

Restaurants - not uniformly well- dressed

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Nicholas Oakwell is rapidly emerging as one of the most influential people in the British hospitality industry but his success, he freely admits, is attributable to a strange combination of factors.

Most importantly, there is his obvious eye for fashion, which first became evident when the retailer Harvey Nichols bought his entire degree collection when he graduated from the Surrey Institute aged 22. Then there was a chance encounter with a woman at a party at which, he confessed, he got 'horribly drunk'. Finally, there is the happy combination of his initials, NO.

Oakwell, 38, is Managing Director of *no uniform*, a company he started five years ago to design specifically for those working in restaurants, bars and hotels and whose logo is 'Address Your Image' with the emphasis firmly on the letters 'dress'. His current long list of clients include The Wolseley, The Grove, Tom Aiken and the Gaucho Grill and so busy are his team of 15 designers that Oakwell refused to meet me in his office – 'it's just too crowded here at the moment' he explained – and we eventually met up in the coffee shop of The Great Eastern Hotel, whose uniforms he also designed.

He looks every inch the designer. Dressed in black from head- to- toe and with a smart black attaché case, Oakwell sported black glasses, a trim black beard, a black Yves Saint Laurent suit and a white shirt with black heart- shaped cuff links. It came as no surprise that when he handed over his company's brochure it was in a black folder within a black envelope. But his black obsession does not seem to extend to his coffee. Over a *caffè latte*, he revealed his passion for his business.

"I began as a milliner but there was never going to be a great financial future in hats. I then worked in fashion retail and at a party I met the woman who was going to be General Manager of this hotel, who said that she would like me to design their staff uniforms. I had never done this kind of design before but I began to realise not just how big this market is but also what an effect the right uniform has on those who wear it. 60% of the British workforce wear a uniform and I just don't think they should get up and put on something they are not happy to be wearing."

That proportion is much higher in restaurants and hotels, where virtually everyone, other than the restaurateur and hotelier, wears a uniform that has not only to be smart but also easily distinguishable and, increasingly, in keeping with the image that the restaurant wants to establish for itself. The receptionist, manager or waiter is invariably the first contact any customer will have with the restaurant, long before the menu or wine list is handed over, and it is critically important that they look smart but not too smart.

Numerous restaurateurs have employed top designers to dress their staff but this approach, rather like ostentatious flower displays, has always left me feeling either under- dressed or that I will be paying for this privilege in an extra- large bill. And restaurants are strictly hierarchical organisations where a definite line needs to be drawn between the various ranks from commis waiter up to manager.

Oakwell's involvement with any restaurant will, he hopes, begin at least three months, although ideally five, before the opening so that he and his staff can immerse themselves in the designer's mood boards and the restaurateur's aspirations. Not allowing enough time for the design and manufacture is, in his opinion, most restaurateurs' biggest fault – particularly as so much production is now being transferred to Poland, Italy and China. Oakwell had just heard that one trouser factory he had frequently used in Dalston, east London, had just closed.

Once his team start designing (using only pen and paper initially – Oakwell insists that the computer must come second), then the ergonomic factors become important. "Firstly, and most importantly, the waiting staff must be immediately recognisable - something that can be most easily achievable via a continued shape, colour, silhouette or detail i.e. ties or shirt collars. Something that strings it together but is not too obtrusive – it isn't a fashion show, after all. Then the uniforms must be cool as waiting staff run around a lot. When I first started I noticed that the designers were using material that was 65% cotton 35% polyester but I have increased the cotton element to at least 80% and a good weave is important so that the uniforms have at least an 18 month life span."

Opening up his own suit jacket, Oakwell revealed what he has adopted as a common design feature, three internal pockets down one side of the jacket and one on the other. "Managers have a lot of stuff to carry around, pens, keys, pads and I want to keep a clean, smooth look to the outside of the jackets. We also put extra belt hoops on trousers and skirts for pagers and try to make sure that the jackets have double vents. This allows the jacket to move around above all this paraphernalia. And we don't design hipster trousers because higher waisted trousers keep the shirts tucked in better and make the waiting staff stand taller and prouder - although this does annoy the more fashion- conscious younger waiting staff."

"Above all, what we are trying to design is a uniform that is foolproof and cannot be customised by any of the staff. If we design a long sleeve shirt then we will put a tab and button on it so that it can be rolled up but only to an exact position. And my particular pet hate are loose apron strings so we add buckles and straps as design features so that these look smart."

Design fees start at £1,000 per day, which would result in an overall fee of around £2,500 for a small restaurant with around 20 staff. The investment in the uniforms is considerably more, however. "We will produce a range of sizes from a size 6 to even a 66" inch waist once," Oakwell explained "although most waitresses are size 8-14 and most waiters a 30"-36" waist as restaurateurs want their staff to look thin and sexy. Then I recommend that the restaurateur budgets for two jackets, three to four shirts and a couple of pairs of trousers for each member of his team. This usually works out at about £700 per person and I have seen uniform bills for big restaurants of over £100,000." On top are the weekly laundry bills to ensure that the uniforms age the same and the white shirts do not appear 'chewing gum grey' as Oakwell described many he had seen that were not properly looked after.

Oakwell's timing with *no uniform* seems to have been equally immaculate. He has turned down two offers to sell the company and is instead looking to recruit another 8-10 designers before his first catalogue appears next year. And after coffee with the FT he was off to finalise designs with restaurateurs and hoteliers in Antigua, Mauritius and Dubai. and

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