

Culture and cuisine

A recipe for conflict

Every arts institution and visitor attraction worth its salt is today exploring how to make the most of secondary income streams, in particular food and beverage provision. As a founding father of London's recent pre-eminence as a restaurant destination (and husband of one of the world's greatest wine writers, Jancis Robinson), Nick Lander has been well equipped to advise cultural destinations on how best to manage food and beverage offers. This he has done for many, with distinction and not a little fascination, including a number of Locum clients. Here, he shares his views on the rewards and frustrations of working with clients more accustomed to satisfying the cultural rather than gastronomic needs of the visitor.

Last autumn our 19-year-old daughter, a first-year History of Art student at the University of Nottingham, attended a day-long series of lectures at London's National Gallery. Whilst most were designed for her degree course, the lecture that came as the biggest surprise to her was the one entitled 'Behind the Scenes at the Museum', which focused on the organisation's commercial elements - the restaurants, cafes and shops that today provide an essential income stream towards the cost of maintaining the gallery and putting on new exhibitions.

When I heard this I felt shocked. Not because the Gallery was explaining these essential facts of life to the next generation of art historians - this cannot happen early enough in my opinion - but because it seemed to indicate an obvious breakdown in inter-family communications (not the first and not the last I am sure).

What had my daughter thought I was up to over the past eight years, as I had set off to scores of meetings at the South Bank Centre, St John's Smiths Square, Glyndebourne, the Baltic in Gateshead, Vinopolis, the Royal Opera House and the Royal Academy, *inter alia*, to put my 20 years of experience in and around the restaurant trade to their advantage? Experience that I hope will ultimately benefit their profile and income stream and raise the overall level of visitor satisfaction. To paraphrase the advertisement, I certainly was not there for the beer ...

If I had to sum up this working experience I would say that it has been 70 per cent successful, thanks as much to my advice as the professional approach and management of those at the coal face, and 30 per cent sheer, unadulterated

frustration, an emotion never encountered before in such quantity even during 45 years of blindly following Manchester United.

Perhaps this ratio is not high by the standards of other consultants. Perhaps it is because I work entirely on my own that I feel the frustration so keenly when common sense, recognising the obvious and understanding customers' needs - the key elements in foodservice - are seemingly so frequently ignored.

It seems practical to an understanding of precisely how arts organisations can maximise their partnerships with foodservice companies to return to the South Bank Centre, the arena of my initial and greatest success to date and at the same time the source of ongoing professional frustration. I was called in by the Centre's then Chief Executive, Nicholas Snowman, to advise on whether the space on the third floor overlooking the Thames, now trading highly successfully as The People's Palace, could ever be a restaurant. Amazingly, in 1994 it had been empty for almost 40 years and this was its last chance - if no suitable restaurateur were forthcoming, it would be reclaimed as a space for the performing arts.

Aside from the operational skills of Joe Levin, whose Capital Group runs The People's Palace, this transformation happened for a variety of reasons. Snowman, having lived and worked in Paris, had an interest in unpretentious, good food and wine where he and some of the 3,000 daily concert goers could go if they chose; the normal starting time for concerts of 19.30 means that the restaurant can serve pre- and post-concert meals to those there for the music and also establish itself later in the evening as a destination in its

own right, helped by its proximity to Waterloo and the renaissance of the South Bank in general; because the SBC has always had a strong foodservice presence to cater for its concert goers and the 4.5 million who walk through the centre each year, the organisation crucially has one of its own members of staff (now with a department to look after, I am delighted to say!) dedicated to foodservice, improving standards and acting as the interface between the operating companies and the general public. In other words, this crucial department has not been left to fall between marketing, customer services and finance.

Finally, the size of the South Bank Centre - the very factor which makes its future development so difficult for its management, city and national politicians - has been our greatest asset. Once The People's Palace was trading satisfactorily, I was asked to look at the other outlets and together with Mervyn Shilliday, SBC's Catering Liaison Officer, we introduced the concept of internal competition; EAT runs the sandwich, soup and coffee contract whilst Granada operates the bars, the buffet counter and a less expensive, Italian restaurant underneath The People's Palace. The consumer chooses with their feet and wallet whilst SBC receives a hefty concession from three completely different food offers, which in the pre-Christmas period were serving over 4,000 customers a day.

My time at the SBC has not been without the normal quotient of frustration, but my experience there and in subsequent arenas has established the following criteria, which are essential if this symbiosis is to work successfully.

Firstly, an understanding approach from the arts organisation's board, trustees and senior management, of what their customers need. Most arts organisations cannot survive without the benevolence and involvement of key, wealthy individuals whose altruism is admirable. However, these individuals' understanding of what the general public want to eat and drink and can afford is usually less than profound and is compounded by the fact that the senior management often see the prospective restaurant as a glamorous venue for fundraising. Restaurants within arts organisations are not the same as restaurants on the high street - the initial attraction of the restaurant at the British Museum, for example, is not I believe the inventiveness of Digby Trout's cooking but the fact that here at last is somewhere to sit down after an exhausting session.

Unless the restaurant's purpose is crystal clear it will founder. The board of the Royal Opera House initially planned a club room for the space that is now a busy cafe and restaurant, and a cold food display counter where the Moët champagne bar stands. Fortunately, both were amended to their present purposes prior to opening (although the initial champagne bar was designed with only a single cash card processing point!) but the intervening two years have been a process of adapting the services back-of-house rather than opening, as a conventional restaurateur would, with the most effective operating systems. This has obviously been frustrating for everyone on both sides of the swing door. This mismatch between the restaurant's expectations is invariably compounded by the chosen architects' failure to understand restaurants.

New arts organisations, whether museums, galleries or concert halls are big productions into which the restaurant/cafe must find the most appropriate niche. Architects are without doubt extremely imaginative and clever people but I still find it staggering that they manage, and are allowed to disregard, the simple essentials involved. After all, the arts organisation will still be looking for its concession rate from foodservice long after the architect has signed off.

The most basic factor in the service of good food anywhere - and this applies at home as much as in any professional environment - is that the less distance food has to travel, the better it is. If only architects would appreciate and remember this essential fact when they are designing, the long-term benefits for all would be enormous.

Instead, the scenario goes like this. Too little attention is given to foodservice at the outset and delivery, production and service areas are located in the most disconnected fashion. As the building progresses, a black hole appears in the operating budget, which can only be filled by greater commercial activity. Yet this is constrained, sometimes irrevocably, by the huge distances that cut the chefs off from their customers.

The labyrinthine passages under the British Museum are a case in point, as is the tortuous path that food has to travel backstage at the Royal Opera House from the main production kitchens on level Stage+5 down two or three floors to the main areas where the audience congregates. The more food has to travel, the

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more staff have to be employed, and this has a knock-on effect on the operator's profits and the arts organisation's eventual receipts.

The same principle even applies to chefs. When The Lowry in Salford, Lancashire, announced that its 'celebrity chef' was going to be Stephen Saunders from Cambridgeshire on the other side of the country, an arrangement that would involve him driving cross country every Friday to supervise the kitchens, there was a certain amount of scepticism in professional circles, scepticism sadly justified now that this arrangement has come to an end somewhat prematurely.

One distinction has to be made, however. In the bigger museums and galleries, small foodservice points selling coffee and snacks with minimal resources and staffing and offering a temporary resting station for the customer, can provide more income and greater customer satisfaction than any other type of sales outlet. But these are very different animals from restaurants.

The final misunderstanding between arts organisations and their foodservice partners tends to come about because each side fails to recognise each other's professionalism and weaknesses. This potential friction usually manifests itself in the selection of the final design of the restaurant's interior, a discussion that can often be further drawn out than the lease.

In many ways, the timing has never been more critical for arts organisations' chief executives to realise the importance of the role that their restaurants and cafes can play in their future economic development and to find the most suitable, long-term partner. The removal of museum charges which has already been such a spur to admissions means that those coming in will have more disposable income to spend once inside and should not be given the opportunity to slip outside to the nearest Pret à Manger.

Secondly, an exciting food offer can do more, and more speedily, than anything else to break down any elitist image an arts organisation may have inherited. This is certainly the cry from the office of Tony Hall, the Royal Opera House's new chief executive, who has introduced tea dances in the Vilar Floral Hall and asked his foodservice partner, Searcy's, to increase the range of inexpensive food available during the day. The response has so far been excellent, with an audience composed not of an elite spending the huge sums of money that is normally associated

with an opera, but in a busy week with over 11,500 customers spending an average of £14 each.

But the most crucial reason for arts organisations' executives to understand these basics and to appreciate just what a successful partnership can do for them is that they are in a position to create something distinctive, something very different from what is going on in the all-too-predictable high streets up and down the country.

Arts organisations with the space, funding and ability to draw in large numbers of customers day and night are in the perfect position to revive the fortunes of the local, independent restaurateur rather than rushing off into the arms of one of the financially enormous foodservice companies. Their forte today lies in the business worlds of airport lounges, hospitals, schools and motorway cafes and in developing brands to draw in captive audiences. This is not, unless the arts organisation is sorely strapped for cash, the way to a distinctive future.

Rather, they should be looking at what is working most successfully in their particular area and find the right partner to create something even more distinctive. There should be a clear recognition of the emergence of British food and cooking as items we can justifiably be proud of - no more pizza restaurants in the British National Gallery please - and a genuine desire to see restaurateurs as allies rather than the money-grabbing enemy. The consequences will be happier customers and even bigger income.

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