

That tricky second opening

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See below John Torode's story for what famed New York restaurateur Danny Meyer of the Union Square Cafe empire has to say about the difficulties of expanding into a second space.

LONDON

John Torode, 44, is the ebullient embodiment of just what a chef with talent, determination and the gift of the gab can accomplish.

Born in Melbourne, Australia, Torode left school for catering college at 16 before coming to the UK 20 years ago to look for work.

Today, he presents BBC TV's hugely popular *Masterchef* programme. His first restaurant, Smith's of Smithfield, has just celebrated its tenth birthday, a landmark in this field, and with 8,000 customers a week going through its doors does not seem to have lost any of its popularity. And his cookery books have been bestsellers.

Torode also bears witness to one of the restaurant industry's few universal and incontrovertible maxims: that anyone's second restaurant is always the most difficult. Explanations for this vary, from the fact that this is the only time when the business doubles in size to the fact that the first restaurant cannot financially support an adequate management structure to run two. The second restaurant can, and often is, a recipe for disaster.

Eight months ago, Torode opened The Luxe in Spitalfields, close to Liverpool Street, his second attempt to open a second restaurant, although after a difficult few months this one now looks as though it has all the hallmarks of another success.

Like Smith's, The Luxe is spread over four floors and is best described as 'a broad church', with a glamorous flower shop attached. The ground floor serves hearty, simple food from breakfast until late. Above is a more expensive dining room with an emphasis on the use of a grill and well-sourced ingredients, all cooked without too much fuss. The other floors incorporate areas for those who want to drink, party or hold a private dinner.

When I met Torode recently he was chatting to his receptionist, wearing a loud, checked shirt and a pair of jeans, which he described as his 'lumberjack look'. With a good head of hair, chiselled looks and broad smile, he looked more of a country and western singer to me.

Over a glass of Kung Fu Riesling, his current favourite on the wine list alongside a Boom Boom Syrah, both from Washington state, Torode recalled how, after opening Smith's in 2000, he was naive enough to believe he could open Cafeteria in Notting Hill Gate, west London, 12 months later. For the first time in the many years I have known him, his face visibly darkened.

'I got everything wrong. The partners; the building; the timing; even down to not appreciating that the restaurant's location on the street was completely wrong. I now know never to open a restaurant with a bus stop outside because when it rains everyone comes and shelters by the front door, blocking the entrance', Torode explained, just forcing a smile.

After eight months, Torode managed to extricate himself at great personal and financial loss. Fortunately, he had the kitchens at Smith's to retreat into and from where he could wholeheartedly put into practice an approach to restaurants that he had brought with him from Australia.

A restaurant has to be more than a building simply serving food and wine, in Torode's opinion. It has to live and breathe, to have a heart and soul and the only way it can successfully achieve all this is if it demonstrates an egalitarian approach to its customers. No restaurateur can afford to be elitist, as many were in London a decade ago. And that, Torode believes, was his opportunity.

'When we opened Smith's I decided we had to open the ground floor for breakfast, against, initially, my partners' wishes. It was difficult for the first few weeks but then suddenly it caught on and it's been packed ever since', he reported in a much happier mood.

The approach from *Masterchef* in 2004 was the final step in his redemption from Cafeteria. But in a world where chefs and television seem interconnected at every level, Torode plays down the impact that having his face appear in front of an audience of over 5 million viewers has on his restaurants. 'Neither of the restaurants carry my name and the food we serve is very different from the far more intricate food the amateur cooks deliver with such enthusiasm', he explained.

Despite all that he had learnt, however, Torode now realises that he was partially responsible for The Luxe's difficult start. 'I simply wasn't strict enough with the designers and when we opened the restaurant looked too elaborate, too posh and expensive, too off putting. All this has been corrected and now we're busy. And we have definitely noticed an upturn in business since the election in early May.'

The menus at both Torode's restaurants are strikingly similar. The graphics are clear; each dish is made up of no more than three constituent parts; and nothing is included that will prove too challenging. He is firmly convinced that restaurants are 'all about therapy'.

But he has also, perhaps surprisingly for an Australian, fully understood what many other British chefs still have not, and that is the importance of appealing to women today. And for that he hands all the credit to his wife.

'Jess and I went out for dinner a long time ago and she looked at the menu and promptly said there was nothing on it that appealed. Everything had been cooked in oil or butter and what she wanted was a piece of grilled fish and a salad. I took this to heart,' he added.

This approach has been a cornerstone of the restaurants' success, he believes. As PAs, it is women who invariably book tables for their bosses, and if they don't like the look of the menu on the internet, they will book somewhere else. Women are less forgiving than men, he believes, so that if they do have a bad meal they are much less likely to return. And they have definite preferences. For example, there will always be an Albariño on his wine list because it is an uncomplicated, fresh Galician white wine that goes very well with grilled fish.

These principles have allowed Torode to realise a dream he never thought possible when he first arrived in London, that of establishing restaurants that subsequently become a part of the capital's fabric. 'I'm very proud that if you ask any taxi driver to take you to Smith's, they'll know where it is immediately. I now want to achieve the same for The Luxe.'

Smiths of Smithfield www.smithsofsmithfield.co.uk

The Luxe www.theluxe.co.uk

NEW YORK

The second restaurant, rather like a second child, can be fraught with disadvantages the first one never needed to endure, recalls Danny Meyer of the time he opened Gramercy Tavern in New York in 1994, nine years after the opening of his first restaurant, the still-popular Union Square Cafe. 'It was difficult', he added, 'and it took two years before it began to near its potential'.

Meyer went on to highlight several specific reasons. 'There is a lofty set of expectations to meet and to exceed created by the success of the first. This can lead to sibling rivalry developing between the teams at each restaurant. For the first time the restaurateur has to learn to become a multi-unit manager and during this period your delegation and time-management skills are sorely tested. It's the ultimate challenge of trying to be in two places at once. And any management challenge in one can cause ripple effects at the other which can lead to waging a war on two fronts.'

'Finally, and perhaps the most difficult situation of all, is that immediately comparisons are made between the two restaurants, some justified but some less fair. And that applies to guests as well as journalists!'

Meyer ended with a heartfelt recollection of his own experiences, 'Your second restaurant teaches you that many of the survival tactics you learned the first time around are precisely the ones that no longer work. If your road to success was to take every reservation, seat every guest, edit the wording for every menu, select every wine for the list, tweak the lighting and music level for every service and greet every able customer then you are in for a very rough ride when restaurant number two opens. Those things still must be done, but overnight, your new priority is to teach rather than to do.'

Union Square Cafe and Gramercy Tavern www.usqgnyc.com