

# Hotel du Vin

## Individuality from the cellar upwards



To explore fully why Hotel du Vin is proving so successful, wherever its doors open, **Locum Destination Review** left no stone unturned. We toured its two most recent offers (in Birmingham and Bristol), compared each bistro in turn, and interviewed its co-founder and driving force, **Robin Hutson**, in Brighton, scene of the imminent, fifth Hotel du Vin & Bistro. It was a tough assignment but someone had to do it (in this case, **Locum Non-Executive Director and resident hedonist, Tony Hodges**).

**Zeitgeist** *n* 1. the spirit of the times, 2. the trend of thought and feeling in a period. [German from *Zeit* 'time' + *Geist* 'spirit']

Oxford English Dictionary

### Hotel du Vin : What the papers say

'It should be clear Hutson and Basset have achieved something special here.'

*Jonathan Meades, The Times*

'A first class hotel and restaurant that should appeal to everyone.'

*Lloyd Grosman, Sainsbury's Magazine*

'A unique style of hedonism!'

*Ed Sullivan, Evening Standard*

'Elegant and urbane, yet relaxed and informal.'

*Suzy Atkins, The Saturday Express*

'The Hotels du Vin have, so far as I can see, the whole of Britain in which to clean up.'

*Jonathan Meades - The Times*

### The origins of success

Robin Hutson and his partners are flying, on the wings of the *zeitgeist*. Whilst international chains are a quarter full, metropolitan boutique hotels are putting new sites on hold, and London restaurants are crashing weekly, Hotel du Vin and its Bistro operations cannot stop winning. Why? What makes this 'micro-chain' different?

The story starts in a familiar way. Two experienced, senior managers in the hospitality firmament – Robin Hutson was General Manager at Chewton Glen and his co-founder, Gerard Basset, was Head Sommelier – had a big idea but started small. 'Thirteen bedrooms, a business plan on the back of a fag packet, and about two and sixpence.' It is when you are reminded that the first Hotel du Vin & Bistro opened in Winchester seven years ago that you realise this is no overnight success. Sane, prudent, even cautious evolution is at least one distinctive characteristic of their success, rare enough in the speedy new world of hospitality. Yet not the explanation.

For any classically trained marketing man, the key can be found in the founders' big idea. The most obvious difference lies in what Gerard Basset brought to the party. Gerard may not be the entrepreneur or businessman or even general manager in the mix but this is the man who puts the *vin* in Hotel du Vin. Herein lies the conceptual difference from which income streams have flowed, alongside its distinctive identity. As the British embraced wine, hedonism became acceptable and Hotel du Vin became the acceptable arena for hedonism. Wine also flowed, ineffably, into food and higher income from 'F&B' than any conventional hotel could imagine.

For any hospitality operator, the key to Hotel du Vin's success lies in the way this team have delivered the promise. As Hutson puts it: 'Over the last 20 years there have been plenty of places that tried to be different, all ideas and pizzazz, restaurants too, all design and no action. Our roots were in the substance of the thing .... The devil is



Cave du Vin Fine Wine & Cigar Store, Hotel du Vin, Birmingham

'Gerard Basset. The man who put the *vin* in Hotel du Vin.'



absolutely in the detail! Value, service and comfort are clearly what bring the guests back, again and again, and then persuade them to make a special journey to the next Hotel du Vin.

Yet there is something else. Four small hotels, with bistro attached, incorporating (pace Michelin) 159 rooms, turning over £13.3 million this year, and a net operating profit of 23 per cent? And serving an average of 600 covers every day of the year? There has to be something else. Enter the *zeitgeist*, as described by Robin Hutson. 'Gerard and I smothered it with supervision, so we could make it as individual as we wanted. We were individuals and we weren't toeing any corporate line .... There was an element of the *artisanale* in our approach to it .... We were saying things then like "There's no dress code", which now sounds really crass but eight years ago that was quite important. The fact that we would never wear a tie in the place, to put people at their ease, to make them feel they could come and enjoy really good quality food and wine in a very unstuffy and unstructured atmosphere.' This sheer informality seems so at odds with the founders' training and most recent experience at Chewton Glen (which *Gourmet* magazine described as 'the best country hotel in the world', and which Hutson will still never criticise). 'Absolutely. Both of us had spent all our lives at the top end. Five-star hotels, Michelin, starred restaurants. We'd come from that and it probably was a deliberate reaction. Rather like the bloke who runs Maserati wanting nothing more than to get on his bike. We sensed a big shift in what people wanted. Even at Chewton Glen people were baulking at wearing their collar and tie .... The fact that children under seven were not welcome at Chewton Glen – their prerogative – you alienated a big chunk of your potential market .... So we really aimed to have a place with *no rules* [my italics]. "No rules" went as far as how we decorated, how we operated; but we underpinned this approach with very serious substance.'

The substance is clear in the team surrounding the founders, staff, directors and backers alike. But entrepreneurs define the cultures they create and it is to Hutson in particular that we should look to

explain why, for the hospitality business, Hotel du Vin is the idea of the age.

## The rewards of originality

Today, it has become obvious to many that hotel restaurants are rarely worth having unless they are planned as standalone operations. When Hotel du Vin started, it went one better. The Bistro was to stand up and be counted in its own right but then it was integrated, by wine theme, expertise and branding. (To this day, each of the first three operations is listed as a separate hotel and bistro by Michelin – dual listings – yet marketed jointly by the management, as 'Hotel du Vin & Bistro'.) You will find no Bib Gourmand symbol in Michelin for any Bistro, because none offers a *prix fixe* menu. Why not? Because value runs through the menu anyway and because the operations have as much custom as they can handle. Fact: conventional hotels derive 15 to 20 per cent of revenue from Food & Beverage. Fact: Hotel du Vin & Bistro derives 50 to 70 per cent of revenue from Food & Beverage. Before accounting for special corporate hospitality events.

In the beginning, the team had to make the most of the Bistro and wine theming because they had only 13 bedrooms. Today, sponsorship by wine producers is more important for décor opportunities than income and the success of each bistro is an upside more than a necessity (and it helps keep the room rates honest, some would say downright inexpensive). Yet that simple original idea of a hospitality operation with a wine theme has proved a masterstroke. Over the six years since the first hotel opened, UK wine consumption has continued to motor ahead (up by 28 per cent) and UK wine consumers continue to need the best advice as they trade up. Who better to advise you than the UK's most admired sommelier, Gerard Basset, and his cadre of expert, enthusiastic disciples at each Bistro? Events du Vin fill the rooms on tricky Sundays and their marketing helps keep the brand profile



*The Bistro at Hotel du Vin, Tunbridge Wells*

“How do we describe our food? Fresh, uncluttered, roots firmly planted in the classical – be it French, Italian, British, Spanish, it doesn’t really matter as long as it’s genuine food that hasn’t been screwed about.”

Robin Hutson

high, the data base active. Gerard's Ecole du Vin generates further income and more publicity. Listen to Nigella Lawson: 'Gerard Basset is a born teacher, which is to say he so loves what he does that he makes one want to learn to love it too.' All the while, the real added value flows in the bars, the Bistro, and the corporate events. Where better to offer corporate hospitality than in an environment dedicated to wine?

The rewards of multiple income streams are not restricted to wine and food. The Birmingham hotel has pioneered Health du Vin, incorporating spa, gym and health club. After a modest start, membership is swelling beyond the 200 mark, and this latest outpost's unprecedented weekend trade is further buttressed. One city tourism chief advised Hutson that he 'would be OK during the week but do no weekend business.' 'Sure enough, we are now between 75 and 100 per cent full at weekends. There's nowhere else in Birmingham can do that. You can get a room for £50 at any other hotel there at weekends! Not at Hotel du Vin. Often they charge higher room rates at weekends than weekdays.

This is the hotelier's reward for originality. A balance of high-yield custom across weekdays and weekends. When you consider the conventional city centre chain hotel is seeing half the room rates on half the rooms at weekends, this is rich reward indeed.

## Delivering the idea

Ask Robin Hutson what mistakes he has made and, for a while, he waffles on about maybe overspending on property issues ('the regulations out there ...') and perhaps being overcautious on some sites, but then he cuts to the chase. 'Getting from where we were to where we are was a difficult cultural move, particularly as Gerard had no administrative experience and I had only limited financial experience.' Typically, nothing was to get in the way of success so the team was bolstered with heavyweight directors of operations (Charles Morgan) and finance (Peter Chittick).

Ever closer to the truth, Hutson then admits: 'With four executive directors and another four non-executives, I'm having to learn to be a bit more democratic these days .... I'm probably a control freak, but *someone has to look after the detail and that's the way it works!*' (Again, my italics.) And, indeed, it does work. Hutson's passion for the product and service transfers itself, palpably, to his team, just as Basset's does to the sommeliers and bar staff. Herein lies the secret of the hotels' individuality.

Hutson gets into the pulpit (an unlikely sight, with his long hair and hedonist looks) and bangs on about 'substance, wit and passion', clearly his training mantra.

The substance is most clearly visible in the comfort all around, in the bistro menu, and in the wine list.

Whatever the design quirks and vinous theming, you cannot fail to be impressed by the Egyptian bed linen, the free-standing bath, the massive shower head. Forget the £250 or £400 suites, opulent and imaginative though they may be, the best comfort features are common to all rooms, from the £100 entry point onwards.

The bistro menu varies from town to town, according to the chef, but each one revolves around classic, staple dishes and strong central principles, laid down by you know who. 'How do we describe our food? Fresh, uncluttered, roots firmly planted in the classical – be it French, Italian, British, Spanish, it doesn't matter as long as it's genuine food that hasn't been screwed about. And fresh produce is

critical. The seasons are too blurred now, apart from game and certain fruit and vegetables, but every March I send out a directive' – not a guideline, you will note – 'make sure you have English asparagus on the menu for the six weeks it's around, it's important'.

He warms to his theme and you warm to him. 'The food I can't stand is combination cooking. We always do battle with the young chefs who understandably want to be creative and experiment. If I brought one in now and you said to him "What does Robin say about *crème brûlée*?", he would say "Leave the xxxing thing alone". The best one is the original one.'

This man truly understands his guest. 'These days our punters, across the social strata, are not people who only go out twice a year... they've seen all the tricks, they've done that. For us, the simple dish is a magnet. It must be sufficiently interesting so you know you are out, but also sufficiently simple that it doesn't do your head in.'

'So there are certain dishes that have to be on the menu, that they (the chefs) cannot screw around with. They cannot take away steak frites. They must have a smoked salmon or gravadlax and a simple fish on the menu. They can then fill in around the edges.'

Bless you, Robin Hutson, and all who sail (or cook) with you. In simplicity, as we tired gourmands are wont to say, lies true sophistication. Which was demonstrated vividly by the perfectly roast cod I found in the Birmingham bistro and the classical *confit* of duck eaten in Bristol.

Then, of course, the great joy of simple food is that it makes it much simpler to find and enjoy the right fine wine to accompany it. Here, predictably, each bistro scores, with greater freedom expressed on each wine list than on the menu. So each sommelier develops his (or her) list with gusto and pride. (The Bristol sommelier has an impressive penchant for Spanish wines, for instance, but it did not stop him introducing me, a California wine nut, to one of the finest Zinfandels I have ever tasted.) Hutson is rightly proud. 'To hang the sign Hotel du Vin outside the door, there has to be an absolute integrity and no-one has been able to have a pop at us on our wines.'

Cleverly, the team have avoided wine sponsorship obstructing wine excellence. The wine sponsors may sometimes provide more commercial, less individual wines but Gerard Basset has to feel comfortable standing by their wines and the sommeliers build wider and longer lists beyond them. (In the only example of a detail which this pernickety observer could fault, a barman in one hotel informed me that the only sherry available was a sponsor's brand. He was wrong, it transpired, but that did not stop Robin Hutson erupting. The error will not, one feels sure, be repeated. What pleasure, however, to discover a chink – the man is human, after all.)

Delivering the original idea and remarkable value, hand in hand, should in theory place a strain on service levels. Surely the margins are too tight to permit full-service people budgets. At Chewton Glen, Hutson would have deployed an average of three staff to each guest and that is a world away. Where Hotel du Vin blurs the distance is, first, through managers with the same ethos and classical training – both Mike Warren at Birmingham and Nigel Buchanan at Bristol had also seen service at Chewton Glen and it shows – and, second, through a natural, unsophisticated charm and enthusiasm across the team. We saw little of the weary scepticism that older British hotel and restaurant staff often exhibit, and none of the 'actor resting' traits of exhibitionist London service. If staff budgets are tight, staff attitudes hide it well. For a control freak, Robin Hutson seems to lead a happy crew.

"We almost have a sub-text that we enjoy the rescue of the old building."

Robin Hutson



Hotel du Vin, Birmingham

'If you think converting a sugar factory in Bristol is idiosyncratic wait till you see the restoration of a thirties faux-Tudor curiosity in Brighton.'



Architect's drawing of new Brighton site, opening late 2002

It helps that the founders' caution has meant happy backers too. An interesting group they appear, mixing financial acumen with entrepreneurial success as they do. The executive directors must find it reassuring, when they need another £6 or 8 million for the next hotel, to see a Gordon Roddick or a Chris Akers at the boardroom table. Not only do they have the funds, but they understand when an entrepreneur needs to prime the pump. And Roddick knows, from another market, what it is to fly on the wings of the *zeitgeist*. The Body Shop was itself, remember, the idea of the age. It too delivered its promise.

## There are no lessons like this at business school

In some ways, the Hotel du Vin success story could be a business school case study and some of its guiding principles are proven classics. However, no-one at business school tells you when to zig whilst other operators zag.

To some extent this contrariness shows up in Hutson's location policy. The company has 'marketing people for our own marketing initiatives but not a strategic marketing person'. It has geodemographic data but no LEZ analysis and no analyst on staff. 'The more of these things I farm out, the less it becomes us.'

Conventional thinkers would have understood Bristol as the third venue for Hotel du Vin but Birmingham was 'a joke to most people' - "What are they doing in Birmingham?" What Hutson saw was that Birmingham had money flowing inwards but no town house or boutique hotel in place, 'whereas Leeds has a huge number of rooms and Oxford is by no means as wealthy or as vibrant as people imagine. Between the academics and the blue collar workers there's not a whole lot of business going on! Painting by numbers this is not.

At business school, they do not teach contrariness as manifest in Hutson's design policy. 'I'm not sure about all this design emphasis,' is Hotel du Vin's message to the Schragar and Collins camp followers. 'Of course it's good to see the chintz and swirly carpets being thrown out but I think it's been used as a panacea to cure all ills. It's fine as long as there is substance behind the design ... just because you spend a lot of money on design doesn't mean it's going to work.'

They do not teach idiosyncrasy to budding hoteliers, either. 'Every time we develop one of these, we are looking for an idiosyncratic building. We almost have a sub-text that we enjoy the rescue of the old building.' (If you think converting a sugar factory in Bristol or a Victorian eye hospital in Birmingham is idiosyncratic wait till you see the restoration of a 1930s faux-Tudor curiosity in Brighton, opening later in 2002.) 'Plus the fact that we run the concepts and

A 'sophisticated rustic' approach to design. "We do it on the kitchen table. My wife does the soft things, I do the hard things."

Robin Hutson



Interior, Hotel du Vin, Birmingham

design in an artisanal way. We could go out and get a professional designer ... (but my wife and I) we do it on the kitchen table. My wife does the soft things, I do the hard things. It works well because it's imperfect and there is something in that imperfection that people feel comfortable with. Whereas you go into these restaurants that have been fantastically well designed, they are too graphic and they are all a bit the same.'

Hutson's individuality shines through in Hotel du Vin's buildings and design, and it works. There is a comfortable feel about each place. Yet it was not just the designer's eye of my companion that picked out opportunities for a splash of colour here, a pillar highlighted there, dead looking dried flowers that could disappear from that window over there. Much as I love Hutson's feel for 'sophisticated rustic' – the leather and hessian and wood – there is a whiff of tiredness in the air, and he might profitably consider opening the windows to a light, fresh breeze in his next interiors. Not to a name designer, of course. Just to a refreshing dab of colour, perhaps.

Where Hotel du Vin most visibly zigs as others zag is on pricing and value. With supreme justification. Listen to Hutson on this hobby horse. 'As you know they are all crying in their soup up in London at the moment and no-one would wish the exceptional circumstances that produced this economic blip ever to happen again. But I do think that, especially in London, there are a lot of fat

cats who haven't been passionate about what they do. They just think "weld the concept, give it some whizzy design, whack in some fusion cooking", and hope to fill 150 seats seven nights a week. It doesn't happen like that except in boom time.'

'At a hoteliers' meeting the other day, I was asked for my views and said that I thought a number of hoteliers have not been prudent with their pricing. They have sat back, London has been booming, and they have whacked up their prices by 20 per cent a year for countless years, reduced the service, pocketed the cash and now they are sitting there with rooms at £300 a night wondering "Why isn't anyone visiting our hotel?" And in restaurants too. Whatever happened, the brakes needed to be put on! Amen.

Remember that Hutson was practising these principles of value pricing long before the rest of the industry had to reassess its approach. Perhaps this is one issue where his contrariness does provide a business school case study. That and the fact that Hotel du Vin is one of the best examples of 'volume prestige' marketing you will find. (Hutson would never use the term but he sees the validity of its principles clearly – take prestige quality and values and make them more accessible or affordable – and recognises the frequent success they underlie.)

Come to think of it, there is a business school course which Robin Hutson could lead. 'Zig where others zag. How to make 23 per cent net operating profit on the back of a fag packet!'



Exterior, Hotel du Vin, Winchester

"13 bedrooms, a business plan on the back of a fag packet, and about two and sixpence."

Robin Hutson on Hotel du Vin's origins.



Pool Room, Hotel du Vin, Bristol

## And now for the bad news

Hutson foresees a limit on Hotel du Vin's development. 'If people ask "How many hotels do you want?", I would say eight to ten. Arguably there is an opportunity for every half-decent town or city in the country to accommodate one but I don't want just to go out there and do it .... It's a question of how long you can keep it up at the pace that we do and feel comfortable about that.'

If Hotel du Vin opens another site each year, this 'micro-chain' (as the company oxymoronically describes it) will number ten properties by 2007, the year that Robin Hutson reaches 50. Perhaps that is when he will step down, and perhaps that will trigger the predictable trade sale, since he does not want to be associated with a roll-it-out approach. 'Other players tell me, "just go and open three at a time" ... (but) I can tell you the history of any piece of furniture, any colour, any picture, in any of the hotels, where it came from and in what circumstances. I know this stuff, why it's there, where I screwed it up, whatever ... it's so much part of us, I couldn't possibly do just a cookie-cutter chain.'

So will Hotel du Vin's growth be stunted? Surely this is an idea with broader, even international appeal? 'If someone took over Hotel du Vin, I think it would have the legs to travel, in a slightly different guise – inevitably someone would simplify what we do and it would be different – if that someone had the right level of commitment to it.'

Sad to say, no-one has yet managed to bottle individuality. As Hutson defines it, 'the kitchen table preserves the individuality'. It will not be Hutson that spreads this brand far and wide. 'Someone's welcome to do it, but it ain't going to be me. They'd have me behind some desk! I think it's possible but it's very much more difficult in a living, breathing, 365-days-a-year business. And it's easier to do the top-end formal service – you've got rules. It's much more difficult to do what we do which is great service without the pomp and ceremony.'

Doubtless someone will one day try, buy Hotel du Vin and spread the brand. But if they use a cookie-cutter, they will miss the point. In the age of the individual, individuality is king.