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BUSINESS

White Brasserie brings French piquancy to English pub cuisine

THE HOT 1000

Companies to inspire Britain 

By Elizabeth Anderson

BRITISH pubs have been going through a torrid time, hit by higher taxes and a drop in customers.

But Mark Derry – the chief executive of upmarket restaurant chain Brasserie Blanc – thinks the renaissance in gastropubs will help his business boom.

To sate the public's renewed appetite for gourmet pub food, Derry has partnered with Raymond Blanc. The celebrity chef not only sits on Brasserie Blanc's board, signing off all its menus, but is also closely involved with the firm's gastropub business.

Brasserie has three sites operating on the outskirts of London, with another soon to open. Derry plans to grow that to 20 outlets in the next three years, situated around and near the M25, after raising £13.5m earlier this year.

"People are still eating out despite the recession and consumers' expectations are growing," Derry told *The Daily Telegraph*. "I do think there are too many pubs at the moment, or at least the traditional ones. They used to be filled with men drinking 10 pints a night. Those days have gone. But pubs are going back to what they were originally about – good food and good drink."

Derry has approached the White Brasserie business in a similar way to its restaurant counterpart. He has focused on expanding the kitchens so that all food can be made fresh on site.

He has also continued to keep the traditional pub at the front, with a restaurant at the back. Currently, the sites in Teddington and Weybridge turn over more than £30,000 a week.

The food on offer is similar to dishes served in the Brasserie Blanc restaurants, except he serves pies in the pubs where the restaurants might serve salmon tartare.

On White Brasserie's menus you are likely to find dressed Brixham crab, and smoked Morteau sausage served with potato salad and a poached egg – a twist on the traditional bangers and mash.

This is essentially to keep the essence of the pub the same, but to dispel the image of pubs being seen as boozers. People are drinking less alcohol, and expect pubs to offer a full food offering.

The traditional British pub has taken a knock in recent years. The latest figures from the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) suggest pubs are closing down at the rate of 31 a week, with around 50,000 pubs left in the country. At the peak closure period in the first half of 2009, 52 pubs closed a week.

Pubs have struggled partly because of rises in VAT and beer duty and



Raising the bar: the company plans to increase the number of White Brasserie gastropubs to 20 within the next three years

supermarkets offering cut-price alcohol all denting profits, but also because of higher rents and the way pub landlords are tied to leases with the owners.

Derry says he has got round the usual difficulties of dealing with pub owners by making sure that White Brasserie is not tied to a long-term lease – instead he hands over a higher proportion of the turnover.

"As our revenue grows, so does theirs. That means in the long term we're providing more in rent not less. We still win as well because it encourages the landlord to invest more in the premises," he explains. This frees up more cash for him to invest in new sites.

The restaurant chain Brasserie Blanc, which specialises on French food, is also undergoing major refurbishment, Derry says. He admits that with so many new food places opening up, it's difficult to keep on top of competition.

"There's so much stuff coming out now – some is just fantastic. Jason Atherton's gastro diners, [which includes Berners Tavern], are terrific. With Blanc we have fallen behind a bit. There's been a lot of new, more interesting modern market entries now which are doing a very good job. We're guilty of not keeping our sites as up to

date as we could have done. But we've hired some great designers to revamp the sites. We're also improving our bar offerings and introducing cheese counters. People no longer want to rush to have their meal – they like having a drink beforehand."

The chain employs 200 chefs to cook everything using fresh products. It buys beef from three farms to track where supply is coming from and even makes its own pickles.

This means prices are higher than other high street chains such as Cote, but its strategy is paying off, as turnover has risen from £15m to £40m in the last three years.

Derry has worked in the restaurant business for decades. He previously ran the Premium Casual Dining company, which developed the Loch Fyne fish restaurant concept in the late 1990s. He sold the business to Greene King in 2007 for £70m to concentrate on Brasserie Blanc, which now employs 850 people.

The first Brasserie Blanc opened in 2006 as a partnership between Raymond Blanc and Mark Derry. In 2011 the firm bought out rival French restaurant chain Chez Gerard, doubling its number to 19 and giving it a stronger presence across London. Its most famous site is the roof

terrace at Covent Garden overlooking the Royal Opera House.

Pubs are less prone to seasonal swings, Derry says. At Brasserie Blanc's Covent Garden site, for example, there is only space for 96 diners inside. The majority of tables are on the large terraces at the front. This means that the restaurant can go from serving 2,000 people a week in January to 7,000 people a week in August.

But despite his experience, Derry says he still has a lot to learn. Because of the added competition, coupled with the recent recession, people expect more for their money now.

"If you fail to make someone happy, it's a really big deal. You have to deliver 1,000pc all the time," he says, otherwise a restaurant owner could find themselves the victim of a negative online review. Derry adds he once had a lady complain that the waiter poured too much wine in her glass.

Running a pub is a joy in comparison, he says: "In a pub people are more relaxed and their expectations are much lower. The environment is terrific."

Brasserie Blanc is one of the London Stock Exchange's "1000 Companies to inspire Britain"