The man behind Carluccio's Caff□s

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Next Thursday March 8th Antonio and Priscilla Carluccio will host a rather poignant dinner for friends and colleagues at the Neal Street Restaurant in Covent Garden. Once a gastronomic landmark, it has been their professional home for the last 30 years but the end of the lease marks the imminent end of the restaurant and their food shop next door.

However, thanks to Peter Webber, who will be sitting there quietly but with his ultra-professional eye on the food and service, the Carluccio name will continue to spread across the UK. And the Carluccios will leave this site far wealthier than one restaurant or even numerous cookery books and personal appearances could have ever made possible.

This all came about because Priscilla Carluccio (Sir Terence Conran's sister) invited Webber to lunch in Neal Street in 1999 for reasons which he described to me over another lunch, this time at Locanda Locatelli off Portman Square, as 'obtuse'.

Webber, who has spent a fascinating 53 years in the restaurant industry, continued, "We had never met but Priscilla had an idea for doing something much more modern and less expensive while I had this idea for combining a café/restaurant with retail," Webber explained. "I had seen it most recently at Fratelli Sarti up in Glasgow and over the years at Zabar's, EAT and Dean & Deluca in New York."

That initial lunch, which Webber still remembers as involving lots of wild mushrooms and generous slices of truffles, was followed by an evening when Antonio cooked numerous dishes which he thought would be suitable for the menus of what were to become Carluccio's Caffès. Webber was not initially convinced because, as he now realises, he was still preoccupied with the Italian restaurants of yore. "It was Priscilla who advocated the very modern design of our caffès from the very beginning and she was quite right. There is nothing like a Carluccio's Caffè in Italy because there the best food is still considered to be family cooking whereas to succeed on the High Street in the UK you have to be contemporary."

Modern design has been one factor in a highly successful expansion of this popular chain. The first Carluccio Caffè opened in late 1999 and there are now 28 with plans to open four or five a year as they expand outside London. Sales to end September 2006 were £45.8 million up 24% on the previous year with profits of £4.36 while the first 16 weeks trading of their new financial year were up a further 22%. Since it floated on the AIM market in December 2005, when the Carluccios sold the majority of their shares, the share price has risen from an opening price of 94.5p to over £1.90.

To the customer this success may in retrospect seem obvious. Based on good ingredients, the food is invariably well-executed and the prices fair. From the management's perspective, the tables are close together to generate sales – one reason why Webber suggested we meet elsewhere – and the locations have been selected with care to ensure constant traffic (our local branch seems to be busiest at 4pm with mothers, nannies and schoolchildren). Success in the Bicester shopping outlet and the Bluewater mall prompted Webber to proudly describe their caffès as 'classless'.

To these factors Webber added three more. The first with the modesty that has been his hallmark (one industry colleague even described him as 'humble') was what he called 'Priscilla's presence' and her determination to create something new and contemporary. The second was Antonio's value in the era of the celebrity chef and his insistence that during the training courses they have initiated for their chefs and the execution of any dish, on two values encapsulated in the letters MOF, 'maximum of food and maximum of flavour.'

The third factor, which perhaps differentiates Carluccio's even more distinctly from their competitors, derives from Webber's view of hospitality and his time spent in the US: Carluccio's does not make a service charge. "I may be old-fashioned but what I most want our caffès to be are places where nice staff serve nice people. Our philosophy is to hire management and waiters with big personalities, individuals who are pleased to see guests and to serve them. I think putting a service charge on automatically is an abnegation of responsibility while the phrase 'discretionary service charge' is a nonsense."

Webber's successful management of Carluccio's alongside two colleagues, Stephen Gee and Simon Kossoff, who have worked with him for over 20 years, is not the first time he has brought a seeming Midas touch to restaurant companies. In

the 1990's as chief executive of My Kinda Town restaurants which included branches of The Chicago Pizza Pie Factory, Henry J. Bean's and Chicago Rib Shack in the UK and franchised across the world he sold the company for £57 million which, on 24 times annual earnings, was again, he modestly explained, 'as good a deal as anyone has ever sold a restaurant business for.' How had he managed this and what advice did he have for anyone keen to invest?

"Like retail, it's detail. But where this business is different is that any restaurant that proves to be initially successful is made up of so many different, often intangible, elements that when you want to open more restaurants you have to duplicate all these details because you just never know what makes the difference. When we opened the first Chicago Pizza Pie Factory my late partner, Bob Peyton, put up a board on which visitors from Chicago could leave their business cards. It was just a way of drawing these visitors together in a pre-internet world. But I insisted that we repeat this wherever we opened just in case this was a vital factor."

Webber began in 1954 as a trainee chef at Westminster College (where Carluccio's now run their own chefs'courses). This that led to hotel management, introducing food into pubs, and then during the 1970's being responsible for what were then two of London's finest restaurants of the time, Le Coq d'Or (now Langan's Brasserie) and Boulestin (now a pizza restaurant).

Webber has grown convinced of two other essential attributes. "In this business it's actually more than passion," he explained, having already thanked Giorgio Locatelli en passant for keeping Italian food so popular "Unless you are prepared to stand by the front door, ask everyone how their experience was and face up to whatever they may have to say, then this business is not for you. But where it's different from any other than perhaps the film business in which my son is involved is that it's a business that allows you to sprinkle a little stardust into peoples' lives. Pret A Manger do it with sandwiches, Carluccio's with inexpensive, modern Italian food."

It is presumably his prolonged exposure to this stardust that led Webber to confess over a macchiato that as an admittedly youthful looking 67, he is now enjoying the restaurant business more than ever.

Full details of all branches on www.carluccios.com