

## Familiarity breeds an appetite

13 May 2009 by Nick Lander/FT

As the waiter at Lemonia, a Greek Cypriot restaurant in Primrose Hill, north west London, that has been hugely popular for the past 30 years, arrived at our table with plates of meze, the woman opposite me dropped out of our conversation and started talking directly to him.

She wanted to know how he was; how the rest of his family were; and whether he would be working tomorrow as she had already booked to come back the following evening for dinner. Then she turned to me and said with a smile, 'He's one of the two waiters who have been here since Lemonia opened and this place is our favourite restaurant. You probably won't approve of this writing about restaurants as you do but when we come here tomorrow we will probably order almost exactly what we are about to eat now.'

I countered that not only would nobody readily say no to well-made, generous servings of hummus, taramosalata and tahini alongside baskets of just-grilled pitta bread, but that nobody today can underestimate the importance of anyone's 'favourite restaurant'.

Shell-shocked may not be too strong an adjective to describe how restaurateurs have been feeling as they have struggled to cope with business over the past nine months. One experienced hand recently emailed to say that this recession is different from the three others he has worked through because 'it has proved to be so sharp and so far bottomless.'

Although business was very good until last summer, the previous 18 months had been a period of not just rising food and commodity prices but also of rents moving incessantly higher. These were compounded by a seeming compulsion on the part of many to fit out their interiors as lavishly as possible in an effort to win customers and influence the critics. With hindsight this now seems a mistaken strategy, as today many feel uncomfortable not only in suggesting a restaurant where, although the set price menu may intrinsically be very good value, its surroundings are now perceived as embarrassingly lavish.

Those restaurants that were opened before the current storm have been able to confront it with effectively deeper roots. They are founded on a lower cost base; they owe their shareholders and their banks less; and they have over the years been able to establish a broader and more loyal clientele, many of whom may even come to see them as their 'favourite restaurant'.

If the current situation favours the old-timers, it is still impossible to predict who the eventual winners will be. What is also unusual, certainly in the UK, is that today fewer restaurants are irrevocably closing their doors than was the case in previous recessions. This is partly a consequence of the fact that it is now much easier for them to reach an accommodation with HM Government over payment terms for their sales and payroll taxes (thereby easing their cash flow problems) than it was in the past. And also because a system known as 'pre-pack administration' is being used, particularly by failing groups, to close one day and re-open the next, often under the same name but without the debt, leaving only the unpaid suppliers aware of the difference.

It is now obvious that three essential ingredients will be required for a restaurant to succeed and these are quality, identity and marketing.

Of them, quality is the longest established although today this characteristic is often subsumed under the more politically correct heading of 'value for money'. It is, in essence, what distinguishes the entire restaurant experience, from how a reservation is taken, to the smile with which the bill is presented. And this complicated process now also has to accommodate a seemingly increasingly impatient world.

The opportunity to instill an identity into any restaurant, whether new or about to be refurbished, is what has invariably impelled anyone foolhardy enough into the business. The challenge today in a marketplace more crowded than ever is to justify the capital expenditure and to ensure the business appeals to a wide-ranging clientele. This specific identity has to be combined with a message that will be heard by many.

And it is to the challenge of getting this message across that many chefs and restaurateurs are now turning with a growing realisation that marketing, in the broadest sense of the term, now holds the key to keeping their restaurants full and their shareholders and bank managers happy.

The old adage, that a good restaurant never needed to advertise, is long dead and buried. But rather than via a plethora of print, the message will be transmitted more subtly and more incessantly. There will be set price menus for every possible quiet period. There will be no shortage of chefs keen to appear on television or the internet, while those with a greater interest in wine will seek to deliver what they have bought for the restaurant to your home as databases established from any of the on-line reservation systems will be put to increasingly sophisticated uses.

Not many, however, will have the opportunity available to the brothers Chris and Jeff Galvin at their excellent Galvin 'bistrot de luxe' (pictured) on Baker Street, W1, who have now teamed up with hairdresser Daniel Galvin, round the corner but no relation, to offer a 'Galvin & Galvin' package from 1 June that includes a haircut, manicure and bottle of champagne with a lunch or dinner reservation.

Lemonia, by contrast, does not even have a website, another sign that it remains charmingly idiosyncratic. And I hope it will do for another 30 years.

**Lemonia**, 89 Regent's Park Road, London NW1 020-7586 7454.

**Galvin Bistrot**, [www.galvinuk.com](http://www.galvinuk.com)