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Hospitality ‘on a knife edge’ as it looks for support to survive

Industry leaders agree that second lockdown will destroy yet more businesses after months of reduced trading, curfews and tier systems

By Katherine Price

Hospitality in England has been described as “on a knife edge” and in need of as much financial support, if not more, than was provided during the first lockdown.

Pubs, bars and restaurants in England will be required to close from 5 November until 2 December, except for take-away and deliveries.

Hotels and accommodation services have been told to only open for those who must travel for work purposes and other exemptions. Funerals can be attended by a maximum of 30 people, while weddings and civil partnership ceremonies will not be permitted unless in exceptional circumstances.

The government’s furlough scheme will be extended throughout November, with the government once again providing 80% of employees’ salaries. In addition, business premises forced to close in England will be eligible for grants of up to £3,000 per month.

Boris Johnson confirmed the lockdown on 31 October, although the details were leaked well ahead of the press conference.

This second lockdown will see the closure of non-essential shops, leisure and entertainment venues and people told once more to stay at home. From December it is expected that the country will return to a tiered system according to local and regional trends and data.

Johnson said he still “believes passionately” that the tiered

system introduced last month “was the right thing to do” and said: “We will continue as far as we possibly can to adopt a pragmatic and local approach in the months ahead but... we’ve got to be humble in the face of nature and in this country, alas, as across much of Europe, the virus is spreading even faster than the reasonable worst-case scenario of our scientific advisers.”

During the press conference, England’s chief medical adviser Chris Whitty said the prevalence

of Covid had been increasing “extremely rapidly” over the past few weeks, with around 50,000 new cases a day and rising, with increases in cases in “virtually every part of the country”.

Chief scientific adviser Sir Patrick Vallance said projections suggested the second wave of coronavirus had the potential “to be twice as bad or more compared to the first wave”.

Johnson said that “no responsible prime minister can ignore” the projections, that there was no alternative and “unless we act, we could see deaths in this country running at several thousand a day”.

He added: “We must act now to contain this autumn surge.”

A statement from trade body UKHospitality said: “Public health objectives are, rightly, the motive for the new measures, and for that reason we entirely support whatever proportionate action is necessary.”

“The costs to hospitality businesses of a second lockdown will be even heavier than the first, coming after periods of forced closure, the accumulation of mass debt and then significantly lower trading due to the restrictions of recent weeks.

“The sector was hit hardest and first, and this recent shutdown will hurt for months and years to come. The extension of furlough for a further month does help to protect our workforce during this difficult time.

“If hospitality, the sector that is our country’s third-largest employer, is to survive and help drive economic recovery,



“We will need a full support plan far beyond the lockdown period to save our great British pubs and brewers”

Emma McClarkin



it will need equivalent – or more – support than that of the first lockdown.

“Hospitality businesses have already been pushed to the limits, with many closures already. For those that have survived, viability is on a knife edge, as is the future of the tens of thousands of businesses and hundreds of thousands of jobs that depend on hospitality, including through its supply chain, right across the country.

“It is critical that businesses are given a lifeline to survive the winter, before being given the support to enter a revival phase in 2021, as the nation’s prospects improve. A clear roadmap out of lockdown and through the tiers will also be vital for businesses to plan their survival, and the safeguarding of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

“It is important to remember that some parts of hospitality, such as nightclubs, have not even been allowed to reopen. The support for those, now that potential reopening has been kicked further into the future, must be redoubled to ensure that they are not lost forever.”

The British Beer & Pub



SHUTTERSTOCK

Association said the 28-day lockdown will result in thousands of pubs and many of the breweries that support them being lost, unless the government urgently provides the sector the same or greater levels of support than it did for the first lockdown.

Chief executive Emma McClarkin said: "As a sector we are of course devastated to have

"This recent shutdown will hurt for months and years to come"

UKHospitality

to close our pubs and are fearful for their future, but we recognise the situation and that the spread of Covid-19 is serious.

"Make no mistake, this could be the final straw for thousands of pubs and brewers. It will also create major disruption to our supply chain partners, whose businesses are now also at severe risk.

"The level of financial support will need to be the same, if not greater, than that provided for the first lockdown earlier this year. This means grants for all pubs sufficient to cover ongoing fixed costs, and compensation grants for Britain's brewers, who will also be permanently devastated by the lockdown.

"The news of the extension of the full furlough scheme is welcome, but we await the full detail of it, and will need a full support plan far beyond the lockdown period to save our great British pubs and brewers.

"A clear, early signal on an economic stimulus package from April next year is a vital element of this. This includes extending the business rates holiday and the hospitality VAT cut, and support on beer duty."

Martin Williams, chief executive of M Restaurants and Gaucho, welcomed the extension of furlough, but also called for the extension of the rent moratorium, business rates holiday and VAT relief until June 2021 to "give genuinely good businesses in hospitality the opportunity to come out the other side of this".

He added: "It is essential that we reopen in December, without curfew and, most importantly, without the one household restriction. The Tier 2 and 3 rulings make almost all hospitality businesses non-viable and we need to return to the 'rule of six' as the worst-case scenario."

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Outrage over lockdown leak and ban on takeaway beer

There has been anger in the industry around the early leak of details of the lockdown and confusion around restrictions.

David McDowall, chief operating officer of Brewdog, tweeted: "When France and Germany announced further lockdown, it was accompanied by extensive support measures for impacted sectors. Here, we find out on Twitter, with not a word about how the millions of livelihoods affected will be protected. Shocking."

Oklava co-founder Laura Christie said it was "beyond a joke that this is how we receive announcements of this magnitude", while Lucknam Park chairman Harry Murray said it was "irresponsible and extremely damaging", causing

confusion and cancellations at a time when many businesses are "already struggling to survive".

And although the prime minister said the lockdown will end on 2 December, chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster Michael Gove has said this could be extended.

UKHospitality chief executive Kate Nicholls (pictured right) criticised the comments as "deeply unhelpful for businesses trying to plan to stay afloat and save jobs".

She said the trade body would be lobbying for a change to guidance which, as *The Caterer* went to press, stated that businesses could deliver alcohol but, unlike the last national lockdown, cannot sell sealed containers of alcoholic drinks to takeaway in person from their premises.

Nicholls said this would cut off a "vital revenue stream" for many businesses, while James Calder, chief executive of the Society of

Independent Brewers (SIBA), called the ban "nonsensical".

The Campaign for Real Ale (Camra) national chairman Nik Antona said: "Offering alcohol for takeaway was a lifeline for many pubs, and particularly breweries, during the first lockdown in England. It is a baffling and damaging decision to remove this option, particularly when other businesses such as supermarkets can continue to sell takeaway alcohol.

"Pubs and breweries were already reporting losses and the risk of closure before Christmas; this will only add to the risk of permanent closures within the next few months. Camra and the entire pub and brewery industry are urging the government to reverse this bizarre decision and ensure the survival of our pubs and breweries."



Brewdog

BaxterStorey's parent company WSH acquires Bartlett Mitchell

By James Stagg

BaxterStorey's parent company Westbury Street Holdings (WSH) has acquired caterer Bartlett Mitchell.

Co-founder Wendy Bartlett and the senior team will remain in their posts as part of the deal, which will see the business continue to run under its own operational structure.

Bartlett Mitchell saw its turnover grow by 27% in the year to 23 October 2019, reaching £57.9m. The B&I caterer also saw pre-tax profits more than double in the period to £2.5m. Documents filed with Companies House put the growth down to new business wins and "continued client satisfaction".

Pre-pandemic Bartlett Mitchell ran the catering at more than 100 locations and employed more than 1,000 people. Since the period end, Covid-19 forced many of the business's sites to close temporarily. But the directors stated: "Previous focus on creating a financially resilient company with strong client relationships means we will be able to weather these storms while still being able to take advantage of any opportunities in our market as they arise."

Like all caterers exposed to the business and industry market, Bartlett Mitchell had been significantly impacted by Covid-19 with its main market of office employees all working from home.



Co-founder of Bartlett Mitchell Wendy Bartlett (pictured right) will remain in her post, working alongside BaxterStorey co-chief executive and WSH director Noel Mahony (pictured left)

Bartlett said that the deal would provide the business with "greater career opportunities and increased financial security".

She said: "Bartlett Mitchell and BaxterStorey bring together market-leading training and people development

expertise, talented teams and a strong focus on sustainability. Our BM family will benefit from greater career opportunities and increased financial security due to the company's presence in multiple sectors, and their growing presence across Europe."

"It's an increasingly challenging time for the sector, but together we are stronger"

Noel Mahony

Bartlett, who founded the business with Ian Mitchell in 2000, added that Bartlett Mitchell's clients would now benefit from the combined resources of the businesses at a time when all caterers are examining their business models.

"With the workplace changing, this is a pivotal moment for our sector and this positions us ready and committed to seize this opportunity," she said.

BaxterStorey co-chief executive and WSH director Noel Mahony added: "I am delighted to welcome Wendy and the Bartlett Mitchell family to our business. Our industry is facing its toughest challenge to date and our combined resources will enable us to accelerate innovation and create a compelling food hospitality offer, building an even more resilient business. It's an increasingly challenging time for the sector, but together we are stronger."

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Gordon Ramsay announces new site

Gordon Ramsay has announced plans to open a new Street Pizza site in London's Southwark.

The celebrity chef announced the restaurant would be launching on 5 November, before the confirmation that England would be entering a second lockdown on that date with restaurants required to close. It is unclear when the site will now open.



At the time he said: "You may think it's crazy opening a restaurant across these torrid times, but we are going to bounce back and we have to get this economy kickstarted and back to where it was."

The Southwark opening will be the chef's third Street Pizza site in the capital, joining outlets in Camden and St Paul's.

The opening has been planned for 12 months.

Street Pizza will specialise in bottomless pizza and cocktails and has been designed to showcase graffiti-style artwork.

Earlier this month Ramsay announced he would open the UK's first Gordon Ramsay Burger site at Harrods in London's Knightsbridge this year.

Jamie Oliver's parents sell Essex pub

Jamie Oliver's parents have sold their Essex pub, the Cricketers in Clavering, after 44 years.

Trevor and Sally Oliver are retiring and have sold the property to Chestnut group, which runs 12 pubs, inns and restaurants across the east of England.

The Olivers bought the Cricketers in 1976 and it was where their son Jamie first discovered his love of cooking.

Trevor Oliver said: "We have had an amazing time running the inn, which has been our home for the last 44 years. We brought up our children, trained and supported hundreds of staff in the hospitality sector and made many friends for life. But with a great team and strong support from our loyal customers in place, we felt it was the right time to move on."

"So, we have taken the decision to hand over the keys to Chestnut and look forward to seeing the next phase in the life of the Cricketers from the other side of the bar."

Philip Turner, founder of Chestnut, said there are no plans to make any "significant changes" to the pub in the short term.

He added: "We are delighted to have acquired the Cricketers, an inn we've wanted to add to our growing collection for some time."

"The way the business is managed – with a strong emphasis on good-quality food with accommodation – makes it a perfect fit for our collection."

"We will focus on maintaining its well-deserved reputation. We do, however, look forward to getting to know the team and guests and building on all the hard work and energy Trevor and Sally have put into the business over the years."

"While some may question if this is the right time for us to acquire the Cricketers, our view and commitment is long term."

Chestnut's other properties include the Packhorse Inn in Moulton near Newmarket, and the Rupert Brooke in Grantchester on the outskirts of Cambridge.

AA reveals red star hotels and outstanding contribution award for Kate Nicholls

London's 11 Cadogan Gardens has been awarded five red AA stars, with three further hotels receiving four stars



11 Cadogan Gardens was the only hotel this year to win five red stars, the top accolade from the AA awards

By Katherine Price

The AA has announced its latest round of red star winners, celebrating the country's best hotels, as well as a new award for Outstanding Contribution to the Industry, awarded to UKHospitality's chief executive Kate Nicholls.

London's 11 Cadogan Gardens was awarded the maximum five red stars, while four red stars were given to Forest Side in Grasmere, Cumbria; Linthwaite House in Windermere, Cumbria; and the Swan in Southwold, Suffolk. Three red stars were also awarded to the Pig at Bridge Place in Canterbury, Kent.

Further to the red star announcement, the AA has created a new award to reflect and acknowledge the work being done in the face of new challenges being presented to the hospitality industry by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Outstanding Contribution to the Industry Award has been presented to UKHospitality chief executive Kate Nicholls in recognition of her work supporting the industry and lobbying on its behalf to government throughout the pandemic.

Nicholls has worked in hospi-

tality since 1993, holding roles in public affairs and strategic communications across the industry. She is also chair of the Tourism Alliance, chair of the Mayor of London's Night Time Commission, and a member of a number of industry supporting boards and initiatives.

During the pandemic, she has led UKHospitality in bringing together the hospitality sector to codify messaging, lobby the government for support and clear guidance, and introduce key guidelines and safety measures to allow the industry to operate within a constantly shifting landscape.

Simon Numphud, managing director at AA Media, said: "There is no denying that it has been an immensely difficult time for the hospitality sector, but we have seen hotels across the UK and Ireland rise to the occasion, providing the public with fantastic experiences and enjoyable stays despite the challenges of Covid-19. Providing outstanding hospitality is an impressive feat at any time, but is particularly notable now, and we are delighted to be able to recognise the hard work and creativity of our red star winners."

"It is also vital to recognise

the individuals in the industry who have stood out in their efforts to campaign on behalf of the sector and its businesses as a whole. Kate Nicholls has worked tirelessly to ensure the hospitality industry has a clear and unified voice and that its concerns are heard at government level."

Nicholls said: "I'm hugely honoured to receive this award and would like to thank the AA for the recognition of the tireless work, dedication and devotion that's been taken by the whole UKHospitality team, because this is really an award for my whole team. I'd also like to thank all of the individual members of our industry who have been so supportive throughout our campaigning work with government. Thank you, and I hope that we can look forward to a better 2021."

The announcement of red star winners by the AA follows last week's reveal of this year's AA rosettes, with recipients including the Ritz London, Ocean restaurant at the Atlantic hotel in Jersey, Muse in London, and the Latymer restaurant at Pennyhill Park hotel in Bagshot, Surrey.

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ONLY 1% OF HOSPITALITY VENUES LINKED TO TEST AND TRACE INCIDENTS, STUDY FINDS

A survey of more than 20,000 hospitality venues found just 1% had been linked to NHS Test and Trace contact incidences.

The study covered members of trade bodies UKHospitality, the British Institute of Innkeeping (BII) and the British Beer and Pub Association (BBPA) and was conducted by CGA.

It found that respondents from more than 22,500 outlets only reported 275 NHS Test and Trace incidences.

The trade bodies say the findings show that pubs, restaurants and hospitality venues are Covid-secure.

PIZZAEXPRESS TO CUT 1,300 JOBS IN THE UK



SHUTTERSTOCK

PizzaExpress will cut 1,300 jobs across its UK estate as Covid-19 continues to impact dine-in trading.

The casual dining group said footfall had fallen since September, following the success of the chancellor's Eat Out to Help Out scheme in August, with city centre sites particularly hard hit. Roles will be lost across PizzaExpress' 370 restaurants through a combination of voluntary and compulsory redundancies.

The announcement comes less than two months after the business shed 1,100 roles and closed 73 sites through a company voluntary arrangement (CVA).

HOSPITALITY SALES DIVE BY 48% IN THE THIRD QUARTER

Hospitality sales dived by 48% in the third quarter of 2020, equating to a year-on-year fall of some £17b.

Sales for the 12 months to the end of September totalled £80.3b. The figure is £53.2b less than the £133.5b the sector contributed to the UK economy in 2019, the latest tracker from UKHospitality and CGA has found.

CONDUIT CLUB SEARCHING FOR NEW HOME AFTER ENTERING ADMINISTRATION



The team behind London's Conduit Club say they are "committed" to reopening in a new location following the site's closure.

The Mayfair club (pictured) has shut its doors and entered administration, two years after its launch.

The business entered administration after talks to purchase debt owed to its bank MetroBank broke down, according to *The Sunday Times*.

REJECTION OF EDINBURGH ROYAL HIGH SCHOOL HOTEL PLANS 'DEEPLY DISAPPOINTING'

Plans to transform Edinburgh's historic former Royal High School building into a luxury hotel have been rejected by the Scottish government.

Urbanist Hotels and Duddingston House Properties (DHP) made an initial bid to develop the listed building in 2015, but it was turned down by the City of Edinburgh Council.

The developers have continued to challenge the decision and pressed forward with scaled-down proposals to turn the building into a "world-class" luxury hotel run by Rosewood.

But ministers said the revised plans would damage Edinburgh's position as a World Heritage Site.

TASTY REPORTS LOSSES OF £11m BUT HOPES TO AVOID CVA

Tasty, the operator of brands including Wildwood and Dim T, has reported post-tax losses of £11m in a trading update, but said that it hopes to avoid a CVA.

The group said all options were being explored, but "with creditor assistance, a more formal procedure, such as a CVA, may be avoided".

Of its 55 restaurants, 48 are open and trading. One in Wales has been closed due to the national lockdown, and there are "no immediate plans" to reopen the remaining six closed sites, which Tasty said are at risk of permanent closure.



BREDBURY HALL ON THE MARKET FOR £5.25m FOLLOWING CLOSURE



Bredbury Hall Hotel & Country Club in Stockport (pictured) has been put on the market for around £5.25m.

The property has been closed since March and its parent company Newco Ventures entered administration on 9 October.

Now administrators FRP Advisory have instructed property consultancy Lambert Smith Hampton to find a buyer for the

site, which includes a 200-cover Marco Pierre White Steakhouse, Bar and Grill restaurant, a lounge bar and brasserie, and a nightclub with capacity for 900 guests.

BRIGHTON PIER GROUP REVENUE DOWN 29.4% AT £22.6m

The Brighton Pier Group, which owns and trades Brighton Palace Pier as well as eight indoor mini golf sites and 12 bars nationwide, has reported a 29.4% decrease in revenue this year to £22.6m.

In the group's trading results for the year ended 28 June 2020, it said the prolonged closures earlier this year resulted in impairments to goodwill, property, plant and equipment and right-of-use assets totalling £8.1m. Of this, £7.2m relates to its bars division, much of which remains unable to trade.

FIRST LONDON HOTEL DESIGNED BY MARTIN BRUDNIZKI TO OPEN SEPTEMBER 2021

A new 57-bedroom hotel called the Broadwick Soho is set to open next September and will be the first hotel in London designed by Martin Brudnizki, behind Annabel's and Sexy Fish.

Situated on the crossroads between Broadwick Street and Berwick Street, the site is privately owned by a "group of friends" and trading under Broadwick Street Holdings.

The food and beverage concepts will be operated in partnership with Jamie Poulton and chef Ed Baines, founders of Soho seafood restaurant Randall & Aubin.



PREMIER INN OWNER WHITBREAD REPORTS £724.7m LOSS



Premier Inn owner Whitbread has dropped from a £219.9m pre-tax profit in its 2020 financial year to a statutory loss of £724.7m in its interim first-half results of 2021.

Statutory revenue was also down 76.9% to £250.8m and adjusted earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, amortisation

and restructuring or rent costs (EBITDAR) dropped from £426.7m to a loss of £153.7m.

However, Whitbread said this was "in-line with expectations", reflecting the closure of most of its estate earlier this year, and insisted it "remains well-placed to capitalise on the enhanced structural growth opportunities" that will emerge.

NEW TENANT FOR WROXALL ABBEY

Trinity Hotel, a consortium of private investors, has agreed to take a new 100-year lease at Wroxall Abbey Hotel & Estate in Warwickshire, which closed and fell into administration last year.

The consortium is said to be made up of individuals who have previous operational experience in hotels located in the UK,

Middle East and Asia, and will be refurbishing and redeveloping the estate over the next few months. Paresh Thakkar and John Nair are listed as persons with significant control of the business on Companies House.

RICKI WESTON PROMOTED TO HEAD CHEF AT WHATLEY MANOR



Ricki Weston (pictured) has been promoted to head chef at Whatley Manor near Malmesbury, Wiltshire, and will be working directly under executive chef Niall Keating.

In his new role, he will help oversee all food and beverage offerings at the hotel, including the two-Michelin-starred Dining Room, Grey's Brasserie, room service, afternoon tea and private dining.

Weston has been working at Whatley Manor for more than two years, having previously worked at the two-Michelin-starred Restaurant Sat Bains in Nottingham.

POLIZZIS PUSH REOPENING OF THE STAR IN ALFRISTON TO MARCH 2021

Olga and Alex Polizzi have announced that the revised reopening date for the Star in Alfriston, East Sussex, will be 1 March 2021, to allow them to refurbish the building.

The Grade II-listed, 15th-century property was planned to reopen this year; however, Olga said: "We have decided to cope with the continuing uncertainty due to the ghastly virus by bringing forward our Phase 2 schedule."

The room count will be reduced from 37 to 30, as 12 of the property's smallest bedrooms and bathrooms will be combined to create eight larger bedrooms.

CRAFT GUILD OF CHEFS LAUNCHES MENTOR SCHEME

The Craft Guild of Chefs has announced the launch of a new mentor scheme with Chris Galvin, Anton Edelmann and Sarah Hartnett already signed up as mentors.

With the challenges of Covid-19 still affecting the hospitality

industry, the association said the timing was right to launch a scheme to support chefs who are seeking to develop their careers.

Interested members can apply to be mentored by sending an email to mentoring@craftguildofchefs.org. There are no limitations on who can apply.

'HUGE QUESTION MARKS' SURROUND EAT OUT TO HELP OUT STUDY

UKHospitality has said there are "huge question marks" around data presented by Dr Thiemo Fetzter of the University of Warwick, which claims between 8% and 17% of infection clusters could be attributed to the Eat Out to Help Out scheme.

In response the Treasury has commented: "We do not recognise these figures – which as the study itself admits, are 'back-of-the-envelope' calculations."

Dr Fetzter presented the calculations after analysing data including how infection rates were impacted on days with heavy rainfall during lunch and dinner hours, where there was a lower take up of the discount scheme.

Public Health England data has consistently shown that transmissions attributed to hospitality are below 5%, significantly lower than those seen in schools, workplaces, hospitals and care homes.

ASHLEY TINOCO APPOINTED HEAD CHEF AT SAM'S RIVERSIDE



Ashley Tinoco (pictured) has been promoted to head chef at Sam's Riverside in London's Hammersmith.

Tinoco was born in India and moved to London in 2016. He has worked at the Rib Room at the Jumeirah Carlton Tower hotel in Knightsbridge and Adam Handling Chelsea.

He was appointed senior sous chef under Harvey Trollope at Sam's Riverside ahead of its launch in November 2019. Following Trollope's move to France last month, he will now oversee the 15-strong kitchen team, as well as the selection of homemade dishes sold at the recently launched Sam's Larder, a grocer and delicatessen adjacent to the restaurant.

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Make no mistake: there's some sublime food coming out of the open kitchen of today's restaurant. Highlights include a dessert of stiff meringue with a satiny, purple quenelle of blackberries and a scattering of the fat, glossy fruit.

But I'm not going to bother to painstakingly deconstruct and issue judgment on every dish at Eldr. Because the place itself gives me the absolute pip.

At the entrance stands a woman at a podium. "Greeter" seems like a misnomer for a frosty number who manages to ooze snootiness from behind a mask; quite the achievement, really. Behind me a customer is agitating at having to wait, her antsy caramel-coloured dog matching her cashmere clothing and inflated caramel-coloured lips.

There's a hand-sanitiser station at street level with a sign reading "Smile with your eyes while your beauty has to be kept undercover", making my own eyes roll like a fruit machine. After that, nada. The place is bursting at the seams and we're directed to share a table for four with another two people. Eh? Social distancing is clearly for plebs. No sanitiser on the tables. Staff lean in to point out every constituent of each complex plate, breathing on us



"We're directed to share a table for four with another two people. Eh?"

as loose masks slip right down, fingers nearly touching the food as they intone "reindeer", "caviar" (really?), "dill oil". We're sharing everything, but have to ask for sharing cutlery. It makes me rage for the places following all the rules only to still wind up staring down the barrel of bankruptcy. In no way do I blame the patient and friendly staff for this. I blame management: it's a training matter.

Price: meal for two, including 12.5% service charge, £183

Marina O'Loughlin is appalled by the lack of Covid safety measures at the Nordic-inspired Eldr in the new Pantechon development in London's Belgravia

The Observer

Jay Rayner forgets all that is bad with the world in celebrating the pleasure of dining at Townsend, a restaurant inside the Whitechapel Gallery in London's East End

It's not the sort of restaurant to make you swoon at inventiveness, or dazzle you with shiny ideas. It's a place where you go with a friend so as to get lost in the chatter, only then to clock just how well you are being fed.

It's all there in the restaurant's DNA. The head chef is Joe Fox, who used to run the kitchen at Petersham Nurseries. He was recruited by Nick Gilkinson, who has previously worked at the bistro Anglo and, more significantly, the delightful café at the Garden Museum by Lambeth Bridge. Like the

latter, this feels like a dining room designed to keep the world at bay.

There are four starters and four mains, some of which read as little more than assemblies of great ingredients. Take quail's eggs, treacle-cured trout and purple sprouting broccoli. Go on. Take them. You know you want to. The eggs are soft boiled so the doll's house yolks lubricate the plate. The folds of lightly cured trout have been brought to room temperature. There is a dribble of vinaigrette across the broccoli. You fork it away as you talk and soon realise, looking down at the very last scraps, that you'll miss it when it's gone. The same is true of a salad of soft-roasted, spiced aubergine, which has been removed from its skin and cubed, with roasted peppers and a snowfall of rowdy Ticklemore cheese.

Prices: snacks/starters: £4-£9; mains: £16-£21; desserts: £6-£7; set menu: £20; wines: from £24

The Daily Telegraph

Keith Miller enjoys "thoughtfully conceived and skilfully cooked" food "served with grace and assurance" at Fourth and Church, a restaurant-come-wine shop in Hove, East Sussex

It's a welcoming, contemporary space, if not a wildly characterful one, with a bar along one side and reefs of wine bottles covering the other. The menu is eclectic but essentially quite tapas-y, though chef goes up a gear (grills, a tasting menu) in the evening.

We had some 'nduja croquetas (excellent, with a slightly rough, crumbly texture); a gem salad with "maple miso"; fried chicken with gochujang and "kimchi remoulade"; blue corn tacos with mackerel, pickled

jalapeño and apple and "marjoram slaw"; some fantastic cured trout, of that almost wine-gum-like firmness and translucency one longs to encounter, on crispbreads; a dessert of frozen lime curd with Zeitgeist-approved pink peppercorns; some cheese, almonds and lovely pickled veg. Unsurprisingly, their wine game is strong.

I've been racking my brains trying to put my finger on why Fourth and Church, for all its many evident strengths, didn't quite make my soul sing. I suppose in a strange way it's something to do with that assurance – and the palpable reassurance that this cohort of Hovians was drawing from it. I found myself wondering whether it might be possible for a neighbourhood restaurant to anticipate the tastes of its neighbourhood a little too frictionlessly.

Price: lunch for two, £130. Rating: 4/5



HM Government

UK TRANSITION



How to keep your food exports moving

From 1 January 2021, there will be a new Export Health Certificates system for exporting animals and animal products to the EU.

Find out more at gov.uk/transition

**UK'S NEW START
LET'S GET GOING** 

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Openings

Evelyn's Table

The opening of Evelyn's Table has been a long time coming for chef brothers Luke, Nat and Theo Selby, who were originally set to launch the restaurant in April before it was delayed by the coronavirus lockdown.

Located in the converted beer cellar of the Blue Posts pub on the edge of London's Chinatown, the restaurant comprises a 10-seat chef's counter, reduced from 12 covers due to social distancing.

Luke was previously head chef at Mayfair's Hide Above when it won a Michelin star in 2018 and has cooked at Restaurant Gordon Ramsay and Balmond Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons. He has been labelled as one to watch since winning National Chef of the Year 2018 and the 2017 Roux Scholarship.

At Evelyn's Table Luke and his brothers cook a £55 five-course menu, which will change monthly and make use of Japanese and French techniques.

Sommelier Honey Spencer, formerly of Nuala and Noma Mexico, runs accompanying wine bar the Mulwray, serving fine and natural wines.

Opened 27 October

Founders Luke Selby, Theodore Selby, Nathaniel Selby, Honey Spencer

Typical dishes Marinated mackerel, plum umeboshi and shiso; squid noodles and mushroom dashi, chestnut and sansho; tarte tatin, clotted cream and miso

Website www.theblueposts.co.uk/evelyns-table/



Extra openings



Vaasu by Atul Kochhar

Atul Kochhar's second Marlow restaurant has opened for dine-in customers, having been takeaway-only since July. Vaasu offers both an à la carte and a seven-course tasting menu.

Opened 26 October

Founder Atul Kochhar

Design Dynargh Design

Typical dishes Old Delhi-style classic tandoori chicken supreme, butter chicken, corn salad, mint chutney; sweet and sour pumpkin, panch phoron

Website www.vaasurestaurant.co.uk



All's Well

Chantelle Nicholson has launched a three-month pop-up in London's Hackney, which will celebrate organic wines and zero-waste cooking. More than half of the menu is plant-based.

Opened 29 October

Founder Chantelle Nicholson

Typical dishes Barbecued Lion's mane mushroom on toast; caramelised celeriac, tahini, green sauce; crispy fried whole sea bream, smoked cucumber

Website www.wherellswell.com



Middle Eight

Shiva Hotels has opened a luxury lifestyle hotel in London's Covent Garden, on the former site of the Kingsway Hall hotel. Middle Eight features 168 bedrooms and 12 suites, 'living walls' made of ferns, moss, trees and water features, and the Sycamore bar and restaurant.

Opened 28 October

Operator Shiva Hotels

Room rate Double rooms from £150 a night

Design Tonik Associates

Website www.middleeight.com



Please email your new openings to openings@thecaterer.com



Telegraph hotel

Coventry's Telegraph hotel is opening to guests after a two-year, £15m development. Located in the former offices of the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* newspaper, the hotel features 88 bedrooms, a Winter Garden private indoor terrace, and an all-day bar and restaurant.

Opening 18 November
Operator Bespoke Hotels
Room rate Doubles from £53
General manager Amy Windsor
Website www.telegraph-hotel.com



Yard Sale Pizza

Yard Sale Pizza is opening its first restaurant in south London. The group will be launching further restaurant collaborations, which in the past have included Monty's Deli and Mangal 2.

Typical dishes New Porker pizza: Sicilian sausage, Guindilla chillies, garlic, basil; TSB pizza: tenderstem broccoli, Parmesan, pine nuts, and garlic
Founders Johnnie Tate and Nick Buckland
Website www.yardsalepizza.com



Rudie's

After building up a following through pop-ups in London's Shoreditch and Borough Market, husband-and-wife team Matin and Michelle Miah are opening a 50-cover restaurant in Brixton. Meats and fish will be marinated for 24 hours, before being grilled over charcoal in a steel drum.

Opening 10 November
Founders Matin and Michelle Miah
Typical dishes Jerk chicken, 'rude' sauces, jerk gravy; curry goat, rice, peas; ackee and saltfish
Website www.rudieslondon.com



Chantelle Nicholson
Chef-owner, Tredwells
and All's Well

Inside track

Who opens a restaurant in a pandemic? Well, I decided to do it. Faced with the harsh reality of feeling helpless and somewhat stuck, All's Well was the thing that revived my energy and motivation.

Pre-Covid, I was looking for a big shiny space into which I could move Tredwells. I had a tentative 'yes' from the bank for a loan and I was actively looking, almost signing up to a site in the City.

Fast-forward eight months (and what feels like one million years later), Covid has certainly changed things. One of those for me was learning more about the notion of the circular economy, which affected my perspective on moving forward. Shiny and new has lost its appeal in some respects; repurposed, used or

the operational infrastructure was in situ. We did a lot of DIYing and bought what we needed second-hand. My intention was not to purchase anything new. Apart from a handful of things where I couldn't find an alternative, we managed to achieve it.

I have never actually opened a restaurant as 'the chef'. I was always on the operational side of things – so slightly at arm's length from the critique of the food. Not so these days, but I'm happy I waited until now to do it. Unfussy, tasty food and great produce is much more important to me with the benefit of experience on my side. Downsizing to about one-tenth of the kitchen space I have been used to at Tredwells has been an adjustment. At a squeeze, we can fit three of us in the kitchen (which I found out, rather brutally on Friday night, is needed).

All's well that ends well

While some may say it's mad to open a restaurant in a pandemic, **Chantelle Nicholson** is taking the challenge in her stride

“Shiny and new has lost its appeal in some respects; repurposed, used or pre-loved wins. And it's much more achievable financially”

pre-loved wins. And it's much more achievable financially to allow things to happen.

So, on to All's Well. Am I mad, some may say (and have said)? To be honest, it is a relatively low-risk venture, and the risk of not doing it seemed much greater from an emotional perspective. It's a short-term lease and most of

I'm enjoying cooking again, without the formality of needing to organise everything to the nth degree, which was the whole reason I got into this industry in the first place: for my love of food and cooking. A circular economy of my own, perhaps.

Writing this on Sunday, I now need to think of what to do during this next lockdown. I always knew it was on the cards when I signed on the dotted line for the site, thus I feel more prepared, both emotionally and operationally than the first-time round. The timing is frustrating, as we have had a really great opening week, but there are still bills to pay and people to keep motivated, so we will crack on with creating a delivery and takeaway offer. Being part of a neighbourhood community was always top of my list, so I am keen to keep that moving forward.

There is not much more to say at this point in time apart from good luck to everyone trying to navigate these uncharted, and very rocky, waters. Look after yourself and let's hope all's well that ends well.



Dishes from All's Well



HM Government

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-  Change
-  Go

Battle royale

Alongside suffering the fallout from the Covid-19 crisis, the Queensberry hotel in Bath has endured a devastating fire and a positive diagnosis of the virus for its owners. Laurence Beere shares the hotel's journey of resilience over the past seven months with *Janet Harmer*

After 16 years of building up the Queensberry hotel to become one of the leading boutique offers in Bath, Laurence and Helen Beere felt able to relax and enjoy running the four-AA-star, 29-bedroom business. In 2019 the Grade II-listed, Georgian property had just completed a £1.3m refurbishment programme, while business was booming at its Olive Tree restaurant following the award of a Michelin star the previous year.

"We were on top of things, cash flow was in the best shape and our three children were grown up, so our personal overheads were improving," says Laurence Beere. "Helen and I were enjoying our business without the immense worries and pressures that had gone before."

Then, of course, Covid-19 happened and, like every other hospitality operation in the country, the Queensberry was knocked for six. But there was more to come. Just four and a half hours after the Beeres closed the hotel on 22 March, a day ahead of the announcement of a national lockdown, a fire caused £500,000 worth of damage at the property. And then, six months later, the couple themselves diagnosed positive for Covid-19, delaying the planned opening of the Olive Tree restaurant for two weeks.

Recalling the 14 days leading up to the closure, Beere lays bare the trauma of that time: "Bookings were cancelled and revenue coming into the business stopped overnight, but we still had overheads to settle, including payroll. It was very scary.

"We have had many challenges since taking over the hotel in 2003, including the 2008 banking crisis, when we got caught up in interest rate hedging problems. But this time I genuinely thought we were going to lose everything. We had gone from a positive cash flow position to a point where we were going to need a £150,000 overdraft in a matter of weeks."

A meeting with the Queensberry's bank manager threw the Beeres a cash lifeline.

"Our experience of banks in the past was not good, with no support when times had previously been tough. But we had recently moved to Barclays and completed a refinancing of our senior debt on 28 February. We were told that Barclays liked our business and was going to continue supporting us."

Following the announcement by the chancellor Rishi Sunak on 23 March of the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CBILS) to help small- and medium-sized businesses, the Queensberry became the first to draw down such a facility via Barclays.

"The bank had the confidence in our business and our ability to service an additional £450,000 debt on top of our existing £3.8m facility. The amount was granted on the basis that we would be closed until October, after which we would possibly reopen with a nominal income."

Despite knowing the bank was behind them, the final days prior to closure were tough, with virtually no business exacerbated by a number of nasty phone calls demanding instant refunds on non-refundable, non-amendable reservations. "It was devastating for the team,"

Facts and figures

The Queensberry hotel
4-7 Russell Street, Bath BA1 2QF
01225 447928
www.thequeensberry.co.uk

Owners Helen and Laurence Beere
Head chef Chris Cleghorn
Hotel manager Joss Roussanne
Restaurant manager Owen Farr
Bedrooms 29
Staff 40
Consortia Mr & Mrs Smith, Sawday's, Condé Nast Johansens



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK CLEGHORN

Helen and Laurence Beere

says Beere. "But, equally, we had some very supportive people getting in touch saying they would support us when we reopened. It is the ying and yang of human nature."

Up in flames

After saying goodbye to the final guests on 22 March, Beere returned home and closed his eyes, the pressure and exhaustion of the previous weeks finally catching up with him. Two hours later he was awoken to be told that the hotel was on fire.

The forensic investigation that followed found an extractor fan that had been replaced a few months earlier had not been wired correctly, causing arcing across the connections. The wooden cladding on the extract ducting at the back of the hotel went up in flames, resulting in burning material falling into the basement, causing a secondary fire that destroyed the kitchen.

And so began the long process of dealing with the insurance company, which assured Beere that the hotel's reinstatement policy would pay out, followed by the redesign of the kitchen. "Our chef Chris Cleghorn was fantastic. Together we worked out every element of what had been destroyed to put to the loss adjusters and set about the refurbishment."



“What we went through was awful in every sense of the word, but our team is now closer, having learned a lot about each other”



The Old Q bar



The process of rebuilding was the closest Beere says he has come to experiencing depression, despite enduring major traumas in his personal life, including the death of his daughter Isabel 22 years earlier and then being told that her twin, Alice, was unlikely to see her second birthday. Although Alice suffers from a complicated medical condition and has endured a bone-marrow transplant, she is still here today.

“Dealing with the aftermath of the fire was very isolating as so many people were furloughed, but I am hugely grateful to Helen for being my rock and ensuring I was fed and watered at the end of each day, and my amazing management team – Chris, Joss Roussann and Owen Farr – for supporting us.

“There has been a lot of talk around mental health, especially during the past six months. Our industry is about caring and hospitality – we look after our guests and we look after each other in our team. What we went through was awful in every sense of the word, but our team is now closer, having learned a lot about each other during this shared experience.”

Back to the new normal

The doors of the Queensberry eventually reopened to guests on 1 August as a bed and

◀ breakfast, due to the kitchen still being out of action. Initially, only a skeleton staff was brought back from furlough, as occupancy was forecast at around 20%-25%. However, within five days bookings came flooding in, with occupancy eventually settling at 81% and 80% in August and September respectively, dropping back to 74% in October. "We were slightly down on our normal summer occupancy of the low 90s, but we far exceeded our expectations, which meant we were able to bring more people back to work, which is what everyone wanted."

Pre-Covid, the hotel employed 45 staff. Today the number is 40, with the five no longer with the team having left in the interim of their own accord. No one has been made redundant and there are no plans for anyone to lose their jobs.

"We are being much more flexible now," explains Beere. "That is how we had to operate as a B&B, with everyone involved in everything, from chefs working in housekeeping to reception staff doing room service. If anyone tests positive for Covid, that person will have to isolate and other members of the team will have to step in. Everyone is happy to do that as everyone is happy to be back at work."

The need for the team to be supportive is an extension of the way the Beeres have always aimed to run the Queensberry – in an empathetic, anti-corporate manner. "Anyone looking closely at the way we run the business might say we don't run it very well because we don't necessarily have strict procedures. But what we do have is a value standard, which is all about caring for one another. If a member of the team is having personal issues, Helen and I are here to support them."

"We are both here every day and we will do everything we need to do to ensure the team is OK. When staff shortages were a massive issue, and Chris was still finding his way as head chef and trying to drive up standards, I put my whites back on and became his commis to help take the pressure off. That kind of support goes a long way among the team."



Disaster strikes again

The opening of the Olive Tree was initially set for 1 October. Six days earlier the kitchen was handed back to the hotel by the builders and the team were gearing up for the launch. However, that evening, Beere started to cough and, following official advice, drove to Cardiff for a Covid test.

"The result was positive and so we immediately isolated the senior management team and pushed back the restaurant opening by two weeks," he says. "We had been fully booked and as a result the delay cost us £35,000 in lost business."

While not suffering extreme symptoms, Beere did experience extensive fatigue and spent 10 days in bed. Meanwhile, Helen and Alice also tested positive. "Alice catching Covid was bloody terrifying, as chronic lung disease is one of her long-term challenges and she



The Olive Tree



had originally spent 18 weeks shielding. But, the virus didn't go to her lungs and instead attacked her gut. She has now come out the other side and is back at college.

"Thankfully, we've all come through it. I'm not going to do a Donald Trump and say don't be afraid of the virus – I say do be afraid, it's a nightmare. Somehow we remained positive and focused on overcoming it and moving forward."

Beere knows that he caught Covid by attending a meeting at an external office. "I think the reality is that if I had stayed in the hotel, I would have been far safer. The hospitality sector is so much better at cleaning, and we have elevated our normal practices to create a Covid-secure environment. The government's attitude toward blaming hospitality for the spread of Covid makes me very cross."

The Olive Tree finally opened on 13 October and has been virtually full every evening since, as well as during the three lunch sittings it operates from Friday to Sunday. Pre-Covid, the restaurant would serve around 50 covers on Friday and Saturday evenings and around 25-28 during the other nights of the week. Now, with social distancing in place, the maximum number of covers that can be served is around 35, which is being achieved nearly every evening of the week.

"We're now doing more consistent business at both lunch and dinner than we were doing before Covid," says Beere. The eagerness of customers to return to the Olive Tree follows on from the excellent year of business in 2019 when restaurant turnover grew by 40%, following the award of a Michelin star in October 2018. Growth in business allowed the Beeres to increase the size of the kitchen



Oversupply in the Bath hotel market

Laurence Beere has long been a critic of planning decisions taken by Bath and North East Somerset Council, which have led to what he calls “a significant oversupply” of the capacity of hotel rooms in the city.

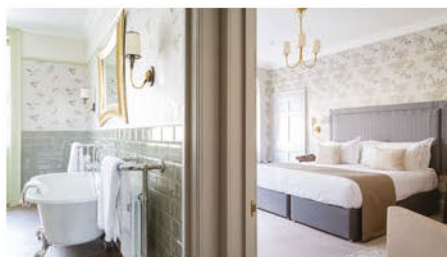
Following a study by the council of the Bath hotel market in 2015, an avalanche of new developments have been given the go-ahead. New hotels in the city include the 177-bedroom Apex City of Bath, Gainsborough Bath Spa (99 bedrooms) and the just-launched Hotel Indigo (166 bedrooms). Meanwhile, a Hampton by Hilton (209 bedrooms) from Dominus Group and a business hotel (up to 130 bedrooms), operated under an unspecified brand within the multi-use

Bath Quays North development, are under development. Plans by Singapore-based Fragrance Group to turn the Grade II*-listed Royal Mineral Water Hospital into a 167-bedroom hotel were turned down in September.

Beere says that the new supply, together with the growing presence of Airbnb, has resulted in a precarious situation for the Bath hotel market, with a lot of businesses – particularly the traditional bed and breakfast and guest house market – being badly hit. The failure of the Bath Visitor Information Centre to open after lockdown due to being “no longer economically viable” has compounded the problem.

“The common misconception is that Bath is doing well,” explains Beere. “It is a popular city, but oversupplying it has destabilised the market.”

The plethora of new, large hotels and disappearance of many smaller businesses has, Beere believes, provided an opportunity for the Queensberry. “With just 29 bedrooms, we are a niche, unique, boutique hotel. Everything we do is service-orientated, offering the likes of valet parking for guests’ cars.”



brigade, ensuring the chefs now work a maximum of 50 hours per week.

Meanwhile, average room rates have been holding up well, with the VAT reduction helping and the completion of the bedroom refurbishment last year providing greater confidence to price rooms accordingly. “Our marketing strategy has been to move our positioning up within the market. Our product is the best it has ever been and we want to be the boutique alternative to the luxury market in Bath. We are deliberately pricing ourselves as slightly more expensive than we were, and we are not getting any push back on that. Bath, like much of the south-west, has benefitted from people coming out of London and major cities to stay with us.”

A budgeted room rate of £150 on reopening has been surpassed, with an average rate

of £187 achieved during August and September and £195 in October, compared to £136 in October 2019. “There has been much debate as to whether hospitality companies should pass on the 15% discount in VAT to customers. But I believe the chancellor put the reduction in VAT in place to help the industry recover. Certainly, when VAT has gone up in the past, no one was willing for us to put up our price; that is something we absorbed.”

The Queensberry and the Olive Tree now appear to be back on track, but that is all supposing nothing else comes along to derail the business and, in the current world, anything is possible. With a further lockdown in place, the hotel still has the CBILS facility behind it.

“Our cash position is reasonable as we have been trading since August when we weren’t expecting to,” says Beere. “I would like to see the

VAT and business rates reductions extended, at least for the whole of 2021. It is not just the short-term – we’ve also got to think about long-term recovery and we’ve got to consider paying back another £450,000 on top of everything else.”

Beere has come to realise the importance of ensuring that debt in a business needs to be one that you can afford to service, while using money from the good times to reinvest in the operation, as well as put some aside as a reserve to recover from the hiccups life can throw at you.

“I made the mistake in the early days of being over-extended, of being over-confident. It took us a long time to get back from that. And finally, after having got it right, Covid came along. But we believe that this is a good business and – with the support of the bank – that is why we have kept fighting.”



“We want to represent the seasons of the UK but add some Mexican hints to it”

Santiago Lastra



Kol, calm and collected

Mexican chef Santiago Lastra's new restaurant Kol has opened in London in what is undoubtedly one of the toughest trading environments the capital's restaurant scene has witnessed in generations. Lastra explains his vision to *Neil Gerrard*, of finding an expression for Mexican food using the best British ingredients





Santiago Lastra knows better than most what a comfort good food and hospitality can be during tough times.

The Mexico-born chef had only just discovered the joy of cooking when, aged 15, his father, grandfather and grandmother all passed away within the space of a month.

Having found inspiration to get into the kitchen by unusual means – a recipe for crab dip on the back of a packet of Ritz crackers that he happened upon in a supermarket – Lastra had by this stage started to work in a local Italian restaurant.

The family bereavement hit him and the rest of his family hard. “I didn’t want to go back to school. I really liked the restaurant, the vibe and the feeling of making something with your hands. I went back and I felt safe. It was something I wanted to do. I brought food home and cooked for my brother and mother, and in that moment, I was happy,” Lastra recalls.

“We were enjoying a meal that I cooked and it was a life-changing moment. If you are so sad, and something that you did can make people feel good in such a difficult time, that is special. It was what I wanted to do for a living.”

Lastra, now aged 30, has taken that philosophy and applied it to the full, travelling the world in the process. For the past three and a half years, however, he has been in London and, as far as he is concerned, it was the natural choice for his new restaurant opening, Kol, in Marylebone.

“London’s guests are my favourite,” he asserts. “You feel a beautiful vibe of excitement

Whole grilled octopus, bone marrow, roots, seaweed macha



“If you are so sad, and something that you did can make people feel good in such a difficult time, that is special. It was what I wanted to do for a living”

Santiago Lastra

and people like stories and culture. It is a place where even if you are here for just one day, you don’t feel like you are a tourist. You feel like you belong because it is such a multicultural experience.”

Kol was originally supposed to open in April, but coronavirus punctured that particular plan. October, with all the fretting over a second wave, 10pm curfews, tiers, and all the other challenges, may not seem like the obvious time to reschedule the launch. But Lastra is determined to see it through. ▶



Squash sorbet, rattlesnake chilli, mezcals

Thinking back to the grief he and his family felt when his father and grandparents died, he says: “We are facing something similar now to what I faced back then. Times are difficult and people are sad. You can lift people up through good food. The best thing we can do is to try to make people feel better.”

It’s a simple and noble aspiration that fits with the concept behind Kol, which takes its name from the Spanish word for cabbage. “We wanted to find something humble and turn it into something special. We want to express Mexican culture through British ingredients and the amazing stuff you have here,” he explains.

Kol sits within a 5,000 sq ft new-build unit on the site of a former police station, owned by the Portman Estate. It was the first site Lastra saw, and even though he and business partners Jake Kasumov and Marco Mendes (the duo behind Portuguese piri-piri restaurant Caso do Frango near Borough Market) went on to view up to 40 more, this was the only one for the Mexican chef. “It’s a nice neighbourhood with a lot of great institutional restaurants so we wanted to be part of that,” says Lastra.

Despite the modern setting, Lastra, Kasumov and Mendes want Kol to feel like walking into a big house in Mexico, one where you are welcomed and taken care of. As you enter, you are greeted by a huge frame containing heritage corn husks woven together, made by Mexican artist Fernando Laposse. Warm tones and textures reinforce the homely feel, with a kitchen made up of three islands set in the middle of the dining room. To the back sits a Mexican comal (a cast iron plate to make tortillas) while the fire pit has a chimney that adds to the domesticated air.

The furniture has been custom-made by Milanese designer Alessio Nardi’s A-nrd studio, while vintage clay pots, some of which are 150-200 years old, have been rescued from Mexican backyards to adorn the walls in the rear of the restaurant.



Noma and the nomadic chef

After graduating from high school in Mexico, where he worked in an Italian restaurant from the age of 15, Lastra headed for Spain, where he worked at Michelin-starred Europa in Pamplona.

At the age of 19, he returned home to attend the Coronado Institute culinary school in Mexico City, before heading off to Spain once more to the world-renowned, two-Michelin-starred Mugaritz near San Sebastián.

When he was 24, he bought a one-way ticket to Copenhagen, arriving with just €50 in his pocket. He sent out emails to 100 restaurants asking for a job and slept on the floor in an empty flat. “You have to see it as an adventure. I didn’t speak English well and I had no clue

what people were saying in service. I would go home super-tired. But then the next day, I woke up, go in with a smile, learn the language and work hard,” he says.

Among the places Lastra worked while in Denmark was Noma offshoot Nordic Food Lab, where he worked on a culinary research project entitled ‘The secret of the tortilla’. He had already moved to Russia when he took a call from former Noma pastry chef Rosio Sanchez, who spotted one of his dishes on Instagram and wondered if he was interested in talking to Noma head chef René Redzepi about a job.

That job turned out to be project manager of Noma Mexico in Tulum, which opened in 2017. “Working at Noma with

René was really important for me in terms of understanding culture,” says Lastra. “He was a mentor and we travelled round Mexico together, discovering. He gave me the chance to understand my culture and what quality means.”

Over the following two years, Lastra cooked in kitchens around the world, taking in 27 countries, including France, Italy and Taiwan, as well as returning to Mexico to study indigenous cooking. “We use different ingredients at Kol but we don’t change the essence of Mexican cooking,” he says. “It needs to be respectful.”

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“You can lift people up through good food. The best thing we can do is to try to make people feel better”

Santiago Lastra



Seared lamb leg tostada, guajillo mayonnaise, wild herbs, corn crisp



◀ Downstairs is a private dining room in muted concrete tones that can accommodate 22 people, with its own test kitchen and chef's table. During the pandemic, it has been set up as three tables of four that can be booked on Friday and Saturday evenings and Sunday lunchtime. A mezcaleria serving Mexico's famous agave-based spirit, headed up by former head bartender of the Savoy's American Bar Maxim Schulte, is due to open soon.

The menu

Kol's menu will offer a five- and six-course option for £55 and £70 respectively, with no à la carte in order to avoid waste. "This allows us to be more organised. We can minimise the hours and make our staff [of which there are 32 in total, including 12 chefs] work more efficiently, and we can also curate the best experience for the guest," says Lastra. "And we don't want this to be a restaurant where you spend too much money so that it ends up being a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The two prices make it a more accessible meal."

Both menus start with a seaweed and chilli broth, and while the chilli may be imported from Mexico, the seaweed travels only a short distance from the coasts of Cornwall and Kent. "We want to represent the seasons of the UK ▶



TIME IS RUNNING OUT. IS YOUR BUSINESS READY?

NEW RULES FOR DOING BUSINESS WITH THE EU START ON 1 JANUARY 2021. BUSINESSES – INCLUDING THOSE IN YOUR INDUSTRY – NEED TO ACT NOW.

Business is changing and new rules are coming. The UK has left the EU and will leave the single market and customs union at the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020. There are definite actions that businesses need to take now.

If you run a business, it's important that you check what you need to do. You can be confident that preparations for these changes will not be wasted. By taking action now, you can make sure your business is ready from 1 January 2021 to take advantage of new opportunities. Getting ready can take longer than you think.

Here's a topline guide to the main actions you may need to take.

CHANGES TO IMPORTING AND EXPORTING PROCESSES

To continue importing and exporting with EU countries from 1 January 2021, you'll need to take a number of actions. These include:

- making sure you have a GB Economic Operator Registration and Identification (EORI) number
- checking whether your imported goods are subject to phased checks or if you need to pre-notify for them
- understanding changes to Customs and Import VAT

IMPORTING ANIMALS OR ANIMAL PRODUCTS

If you import animals or animal products to Great Britain from the EU, you will need to register for the new Import of Products, Animals, Food and Feed System (IPAFFS) and submit pre-notifications in line with the phasing of import checks throughout 2021.

NEW LABELLING REQUIREMENTS

Food and drink producers, manufacturers, retailers and suppliers may have to change their labelling. All food placed on the EU market from 1 January 2021 will have to meet EU rules. Foods sold in Northern Ireland (NI) will be required to align with EU labelling rules from 1 January 2021 and some label changes may be required. For food and drink sold on the GB market, you will need to make any required labelling changes by 30 September 2022. However, the deadline will vary for some products, for example those with Geographical Indication protection.

YOUR WORKFORCE

- **Current employees** – if you employ EU, EEA or Swiss citizens, signpost them to the EU Settlement Scheme to secure their future in the UK.
- **Recruitment** – if you're recruiting new employees from overseas, whether they're EU or non-EU citizens, you must comply with the new immigration policies from 1 January 2021.
- **Professional qualifications** – make sure your staff are able to continue to practice and provide services to clients in the UK after 31 December 2020 by ensuring their professional qualification(s) are recognised by their professional body in the UK.

To help UK businesses, the UK Government has put a range of support measures in place, including introducing new border controls in stages up until 1 July 2021 and providing more than £80 million to boost the capacity of the customs intermediary sector. In July it announced a £705 million funding package for border infrastructure, staffing and IT, to ensure border systems are fully operational after the end of the transition period.

Find everything you need to know to prepare for 1 January 2021. Visit [gov.uk/transition](https://www.gov.uk/transition)

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AND LET'S GET GOING.**

but add some Mexican hints. We make a broth of toasted seaweed but then we add Mexican chillies and mezcal. The idea is that we welcome people with something warm that represents the two countries,” Lastra says.

He is also looking forward to serving the ‘Coloradito’ braised short ribs with a mole made from Kentish quinces, served with roasted carrots. “We slow-cook the ribs for 20 hours with some chillies from Oaxaca that are smoked over peppercorn wood, and then we make a glaze with brown sugar and quince juice. We serve it with some fresh corn tortillas,” he explains.

Scottish langoustines dressed with smoked chilli cream feature in a taco served with sauerkraut and a reduction of Scottish sea buckthorn juice. The intensely sour sea buckthorn berries take the place of Mexican limes, in another nod to British produce.

The creations have already piqued the interest of London diners, with several hundred bookings made within the first few minutes of reservations opening “We will treat people who come here really well and we cannot wait for them to come and try it,” he says.

He admits that the timing may not be ideal but asserts: “We have just got to do it. We have been working on this for three years. We have the site and I don’t want to lose my team – they are amazing. If you want to wait until the world is perfect, you are never going to do anything. We just need to do it and be positive.”



The evolution of Mexican food in the UK

When Santiago Lastra’s compatriot Edson Diaz-Fuentes, co-founder of Santo Remedio, arrived in the UK 13 years ago, Wahaca in Covent Garden had just opened. “I was happy to see tacos and tostadas and, in fact, I went on to work with Tommy [Thomasina Miers] and Mark [Selby] in 2014. But after a few months of being here I realised how sad the Mexican food scene was. It was Wahaca and not much else.”

Producing “authentic” Mexican food outside of the country was and, to a certain extent, remains, a tough task. That’s in part due to the lack of Mexican produce, which is now less scarce than it was, but also because the authenticity of Mexican cooking “cannot be translated” to a blender or food processor, according to Diaz-Fuentes.

“Traditional Mexican cooking implies molcajetes [pestle and mortar], metates [a traditional rectangular-shaped stone used to grind corn to make tortillas] and other utensils,” he says.

Suppliers 13 years ago weren’t

terribly interested in Mexican ingredients, Diaz-Fuentes says, and knowledge of his home country’s cuisine in the UK generally only stretched as far as burritos and Tex-Mex.

But when he returned to the UK in 2014, after leaving in 2010, there had been an “explosion” of Mexican offerings. Among those flying the flag that spring to mind for Diaz-Fuentes are La Bodega Negra in Soho, Martha Ortiz’s Ella Canta within the InterContinental London Park Lane, former Pitt Cue chef Oscar Holgado, who is now head chef at Coombeshead Farm hotel in Cornwall, El Pastor in Borough Market and Casa Pastor at Coal Drops Yard, as well as the now-closed Casa Morita in Brixton market and Peyotito in Notting Hill under head chef Adriana Cavita.

By 2014, Diaz-Fuentes too was inspired to bring some of the flavours he missed to London where, post-Olympics, he was finding that Mexican food was being very well-received.

For his part, it was competing in Jonathan Downey’s ‘Taco Wars’

that helped inspire Diaz-Fuentes to start Santo Remedio. “My taco was extremely well received at Taco Wars. A lot of people were asking, ‘What is this flavour?’ I used hoja santa, which hadn’t been tried much in the UK. It’s a super-fresh herb from Oaxaca with an aniseed flavour, and I combined it with grilled octopus that was marinated in Pasilla mixed chillies, with black beans, avocado leaves, Serrano mayo and pickled radishes.

“That inspired me to open something small in Shoreditch where we could recreate that and dishes like pork cheeks with salsa verde. It has been a challenge, but it has been great to see critics appreciate it and realising that Mexican food isn’t just covered in cheese but can be fresh, citrusy and delicious.”

And the popularity of Mexican cuisine isn’t just limited to London. Diaz-Fuentes credits Wahaca and Rick Stein, who presented the popular BBC series *Road To Mexico*, with extending its appeal to the rest of the country. And now other programmes, such

as Netflix’s *Taco Chronicles* and *Chef’s Table* are teaching people about Mexican food.

“More people are incorporating ancho chillies into their food,” says Diaz-Fuentes. “They are adding chipotle to dishes and I am seeing salsa verde. If it is authentic is questionable, but there is more of an influence. If they are incorporating tomatillos or habanero or trying to recreate kinds of moles, that is good to see.”

Diaz-Fuentes has used lockdown to work on a Mexican cookbook, which has inspired him to look at how the food of Mexico City has changed in the 18 years since he lived there, as well as exploring a project to make and deliver Mexican tortas.

“When we are past the pandemic, hopefully we will emerge stronger and can offer people more options for lunch and dinner and also learn to cook more at home. I can see more Mexican items on the shelves and that is encouraging. It is great to see more understanding and interest from people.”



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Buy it forward

Forward buying, or investing in hotel rooms with a view to reaping the revenue, sounds enticing, but the high-profile collapse of companies including Northern Powerhouse Developments reveals that it is fraught with complex issues. *Neil Gerrard* asks if there is a successful model for both hoteliers and investors

If buy-to-let could work so spectacularly well for homes, then why not for hotels?

It's a question that enterprising developers and hoteliers have asked themselves several times over the past couple of decades, but the boom in the residential market that saw so many independent investors ride off into the sunset on huge returns has never quite materialised in the hotel sector.

And now the high-profile failure of Northern Powerhouse Developments (NPD) and certain hotels within the Signature Living Group (see panel) has brought the so-called "forward-buying" model into question.

So how does the forward-buying of rooms work, what is to be gained for both investors and hoteliers, and what are the risks?

Simply put, the scheme involves asking investors to pay a sum of money – normally ranging from five to seven figures – to purchase a room in a hotel that is either yet to be built or is due to be renovated, on a long leasehold. The investment helps fund the development, and investors receive an annual return for their outlay, normally guaranteed for a period of time. In some cases, they also have the right to use the room themselves for a limited number of days per year.

It sounds attractive, but when it goes wrong, it can go spectacularly wrong. In the worst cases, investors are unable to recover the returns they were promised, or sell on their asset. "I think there have been a lot more failures in this space than there have been successes," said one finance industry figure who spoke to *The Caterer* off the record.

That's certainly the case for NPD's creditors, who face the prospect of receiving back very little of their original investments.

'The strangest form of investment'

The forward-buying model appears to have emerged in the UK at some point in the early 2000s. And early schemes perhaps ought to have set alarm bells ringing for some of today's investors. As far back as May 2008, a www.thisismoney.co.uk article asked if "one of the strangest forms of property investment" could catch on. It explained how, for an investment of £50,000 to £250,000, investors could earn "50%



"People see this sort of scheme and think 'I will invest in a hotel - hotels are good business. What can go wrong?' Well, quite a lot actually"

of the income" from the hotel room's occupancy to put into a self-invested pension plan (SIPP). Among the companies promoting such schemes, it said, were Guest Invest. However, just five months after the article was published, Guest Invest collapsed. Its rival, Owner Hotels, also mentioned in the article, failed a year later.

That's not to say that there haven't been successes. Perhaps the best-known hotel to have

been delivered under the model is the Park Plaza Westminster Bridge, which was developed by Galliard and completed in 2010. Around half of the rooms in the hotel (535 out of a total of 1,019) were sold as what Park Plaza terms "income units". The rooms were marketed to investors under a 999-year lease. Upon the completion of the sale of each room, Park Plaza, through a wholly owned subsidiary called Marlbray, entered a complicated-sounding "income swap agreement" with investors. Under the terms of the agreement, investors had the right to receive net income derived from the rooms, with an annual rent guarantee of around 6% of the purchase price for five years.

Since November 2014, Park Plaza has bought back 23 rooms from investors, and there is a secondary market for the rooms, which are being marketed by a firm called ROC Invest, with prices starting from £295,000 and returns based on accounts showing how that particular room traded over the past three years.

Escapade Silverstone



Winning formula?

Will Tindall, who is in the process of developing Escapade Silverstone, a collection of 60 two-, three- and four-bedroom residences at the world-renowned racetrack, set to open in 2022, also has faith in the model.

Tindall's business, which has already opened a similar project on an island off Bali, will run the residences as a hotel operation. Two-bedroom residences away from the track start at £650,000, running up to £1.65m for a four-bedroom trackside residence. Owners can choose to buy the units as a pure investment with no usage nights, or take a reduced return in exchange for 21 nights' usage for themselves. Investors take a share of gross revenue, which Tindall says allows for greater transparency than would be the case with operating profit or net profit. The firm has calculated the annual yield of a four-bedroom trackside residence at 4.71% if an investor takes up their full allocation of usage nights, running up to 5.92% without any usage nights.

Explaining why he chose to fund Escapade Silverstone in this way, rather than taking a more traditional route, such as a loan from a bank, Tindall explains: "The reality is it is a bit of a strange funding landscape at the moment and this effectively builds equity. When a debt funder is looking at this, we get them

NPD and Signature Living: When forward buying goes wrong

The thousands of people – many of them private investors from places as far-flung as China – who funnelled £80m into Northern Powerhouse Developments (NPD) thought they knew where their money was going.

The scheme was an attractive one – in return for buying a room on a long leasehold in one of the many hotels that NPD was accumulating and promising to refurbish to a high standard, such as the 61-bedroom Llandudno Bay hotel or the Fourcroft hotel in Tenby, investors would receive annual returns of 10% on their investment, plus the chance to sell the room at a 25% profit after a decade.

While investors believed they were funding one individual room, which would then generate their return, it was in fact run as a collective investment scheme, where hotel investors' cash was pooled into a central account and appears to have been used to fund other loss-making enterprises within the group. Such collective investment schemes are regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), but the FCA said

it did not authorise NPD to run such a scheme.

NPD collapsed last year, with administrators Philip Duffy and Sarah Bell of Duff & Phelps looking after eight of the hotels, and administrator CG&Co dealing with another three.

Meanwhile, administrators have obtained a freezing order against the personal assets of NPD founder Gavin Woodhouse after discovering an overdrawn director's loan account at £615,000. Woodhouse has served his defence, along with a request for additional information, which is under review.

A report by Duff & Phelps likened NPD's business model to a Ponzi scheme. A Ponzi scheme is characterised by the promise of larger-than-expected returns, and new investors' money being used to pay old investors.

Duff & Phelps also revealed that NPD paid £895,000 to four separate hotel proprietors for the acquisition of their hotels. The company exchanged contracts for the purchase but did not complete as it had insufficient funds. Nonetheless, it still raised

funds from investors by pre-selling investments in the hotels. Duff & Phelps said it had reported the matter to the authorities.

Signature Living

Signature Living has also used the forward-buying model for some of its hotels. A report by Duff & Phelps on Signature Shankly, the company that holds the long leasehold interest in the Shankly hotel in Liverpool and is part of the Signature Living Group, noted that the company had historical rent arrears, with a number of bedroom investors that had purchased a leasehold interest in individual rooms in the hotel. The company went into administration this year.

The report continued: "In addition, a number of investors had exercised their contractual option to sell their leasehold interest back to the company after the three-year anniversary of their purchase, although the company failed to meet its contractual obligations in this regard."

Signature Living also raised funding via what administrator Duff & Phelps described in its report as a "collective investment

scheme" to purchase and develop the George Best hotel in Belfast. Investors were due to be granted a long leasehold interest that would be leased back to the company on a 10-year leasehold with a guaranteed return on investment of 8%, rising incrementally to 10% by year five. Investors were promised their capital back if they sold the room back, plus an uplift of 12%.

The hotel in the former Scottish Mutual Building was originally due to be completed by 2018, but a series of planning and building control issues caused delays in its completion. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic caused further delays as the development of the hotel was suspended due to government restrictions. The firm also faced a winding up petition, which was presented in January 2020.

The FCA told *The Caterer* that it had not authorised Signature Living's collective investment schemes.

Signature Living has been contacted for comment. Gavin Woodhouse was unavailable for comment.



Escapade Silverstone (all this page)

comfortable by the fact that there is a little bit of a proof of concept in there in terms of people are buying it and showing interest and staying in it. But also it is partially about building a bit of a community around it.”

The fact that many schemes sit outside of the regulation of the FCA (*see panel*) and can vary in terms of the way in which they are administered still make some in the industry uneasy, however. One hotel industry figure, who spoke to *The Caterer* on condition of anonymity, warned that investors often don’t have a sophisticated enough understanding of how the hotel market works. “At the moment, there’s the question of where the hell do you put your money, if you have got any. People see this sort of scheme and think ‘I will invest in a hotel – hotels are good business. What can go wrong?’ Well, quite a lot actually.”

“You can have hundreds of different owners in a property and that becomes quite cumbersome in itself. Each of those owners have different perspectives and requirements. Then, if you want your capital back, you have to find someone who wants to buy it. If you bought it seven years ago on the basis of a five-year

What regulations govern the forward-buying of a hotel room?

“If a property, or portion of a property, is sold to investors with a view to enabling their participation in future profits arising from that property, then, depending on the specific structure and arrangements, this might constitute a form of collective investment regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA). In such cases, the promotion and operation of the scheme would need to comply with FCA regulatory requirements and may even require FCA authorisation.

“The application of the FCA’s rules to these types of schemes is complex and the legal position will depend entirely on how the specific arrangement is structured and operates, and the facts surrounding it. It’s important to seek legal advice before operating or marketing such a scheme in the UK.”

Clare Reynolds, senior associate for law firm Taylor Wessing

guarantee and the guarantee comes to an end, and the operator needs some cash to refurbish the hotel, then you can see that the investment doesn’t necessarily look particularly pretty.”

Tindall accepts that such schemes can become complicated, with many different investors, each of them with differing objectives and expectations, to manage. “Some people aren’t at all interested in the yield and it is more about the lifestyle side, whereas others don’t want to use it at all and want more yield, so that is a tricky one,”

he acknowledges. “It is a balancing act to try to find something that feels right.”

Partly in response to this, the Escapade Silverstone residences are all “dual key”, which allows a four-bed residence to operate as two two-beds, or a three-bedroom property as a two- and a one-bed, and so on. “That gives flexibility from an operational perspective, but also from an owner’s perspective because if, for example, they have bought a four-bed, they could actually use a one-bed and let the rest out,” explains Tindall.



Tindall is also clear that the Silverstone project will not pool revenue from investors so that it will not be deemed to be a collective investment scheme and consequently require the involvement of the FCA (*see panel*). Investors' returns are based solely on the performance of their own residence and no others. Meanwhile, the firm's booking technology randomly allocates guests to properties to ensure that revenue is evenly distributed. "It is just about being open and transparent about it – that is the key," says Tindall.

In any case, however, such forward-buying initiatives are likely to stay relatively rare for the time being. That's in part due to the Covid-19 pandemic, one finance industry figure explains: "There are really interesting ways of funding things when the deals get more expensive. But with pricing likely to drop and there being more distress, there will be fewer new developments. Investors will be looking to buy existing hotels rather than building new ones over the next 18 months and there is plenty of money to invest with regular finance, without having to go and find financially engineered ways of making a deal work."



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All Menuwatches go forward to the judging of the Menu of the Year Catey

MENUWATCH



Partridge, cep, bacon

The Curlew

Nestled in the Sussex countryside, Will Devlin's second restaurant is drawing a crowd who digs its home-grown philosophy, relaxed feel and stonking sharing plates. *Jennie Milsom* pays a visit

Will Devlin, who is behind the Small Holding restaurant in the Kentish countryside, took over former coaching inn the Curlew earlier this year to pursue an “unshackled” approach to dining.

His early career saw him work his way up through kitchens including Michelin-starred Pétus in London, but it was at Thackeray's in Tunbridge Wells (his hometown) and as head chef at the Windmill in Hollingbourne, both in Kent, where a focus on the connection between produce and plate shifted his cooking from classical to “innovative and progressive”.

The Curlew opened briefly in February before the pandemic temporarily closed it and forced Devlin to take a step back. When he reopened both restaurants in July, it was with reduced opening days – Thursdays to Sundays – with Wednesdays reserved as a “fieldwork day” of foraging and tastings for the whole team.

He believes the result is a more rounded way of working that “brings that purpose back”. He adds: “We needed a big shock to see the clarity. I don't think we would have been brave enough otherwise.”

“The seasons drive us forward, whether it's wild garlic or mushroom foraging”

Will Devlin

His first restaurant, the Small Holding, set in an acre of land eight miles away, provides much of the produce at the Curlew. “The seasons drive us forward, whether it's wild garlic or mushroom foraging,” Devlin says. He advocates ‘no dig’ farming. “We feed the soil rather than disturbing it. It all goes back to the ground. There's so much promotion about the end product – the conversation should be about where it's grown.”

What they don't grow, forage or rear themselves is sourced from local producers. And, with game season now open, Devlin intends to shoot duck, pheasant and partridge, which he'll bring back and pluck “old school”.

Covers have dropped by 10 to 36 and three chefs, led by Devlin, run lunch and dinner service, which, after the “kick in the nuts” curfew was introduced, begins earlier, at 5.30pm, to accommodate two sittings. “There's a nice buzz for everyone, finishing together,” Devlin says.

The menu consists of small plates divided into snack, meat, fish, ‘whole’, vegetable and sweet. Snacks include tarragon focaccia with apple balsamic (£4) and pork dumplings (£6). In fish, there is miso cod with seaweed sauce





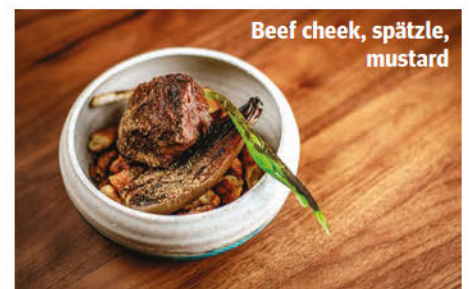
FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY: KEY & QUILL
WILL DEVLIN AND INTERIORS: FOOD STORY MEDIA



Pork dumplings,
pickled plums



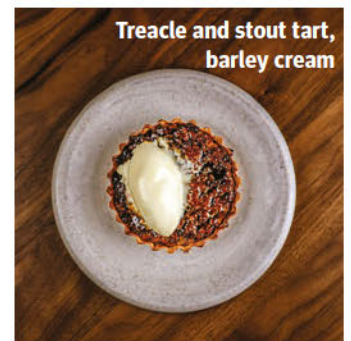
Halibut, celeriac,
lovage



Beef cheek, spätzle,
mustard



Rack of lamb, mint



Treacle and stout tart,
barley cream

(£11) – a 24-hour white miso marinade firms up the flesh before cooking and the sauce is poured over at the table. Roast hake, clams, shellfish sauce (£10) is served with a curl of crispy skin.

Devlin's favourite dish is the whole Creedy Carver duck (£58). With "real ducks, the flavour is intense, the layer of fat is super-profound," he explains. Guests are invited to carve the crown and divvy up the heart (rolled in toasted seeds and roasted), liver (pan-fried and glazed with a duck reduction) and confit leg. It's served with gravy made from the neck bone, sweetened with garlic and thyme.

The selection and treatment of ingredients is always at the fore. Vegetable dishes include beetroot, ricotta, black pepper (£7). Beetroots are salt-baked in their skins to intensify their flavour, before being served warm with quenelles of house-made ricotta, made from milk that "changes with the seasons" from nearby Northiam Dairy, split with fennel vinegar.

Hispi cabbage, mushroom, egg (£7) sees yolks cured for five days in a 50/50 salt-sugar mix until hard and "gummy", then finely grated over the cabbage to lend

From the menu

Snack

- Whitstable oysters, chermoula, cobnut **£3 each**
- Smoked mackerel, bronze fennel, cucumber **£7**

Meat

- Pork belly, fennel, scallop roe **£9**
- Rabbit loin, confit leg, chervil **£12**
- Beef cheek, spätzle, mustard **£9**

Whole

- Rack of lamb, mint **£68**
- Sea bass, cauliflower, anchovy **£56**

Vegetable

- Potato, thyme, red onion **£8**

Sweet

- Dressed berries, milk and honey **£8**
- Plum tart, almond, burnt cream **£7**

umami notes. And there's a pumpkin pie with blue cheese (£7), filled with puréed pumpkin, sweet jewels of diced roasted pumpkin and a melting local blue cheese from Arthur Alsop at Alsop & Walker. It's wrapped in a sandy shortcrust and topped with aerated pumpkin custard, served warm and collapsing.

Desserts include sweetcorn parfait meringue (£8), which consists of a sponge disc, topped with crisp meringue and a playful wobble of sweetcorn curd that has been rolled in popcorn.

Drinks are no less local. "We're so blessed in this area," says Devlin, rattling off Oastbrook Estate Vineyard and Tillingham winery, a 15-minute drive towards Rye, among others. Local gins include carbon-neutral micro-distillery Greensand Ridge and 1066 Hastings, with beers from Good Things Brewing Co.

Everyone's welcome and you don't need to dress up, says Devlin. "Guests swing by for the whole duck, a bottle of wine and a cheese board. Come and have as little or as much as you like."

The Curlew, Junction Road, Bodiam TN32 5UY
www.thecurlew.restaurant

Book review



Fäviken: 4015 Days, Beginning to End

Magnus Nilsson

£45, Phaidon

Why would anyone write a book about a closed restaurant? And who would want to read it? That's the question chef and author Magnus Nilsson poses in his fifth book, and the second about his restaurant Fäviken, which closed in December 2019. For those of us who made the journey to the remote hotel and dining room in rural Jämtland in Sweden, the book acts as a thrilling reminder of Nilsson's distinctive culinary style. Who else would serve diced raw ox heart with marrow from a bone that was theatrically sawn in half in the middle of the dining room?

For those who didn't make it, Nilsson delivers much more than a mere 'here's what you could have won' experience (although an eight-page complete list of dishes served at the restaurant in chronological order is included). By contrasting text from the first *Fäviken* book published in 2012 with new writings, Nilsson offers an insight into the evolution of his cooking over the restaurant's decade-long lifetime.

One of Nilsson's most famous creations, almost burnt cream (served as an accompaniment to roasted king crab leg) was developed from a combination of accidentally burning cultured milk for a sorbet, which he realised as he poured it away "actually smelled pretty good", and tasting the residue of a cream sauce from a cooling pan. The result, Nilsson says, "was perfect, deep and toffee-like from the caramelised proteins and lactose".

Nilsson further explores the notion of creativity in one of the book's 17 short essays, using English social psychologist George Wallas's five-stage model, which divides the creative process into preparation, incubation, intimation, illumination and verification, to explain how his dishes go from theoretical idea to the plate.

Erik Olsson's photographs that span the life of the restaurant provide a visually stunning counterpoint to Nilsson's recipes, stories, anecdotes and musings. Who would want to read a book about a closed restaurant? When it's somewhere as remarkable as Fäviken, and written by someone as talented as Nilsson, who wouldn't?

By *Andy Lynes*

The dish ended up doing exactly what I had hoped. To add complexity and reinforce the aroma of the butter, and the feeling of the forest, we ended up seasoning the fish with more of those same plants. Visual representation really does help our other senses to perceive things: if you see a strand of moss, you can smell it and taste it more strongly.

Serves 6

Bog butter

10g wood sorrel
10g fireweed
10g pine needles
10g blueberry leaves
10g clover
10g thistle
200g good butter, at room temperature

Porridge of lichens

5kg water
25g pickling lime
100g dried reindeer moss
100g Icelandic moss

Whey béchamel

20g butter
18g flour
300g cream
100g whey from cultured milk

Trout

1kg butter
3 x trout fillets (approximately 150g), from a 2kg trout

Garnishes

Neutral cooking oil, for frying
25g fried Icelandic moss
25g fried reindeer moss
6 green juniper berries
10g wood sorrel
10g moss
6 leaves red fireweed
5g pine needles
10g Herb salt

Herb salt

100g unwashed herbs, leaves only, picked on dry and sunny day (eg, lovage, oregano, thyme, lemon balm, sage, chives, tarragon, mint, fennel, currant leaves, garlic leaves)
100g very good-quality sea salt, chilled

Briefly process the herbs in a food processor, making sure that they do not heat up, as this causes them to lose their aroma.

Combine the herbs with the salt and pass the mixture through a sieve to remove any unwanted plant fibres.

Carefully boiled trout, bog butter and porridge of lichens prepared in lye

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ERIC OLSSON

Transfer the mixture to a vacuum-packed bag and freeze until needed or store in an airtight jar, depending on the result that you want.

For the bog butter

Chop all the leaves and herbs very finely, then mix into the butter. Roll it out between two sheets of baking paper to a thickness of 4mm, then remove the paper and cut into 3.5cm-diameter discs. Replace the top layer of paper, place the butter in a sealed plastic box and store in the freezer.

For the porridge of lichens

Combine the water, pickling lime and lichens. Leave for 24 hours in the fridge before draining the liquid away, thoroughly rinsing the lichens and transferring them to a bowl of fresh water. Again leave them for 24 hours in the fridge.



Revelations

Harriet Mansell, chef-owner,
Robin Wylde, Lyme Regis, Dorset



What do you normally have for breakfast?

Tomatoes or cucumber on toast, with either Cheddar or olive oil



Which is your favourite restaurant?

Of all time, Noma in Copenhagen. Recent favourite, Brat in London. My casual fave, Poco Pizza in Lyme Regis

What's your favourite hotel?

Locanda Da Raia in Gavi, Italy, or the Phoenicia in Valletta, Malta

What is your favourite drink?

Wine

What is your favourite food/cuisine?

Italian, for the pizza, pasta, cheese and the beautiful vegetable produce



What flavour combinations do you detest?

I went to a Wendy's in the US once and asked for some mustard to go with some bacon thing I had ordered, and they brought custard... that was rank

Which person in catering have you most admired?

My friend Chris Rowley [chef-owner, Ballintaggart Farm, Perthshire]. He's a great chef who has demonstrated absolute loyalty to his role while building a life and a family. He's given me great advice over the years

Which person gave you the greatest inspiration?

My boyfriend, Dom Moldenhauer [founder of Dom's Table in Lyme Regis] gives me a lot of inspiration. He is a crazy talented chef, absolutely passionate about food, and cooking is his life

Cast away on a desert island, what luxury would you take?

Just some massive book of short stories, preferably spooky ones, because I like those the best

If not yourself, who would you rather have been?

Mary Shelley



Describe your ultimate nightmare?

Being held hostage somewhere or losing my freedom... perhaps being 'sold'

Tell us a secret...

I can hold my breath for a really long time... Five minutes and 30 seconds is my record

Who would play "you" in a film about your life?

Hopefully Lily Collins because she is beautiful, a fabulous actress, has aspirational eyebrows and glossy hydrated hair



When did you last eat a burger?

Last week

What is your favourite prepared product?

KFC. Or frozen parathas

Dry the lichens using a salad spinner, then boil them in water until soft and tender. Reserve a small amount of each to be placed in the drying room to dry for the fried moss.

For the whey béchamel

Place the butter into a sauté pan, followed by the flour, and cook the mixture until it is blonde in colour. Add the cream and whey gradually, until a thick béchamel is formed, simmer for a few minutes and finish by adding the cooked lichens and stirring them in.

For the garnishes

Half-fill a sauté pan with neutral cooking oil and heat the oil to 190°C. Add the lichens that have been drying in the drying room and fry until golden brown and

crispy. Remove from the pan and drain them on paper towels.

For the trout

Place the butter into a large sauté pan over a medium heat and heat until the butter reaches 60°C and then keep it there. Place the trout in the butter skin side down and poach until warmed through. Remove the fillets from the butter, place them onto a cutting board, still skin side down, and cut into two portions. Flip the fish and pull the skin off before plating.

To finish

Place a large teaspoon of the lichen béchamel on each hot plate and place one portion of the trout on top. Arrange the garnishes on top of the trout. Just before serving, place a disc of the bog butter onto each hot plate.

Government lays out blueprint for improved hospital catering

The government has created a new blueprint for better hospital food following an independent review of hospital catering, led by a panel of advisers including chef and restaurateur Prue Leith.

The Hospital Food Review board, chaired by Philip Shelley, former head of the Hospital Caterers Association (HCA) and catering lead for Taunton and Somerset NHS Foundation Trust, published its findings and made recommendations on how NHS trusts can prioritise food safety and nutrition for staff and patients.

The review makes eight recommendations:

- **Catering staff support:** introduce professional qualifications and standards for hospital caterers, provide more training and reward excellence with pay progressions.
- **Nutrition and hydration:** ensure importance of food services is understood and integrated within patient recovery, hospital governance and staff training.
- **Food safety:** ensure food safety through open communication channels to address safety concerns, by appointing food safety specialists and upholding standards.
- **Facilities:** provide funding to equip and upgrade hospital kitchens, provide 24/7 services for staff and patients, and prioritise health-enhancing meals.
- **Technology:** every hospital should implement a digital meal ordering system by 2022 to collate food choices, manage allergies and diets, and minimise waste.
- **Enforcing standards:** food and drinks standards should be statutory and inspected by the Care Quality Commission, a forum should be established to share exemplary best practice.
- **Sustainability and waste:** ensure government food procurement standards are upheld. NHS trusts should agree a common method of monitoring food waste.
- **Establish an expert group of hospital caterers, dietitians and nurses to monitor progress, accountable to the secretary of state for health and social care.**

Matt Hancock, secretary of state



Boris Johnson and Prue Leith at Reading's Royal Berkshire Hospital. Below: Philip Shelley and Craig Smith



for health and social care, said: "This pandemic has demonstrated more than ever the importance of good food and proper nutrition. We must all prioritise our health and be empowered to eat well, whether we're at home or in hospital. This impressive report shows the way to good hospital food for all – patients, staff and visitors.

"Across the NHS and in the 40

new hospitals we are set to build I want to ensure – with Prue's help – that we deliver really good hospital food. Alongside our new obesity strategy to improve the nation's diet, the NHS is leading by example when it comes to public health."

Leith added: "The review provides best-in-class examples of how hospitals can serve delicious, nutritious and nicely presented meals on a budget. Food is not only important to health, but to morale. Hospital mealtimes should be a moment of enjoyment and a pleasure to serve. They should inspire staff and patients – and visitors – to eat well at home."

Recruitment has begun for the expert group of hospital caterers, dietitians and nurses who will monitor the recommendations.

The group's chair Shelley said: "Just as our staff need the right tools to do their job, we also need to ensure that they have the nutrition and hydration they require to perform their crucial roles. The wellbeing of our NHS staff is vital because it affects their mental and physical health, as well as the quality of care they deliver for patients. A lack of nutritious food and drink can contribute to feelings of stress and lack of control in the workplace."

Fellow board member and chair of the HCA Craig Smith welcomed the recommendations, but questioned the transparency around funding: "The Hospital Food Review recommendations are excellent, and we fully support them. Yet we simply can't move forward without capital investment in our hospital catering operations, and we urge the government to release details of funding plans to support these initiatives."

"The government recently announced a £3.7b fund to deliver 40 hospitals across England by 2030, which will include a focus on 21st-century catering facilities. We urge our members to bid for any funding which is available to help improve their catering operations."

Shelley and Leith visited catering managers, staff and patients across the country, looking at best practice from those leading the way in NHS food quality and innovation. The findings of the review echo many of the themes in both the government's recently published obesity strategy and part one of the National Food Strategy.

Visit www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-nhs-hospital-food for the full report

Food firms warn of end to trading in Northern Ireland after Brexit

The leaders of 40 British food and drink associations have warned prime minister Boris Johnson that they may stop trading in Northern Ireland following Brexit.

According to an exclusive story by *Business Insider*, a letter, seen by the New York-based research firm, states that the increased trading costs mean trade in Northern Ireland "will no longer be practical".

The letter, addressed to the Duchy of Lancaster Michael Gove and environment secretary George Eustice, urged the government to minimise new checks on

goods going from Great Britain to Northern Ireland next year.

As of 1 January, Northern Ireland is expected to continue to follow EU trading rules to avoid a hard border with the Republic of Ireland, meaning there will be new checks on goods crossing the Irish Sea.

Business Insider quoted from the letter: "The added cost, complexity and trade friction this inevitably creates means it will no longer be practical for many of our businesses to supply goods from Great Britain for sale in the Northern Ireland market."



Westminster Kingsway College offers New Covent Garden Market menus

New Covent Garden Market has partnered with Westminster Kingsway College to launch seasonal menus across its two restaurants using the market's fruit and vegetables.

The vegetarian dishes will feature on the menus of the Brasserie and fine dining Escoffier restaurants. Each menu will be vegetarian and refreshed on a weekly basis, in line with seasonal availability.

The college students will use fruit and vegetables from the market, which will give them access to produce from wholesalers such as DDP and Wild Harvest.

Rebecca Barrett, head of strategy, partnerships and communications at Covent Garden Market Authority, said: "We have a long-standing relationship with the college and each year welcome the students to the market to experience the world behind the fresh produce they cook with."



José Souto, chef-lecturer in culinary arts at Westminster Kingsway College, added: "The students hugely value having access to the array of fruit and veg from New Covent Garden Market and the launch of the new menu will give them increased access to, and understanding of, the very best seasonal produce out there. We're looking forward to welcoming back diners and introducing them to the new menu."

ATTENTION - CLYDESDALE AND YORKSHIRE BANK BUSINESS CUSTOMERS NOTICE TO JOIN HIGH COURT GROUP ACTION

If you had a business loan after 2000 with Clydesdale or Yorkshire Bank (now Virgin Money) you could be eligible to join the ongoing High Court Group Action.

The hospitality sector is believed to be significantly affected.

Key Litigation Facts:

- Individual claims can run to £250,000 or substantially more, with the total claim estimated in the hundreds of millions
- Limited companies, sole traders and partnerships, even dissolved companies are eligible
- No upfront costs - claims run on a "No Win, No Fee" basis.
- If you have already made a claim, you could still be eligible to join regardless of the outcome

Action Required:

- You must sign up to be included and share in the proceeds of a successful claim
- We expect the Group Action will close to new joiners in 2021 – so time is pressing
- For further information about the High Court Group Action contact us and get a free eligibility check

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Bad waste

Food and plastic waste mean money waste, and as the industry recovers from the impact of Covid-19, operators simply can't afford these losses. *Angela Frewin* finds out what can be done

Predictions that there will be more plastic than fish in the seas by 2025, estimates putting food waste as the cause of 6% of the world's total greenhouse gas emissions, and the government's imminent Recycling and Waste Resources strategy, are all reminders of the urgent need for sustainable solutions to food waste, packaging and disposables in the minds of caterers, consumers and legislators alike.

Covid-19 – with its lockdowns, fluctuations in demand and margin squeeze – has accentuated the challenges. Andrew Shakman, chief executive officer of food waste measurement group Leanpath, notes that the shift to reduced-contact service styles, such as grab-and-go, takeout and off-premise dining, means that “part of the new reality of foodservice is the increased use of plastics and disposables for sanitary service... with their associated rising costs.”

Parting with plastic

The UK Plastic Pact's goal for all packaging to be reusable, recyclable or compostable by 2025 is spawning a variety of greener, circular-economy options, including Delphis Eco, offering the world's first 100% recycled PCR (post-consumer recycled) plastic bottles across its range of eco-friendly cleaning chemicals.

Eco to Go, FSG Tableware's answer to single-use disposables, is a range of polypropylene food boxes and rice-husk-based cups, made from recycled materials that are reusable up to 1,000 times and recyclable or compostable. These food boxes enabled the University of Birmingham's Vale Student Village to divert 135,000 packs from landfill in a year, saving over £17,000.

Hav's paperboard-based Six500 packaging – marketed in the UK by Marren – offers a game-changing



FSG Tableware's Eco to Go (and left)

“There's been a significant increase in the amount of compostable packaging being used by sustainability-savvy businesses”

Bruce Bratley, First Mile

fast-food alternative to hard-to-recycle black plastic trays for manufacturers and central production kitchens. The world's first oven-tableware containers are designed to work in accelerated ovens with no loss of food quality, texture or moisture, withstanding temperatures of 273°C for up to six minutes, or 2000W in microwaves.

Meanwhile, juice and smoothie brand Pip Organic has removed more than 10 million plastic straws from the waste stream by launching paper straws that bend like plastic across its entire range of children's cartons this September, ahead of the October 2020 and July 2021 bans for foodservice and retail respectively.

Compostable catering disposables specialist Vegware partnered with recycling collector Paper Round and commercial composter EnVar to launch a collection and composting service across London, Brighton and Sussex this summer, following a 12-month trial that proved the viability

of collecting compostable packs and food waste from multisite collections (where one bad site could pollute the whole load).

The trial highlighted the importance of staff education and engagement alongside clear signage, which boosted the proportion of target material in compostable bins from 50% to 85% in a month.

“There's been a significant increase in the amount of compostable packaging being used by sustainability-savvy businesses, but these items need to be processed properly to provide any environmental benefits,” says Bruce Bratley, who founded First Mile last year as the UK's first dedicated recycling service for these disposables, collected in kerbside sacks for conversion to fertiliser.

And while recyclable materials are a vital part of any operation, one way to avoid plastic waste is by switching to reusable products. With Britons buying 7.7 billion single-use plastic bottles each year, EcoPure Waters managing director Paul Proctor suggests in-house water filtration systems as a cost-effective alternative for



EcoPure
Waters



Appy eaters

The Covid-19 lockdown created an ‘unprecedented challenge’ for foodservice suppliers, says Barrie Nash, environmental manager at wholesaler Brakes: “The overnight closure of hospitality created huge supply chain issues with panic buying leaving supermarket shelves empty, while foodservice wholesalers had warehouses full of products and no market.”

A business-wide taskforce tackled thousands of tonnes of potential waste by supplying staple ingredients to major retailers and 500,000 meal equivalents to charities and community groups via Fareshare. Brakes donated a similar amount direct to charities such as foodbanks, the Salvation Army, soup kitchens and animal shelters, along with 50,000 food parcels to vulnerable families.

The Too Good To Go app helps consumers buy surplus, unsold food from local businesses at discounted rates, saving 2.2 million meals from landfill in the UK. Accor’s 63 UK hotels have shifted 54,051 meals in the UK this way, saving 135,127.5kg in CO2, emissions in their drive to slash food waste by 30%.

“Modern on-site technologies offer green and convenient solutions towards the zero-landfill targets as well as generating by-products that can be turned into profit”

John Whitehouse, FEA

operators. They provide unlimited chilled, still and sparkling water served in robust, reusable and brandable glass bottles, with daily running costs starting from just £3.70.

Waste not, want not

Hospitality and foodservice firms throw away 920,000 tonnes of food each year at a cost of £2.5b, but most is preventable, attributed by charity WRAP to spoilage (21%) and food prep (45%). This suggests improved purchasing systems, storage and chef training, plus a more nose-to-tail or root-to-shoot approach as a first line of action.

Minimising food and drink waste – one of the sector’s highest costs after labour – can help offset the costs of Covid-19, suggests Stewart Maranello, senior solution consultant at hospitality software specialist Fourth. Technology such as Fourth’s purchasing and inventory solution can help measure and identify waste at all stages of a product’s life cycle.



Leanpath Go is a mobile platform designed for Covid-era menus that tracks and measures food waste by item, rather than weight. Data entered via the tablet’s picture-based interface is sent to a cloud-based analytics platform.

Historical data may not help gauge demand as foodservice slowly reopens from shutdowns with changed menus and lower volumes. “Tracking your food waste can provide one of the few reliable and immediate sources of data on which to base production forecasts,” advises Shakman.

“While 75% of food waste is avoidable, the remaining 25% of unavoidable food waste will inevitably incur costs. Disposing of end-of-life food to landfill is the most costly option and should be avoided,” advises Kristian Roberts, marketing manager at Mechline.

Fears that operators would be required to buy permits to use on-site equipment such as dewaterers, digesters, sink-to-sewer disposal, in-vessel composters and grease removal units have been

verted by a Foodservice Equipment Association (FEA) working group. It convinced the Environment Agency that its favoured option – collecting food waste for anaerobic digestion – was not a universal panacea, with 20% ending up in landfill due to contamination and kerbside collections prohibitively priced in rural areas.

“Modern on-site technologies offer green and convenient solutions towards the zero-landfill targets as well as generating by-products that can be turned into profit by foodservice operators,” observes FEA chair John Whitehouse.

Mechline’s Waste₂O biodigester uses natural micro-organisms to convert 189kg of food waste into waste water in 24 hours using significantly less energy than many competitors.

Meiko’s Biomaster uses homogenisation as well as maceration to create a biomass that is pumped to holding tanks for use as compost or conversion to biogas. The system can handle items that many grey water and composting systems cannot, such as bones, shells, fat, oil and grease, flower stalks, soups, sauce and gravy, adds specification director Mick Jary. It also uses less electricity and water and needs no added chemicals, wood chips or enzymes.

“Food waste is rarely viewed as a potential solution for cost-saving or revenue generation; more generally it is seen as a problem to be dealt with together with an associated expense,” says Richard Harland, managing director of Waste₂ Environmental Systems. Its iD-R system, launched late last year, converts the calorific value of food waste into energy that operators can use on-site to reduce power bills or sell to the national grid.

The iD-R-5K uses aerobic and anaerobic digestion to dewater up to 5,000kg of food waste and internally shredded compostable crockery and cutlery per day, reducing volume by 70% to leave a dry fertiliser crumb. Electricity is generated from waste gases by the integral biomass or CHP systems – or via an optional RES module on smaller models where waste volumes are sufficient.

Next-generation technologies are providing the carrot to the legislative stick, rewarding



Meiko Biomaster

“Tracking your food waste can provide one of the few reliable and immediate sources of data on which to base production forecasts”

Andrew Shakman, Leanpath

those who do right by the environment. They are contributing to a positive shift in attitude among hospitality operators who Carl Fletcher, head of corporate accounts at business waste collector Biffa, finds are now keen to learn “how to manage waste sustainably, how to use less, recycle more and even cut costs overall by doing this”.

Contacts

Biffa UK www.biffa.co.uk

Brakes www.brake.co.uk

Delphis Eco www.delphiseco.com

EcoPure Waters www.ecopurewaters.com

Foodservice Equipment Association
www.fea.org.uk

Filta Group www.filta.co.uk

First Mile www.thefirstmile.co.uk/

Fourth www.fourth.com/en-gb

FSG Tableware www.fsg-tableware.com

Leanpath www.leanpath.com

Marren https://marren.co.uk

Mechline www.mechline.com

Meiko UK www.meiko-uk.co.uk

Pip Organic www.piporganic.com

Synergy Grill Technology
www.synergygrill.com

Too Good To Go www.toogoodtogo.org/en

Vegware www.vegware.com/uk

Waste₂ Environmental Systems
www.waste2es.com

Fat chance

Fat, oil and grease (FOG) causes 70% of drain blockages and back-ups in commercial kitchens and 75% of sewer blockages.

The Synergy Grill eliminates the problem by atomising fat into carbon dust that can be vacuumed or brushed away. Its low-power demands can save operators up to £1,000 a year in energy consumption.

But recovered FOG is a potential cash cow when

converted in biogas or bio-diesel, notes Whitehouse at the FEA. Filta Group’s new GreaseMaster Cyclone



works with drainage systems, dishwashers/potwash areas, and ovens to recover an industry-leading 2,000 litres of oil each year, worth £400, says commercial director Edward Palin.

It separates and stores food debris in a removable basket, forcing FOG into an oil collection cassette and discharging clean water into the sewers. The ultra-low power consumption – from three pence per day – can save operators up to £1,500 in annual power costs.



WHY IS GREASE TRAP EMPTYING IMPORTANT?

Grease trap emptying is essential for businesses within the hospitality and catering industry including restaurants, hotels, fast-food chains and other establishments with commercial or large kitchens. The **CountyClean Group**, a 24/7 waste management services company, shares its extensive knowledge of how grease traps work and why they are essential



What is a grease trap and how does it work?



A grease trap (also known as a grease interceptor or fat trap) can be plumbed into the existing pipework under the sink or can be a large external tank. This is dependent on the size and volumes of the waste generated by the premises.

Fats, oils and grease (FOG) are lighter in density and float at the surface of the grease interceptor. The clean water then continues draining to the sewer. Dense food solids settle at the bottom of the tank.

Cooking on a large scale generates a vast amount of FOG which if not disposed of correctly can create plumbing issues and clog sewer lines contributing to "fatbergs".

Why is grease trap emptying important?

By monitoring the level of FOG and having a regular emptying and cleaning schedule, health and hygiene related issues can be avoided.

These issues include; overspills, bad smells, flooding, blockages, grease trap repairs and even fines from local water authorities and the Environment Agency.

How can CountyClean help?

Regular emptying and cleaning will assist in reducing the need to pay for costly emergency call-outs or repairs.

To ensure maximum efficiency, the emptying and cleansing of grease traps can be carried out with CountyClean's Rioned Urban Combi Units. These units are ideal for areas with restricted access including underground car parks, narrow city streets



and commercial yards plus many other hard to reach areas. The Urban Combi delivers powerful vacuuming with up to 30m of on board suction hose and 100m high pressure water jetting hose to remove grease and debris.

CountyClean's highly skilled operatives and powerful Urban Combi's work quickly (and out of hours if necessary) to minimise disruption to your business or kitchen. The Group also operates a 24/7 emergency response service.

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Dodie Piddock

Starting Step is a social enterprise and charity that is launching its first hospitality training venue within the grounds of Perth Prison. The chief executive tells *Jennie Milsom* why the project is important for the community

What is the aim of the project?

Our mission is to improve the life chances of those who suffer from social disadvantage and, in so many cases, have taken the wrong turn. I want to use hospitality and horticulture as a route to future employment for those with whom we work. We will give them the tools to be the best they can be and use innovation to inspire individuals to achieve their potential. This will be done while reducing our impact on the environment and lowering our carbon footprint.

You recently got the green light for planning permission for the Yew Tree restaurant – what is the next stage?

We need to complete a building warrant application and then the bid and invite to tender. Once we award the tender we can begin the renovation. Funding the renovation is the biggest challenge.

How will the business model work – are you inviting commercial operators to tender?

We will be inviting commercial operators to tender for the renovation, but Starting Step will run the restaurant. As a social enterprise we are committed to our mission and we know we can deliver it and be sustainable. We can provide an excellent service to the public who eat at the Yew Tree while delivering innovative training for our students.

You'll open first as a café and then look to open as a fine-dining vegan restaurant – what made you decide to run a vegan restaurant?

I have been a committed vegan for many years, so it was impossible for me to consider anything else. I am passionate about the benefits of a plant-based diet. I believe that the time is here when other hospitality outlets are



looking to grow their menus and they will need innovative chefs who can deliver on taste without the reliance on animal products. We want to create a plant-based menu that will excite our customers and showcase the incredible versatility of a vegan diet.

You are partnering with the Scottish Prison Service, HMP Perth and HMP Castle Huntly – how do those organisations work together and benefit each other?

I have been fortunate to work with the Scottish Prison Service in my past roles and know that their intentions to support their inmates can sometimes be overtaken by the need to conform to

processes and procedures. This is inevitable and frustrating; as a separate entity we are able to bring a different approach to empowering and supporting those people who are trying to change their future. Working together, we can change the lives of those who have taken a wrong turn and want to get back on track.

How will the project support and benefit the wider community?

We will be a Living Wage employer who cares. We will use local suppliers wherever possible; our garden project will grow sufficient food for us and other like-minded projects. As for the wider community, I believe a

“Working together, we can change the lives of those who have taken a wrong turn and want to get back on track”

plant-based café-bistro can bring enormous benefits: to the overall health of our customers; the planet; the environment; and animal welfare. One of our aims is to reduce offending behaviour and the project will bring enormous benefits to the wider community and the public purse.

What are the operational challenges of running a business inside a maximum-security prison?

The Scottish Prison Service is incredibly supportive of the enterprise and has agreed that we can use a building that is on its land but outside the security fence. This allows us to support the great work happening within the prison without disrupting the daily routine.

To work with people with convictions is a challenge, but it's a rewarding one. To support people in changing their behaviour and empowering them to build a future for themselves and their families is worth all the challenges we may face.

What are you most looking forward to over the coming weeks and months as the project develops?

I am impatient to start working with our students and to introduce our customers to scrummy, nutritious and exciting food. We are also looking for chefs who would like to be involved with us and, perhaps, share their challenges and triumphs with our students.

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