

Not such Underdogs after all

26 May 2007 by Nick Lander/FT

I was really enjoying my margarita sitting at the bar of Green & Red, the hugely popular Mexican cantina in increasingly fashionable Bethnal Green, E1, until I asked its owners, Will Beckett and Huw Gott, how old they were. The quick calculation that, added together, their ages were only slightly more than mine made my heart sink.

Restaurants and bars have always attracted those young not just in age but also in spirit but there currently seems to be a new breed of young entrants into the market who for two very specific reasons may be able to offer their customers even more than their predecessors.

Firstly, they have spent most, if not all, their lives eating well so that good food is an integral part of their interests and, secondly, thanks to cheap flights, they have travelled extensively even by their mid-20's. The hours may be long, the pay less than that on offer in finance, but the rewards include constant human contact rather than sitting in front of a computer screen and, for those in the kitchen, close contact with seasonal produce in an increasingly urban world.

Beckett and Gott certainly grew up with good food. Will Beckett's mother is Fiona Beckett, the well respected food and wine writer, while Gott grew up in his parents' award-winning café, Berrys in Church Stretton in Shropshire, where he was taught to value their suppliers and their ingredients. A stint as a kitchen porter in a London restaurant followed, as did another as an oyster-opener in Paris which, he admitted sadly, means he can no longer even face an oyster.

As they have known each other since they were 11 (they are now both 29) there might have been an inevitability about Beckett and Gott's working together but Beckett did admit he would have embarked on a PhD in Modern European History had not Gott called to propose they open a bar. That was back in 2003 when they opened The Redchurch since when they have gone on to open Green & Red across the street from one another in Bethnal Green, Hawksmoor, their successful interpretation of a New York steak house in Spitalfields and the Marquess Tavern in Canonbury, a pub serving good British food, as well as starting a consultancy business for those either cash-rich and idea-poor, or vice versa, who dream of breaking into this demanding business.

Two principles underpin their apparently diverse business. "What we have tried to do all along is look at familiar concepts," Beckett explained, "analyse them and then think of how we could do them better than anyone else. And alongside that we have tried to ensure that whichever sites we have moved into have had the double benefit of low rents and relatively low set-up costs."

In effect, they have specialised in turnarounds. The Redchurch was a Bengal Fried Chicken and Green & Red an underperforming bar while Hawksmoor (named after the renowned 18th century architect, three of whose churches are nearby) used to be a Turkish restaurant. Three of these four are in close proximity to one another which keeps management costs down while Beckett keeps a close eye on the Marquess Tavern by living in the flat above the pub.

But travel has also enhanced their commercial vision. "We had both been to Mexico several times," Gott explained, "and realised the huge gap there was not just in the appreciation of Mexican food over here but also of just how different and distinctive tequila can be. Here, many peoples' formative experience with tequila has invariably been something to get drunk on as quickly as possible. And Mexican food has been thought of as merely something to soak this up."

Green & Red opened in late 2005 specifically to rectify these misapprehensions and so far has won numerous awards for its 150-strong tequila list, poured by tequila-obsessed barmen, and its Jalisco food, based on the principal tequila producing region, which has attracted two very distinctive crowds other than its obviously happy customers. The first has been a stream of Mexican cooks delighted at the opportunity to cook the food that they were not being allowed to cook in other Mexican restaurants in London and the second is the many Americans working in London who miss this style of cooking that has become so prevalent across the US. What gives Beckett and Gott particular pleasure is that Manuel Diaz-Cebrian, the European manager of the Mexican Tourist Board, uses their bar to brief journalists before they head off down Mexico way.

Their decision to open Hawksmoor was based on another principle. Gott explained: that it is better to find a potentially good location and then conceive of what would work well there rather than shoe-horn a preconceived idea into what could be an unsuitable venue. The fact that London lacked a really top quality steak restaurant has been obvious to many restaurateurs for some time but what reinforced the partners' gut feel that this was the opportune place to do this was that the former Turkish restaurant had only a small kitchen (which would obviously limit any menu) but a large charcoal grill. The subsequent masterstroke that they should only serve meat bred and prepared by The Ginger Pig in Yorkshire has only added to the restaurant's authenticity.

Steak restaurants serving expensive cuts of meat and good wines with a cash rather than a percentage mark up are very different businesses from bars serving high-margin cocktails and it is the vital challenge to keep on top of such a varied business that forced Beckett and Gott to look long and hard at themselves and then consider how their experiences could be useful for others.

"There is no doubt that over the past four years we have made loads of mistakes, particularly opening Hawksmoor and the Marquess Tavern almost simultaneously, which stretched us all," Beckett explained. "But the difference between the relative ease of opening our fourth restaurant and the challenges of the first is chalk and cheese. Landlords and the banks like us now; we can get better credit and it is far, far easier to hire staff. Our company is called Underdog because that is how we really felt at the beginning and there is no good reason why others should have to go through this."

Both were frank enough to admit that they may have to wait for the financial rewards. For the first couple of years they drew an annual salary of £16,000 each which recently went up to £24,000, far less than many of their contemporaries earn. But Beckett has no regrets. "There are three things I love about this business. I have no boss. I can push myself as much as I like and every morning I look forward to coming to work. Even on a Monday. I don't know of many friends I grew up with who can say that."

The Redchurch, 107 Redchurch Street, E2, 020-7729 8333,

Green & Red, 51 Bethnal Green Road, E1, 020-7749 9670,

Hawksmoor, 157 Commercial Street, E1, 020-7456 1006

The Marquess Tavern, 32 Canonbury Street, N1, 020-7354 2975.

At last week's annual awards by The Drinks Business, Beckett and Gott scooped both On Trade Operators and Young Achievers of the Year.