CASE STUDY // OPHEEM

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OPHEEM

WILLIAMS GIVES AKTAR ISLAM "COMPLETE CONTROL" TO EXPERIMENT

Two-Michelin-starred Aktar Islam masters food ageing with Williams meat ageing refrigerators

Opheem is the only two Michelin star restaurant in Birmingham, and one of just two Indian restaurants in the UK to achieve this. At its core, this level of fine dining demands a seamless synergy between quality ingredients, technique and personality. Aktar Islam, chef and proprietor of Opheem, explains it simply. "We're in a business of flavour. Any process which we adopt has to be for that reason."

The restaurant's menu focuses on seasonal British produce, but through the the culinary practices, history and flavours of Indian cuisine. It combines classic approaches with modern techniques and aesthetic. For Aktar, Opheem's marriage of cultures is emblematic of its setting, his home city of Birmingham.

"I think over the last sixty years one thing Birmingham has always been good at is adopting new cultures," says Aktar. "The food scene here is incredible. To be part of that is really important to me." Although Birmingham also formed his upbringing and culinary roots, Aktar spent years working in restaurants in Argentina, renowned globally for its outstanding quality of beef. Unlike the UK, where beef is often dry-aged for 28 days before it is sold, much of Argentinian cuisine favours fresh, unaged cuts.

"For me personally dry ageing brings out the best in the beef," says Aktar. "As a nation we're renowned for it; it's something I've been doing for years. We don't do this process of dry-ageing for vanity or for the sake of doing it. There is a tangible benefit. When you get meat, fish or poultry that has been aged, it tends to intensify the flavour."

> "I've always opted for Williams Refrigeration because I find it to be very dependable. That's really important when it comes to refrigeration."
> **AKTAR ISLAM**

Growth is at the heart of Opheem, having transformed its kitchen three times since its opening in May 2018. In light of this, and the importance of using dry-aged ingredients on the menu, Opheem recently purchased three Williams meat ageing refrigerators.

"I think the decision to install three Williams dry-agers into the kitchen is important. It's very much part of the journey we're on," says Aktar.

Before installing the Williams meat ageing refrigerators, Opheem would often rely on its suppliers to dry-age its proteins. This had its limitations as the level of customisation required was not always possible. The team would often end up with "makeshift" dry agers, particularly when ageing fish. Upon installing the three Williams meat agers, all dry-ageing was able to move in-house. "Now we dry-age all our proteins. We have control over the entire process."

Of the three Williams meat ageing refrigerators currently installed, one is used for poultry, another for beef, and the third for fish. All require different conditions and so flexibility and control is essential. For Aktar, the Williams units allow for this.

While dry ageing brings out intense flavours, it can also transform the cooking of the protein in question. "With poultry we've found the skin is lovely and crisp by removing some of that moisture in the drying process.

Same with fish, it really helps the marinades actually stay on the fish as opposed to dripping," says Aktar. Given the fish at Opheem tends to be chargrilled over charcoal, this has been vital at improving the cooking process and maximising the overall flavour and finish of the fish.

"With beef, we find we get a far better sear. That Maillard process, where we really build up layers of flavour, I find so much easier with a lovely dry-aged piece of beef."

Of all the protein Aktar currently dry-ages, beef is given the longest. "We're getting at least two and a half months out of it" says Aktar. "The quail we're using at the moment is aged for a week, and the fish for four days.

"For me having the three meat agers, having that flexibility, being able to experiment and find what works for me, that's really important and that's something I've got now which I never used to have before."

AKTAR ISLAM

The equipment at Opheem was supplied by Vision Commercial Kitchens Limited. Aktar's relationship with Vision is longstanding, having worked with the company's managing director, Jack Sharkey through multiple projects over the last fifteen years. The kitchen at Opheem has itself had three renovations in a six year period since its opening in 2018, and for Aktar, Vision has been on board every step of the way.

"I love working with Vision because they understand exactly how I operate and what I want. They work with me to create the perfect kitchen for my needs."

"Aktar's vision, precision, and constant drive for innovation make every project we collaborate on truly special," says Jack Sharkey of Vision. "Integrating the Williams meat ageing units gave Aktar the exact control and consistency he's been looking for.

"The specification had to allow for different humidity and temperature zones and the Williams units delivered that perfectly. Seeing how Aktar and his team are now using them to refine flavour and elevate texture is exactly why I love what we do at Vision. It's not just about supplying and installing equipment — it's about enabling culinary innovation."

While other meat agers are available on the market, Aktar chose Williams Refrigeration.

Location also plays a part. Williams being a British company was a big draw for Aktar when it comes to reliability and availability. "I think because Williams is a British product manufactured in Britain, if I ever do have any issues, it's all there. Labour, service and after care; they're always able to support you."

Although the three cabinets currently age poultry, beef and fish respectively, the ever-evolving menu at Opheem demands constant reinvention and experimenting, and for Aktar, dry-ageing has potential beyond meat and fish.

"Ageing is something that most ingredients benefit from. It's incredible what you can do. Now we're looking at what we can do with vegetables as well because the possibilities are endless."

"I've been behind this movement for well over two decades and the Williams Meat Ageing Refrigerator is something I wholeheartedly recommend. I think your customers will love it."

AKTAR ISLAM

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