed a ravioli of potato with a truffle sauce. "It has been on the menu on and off for two years now, it goes well with game."

The conversation drifts on to ingredients. From the daily-changing lunch menu the escalope of tuna, marinated in lime, fresh coconut (flesh and milk), ginger and cumin came, with a light curry sauce, made from the marinade, plus excitement from the kitchen. "Our fish supplier told us he had some tuna from Cornwall: we thought, 'tuna from Cornwall?' Must try that.' It's delicious."

Game is top of his list. But then **Marriage** makes a surprising admission – he gets emotional every time a bird is delivered. "I love wild-life. When a snipe is delivered with all its feathers with beautiful markings, I almost start crying." He gets one of the other chefs to pluck it for him. "Ten I'll cook it as best I can, to give it a good send-off. If it's overcooked I get really upset – the bird dies for nothing."

Suppressing a giggle, I discover L'Ortolan is named after a rare bird eaten to near-extinction by the French: that Marriage is a member of the RSPB (Royal Society of Protected Birds) and is an avid bird-spotter.

The manic speech and steely gaze melt away revealing a rather shy, soft-centred sous chef who grows unusual vegetables "just to see how they work". And bakes the week's bread at home after Sunday night service. "The lads can't believe I do that."