Staying sharp

20 May 2009 by Nick Lander/FT

The two young men walking out of Princi, Alan Yau's chic new café on Wardour Street in London's Soho, looked very different from the rest of the customers. They were broad shouldered, carrying two large trays of knives and wearing blue T shirts embossed with their company's website, www.nellacut.com

A few days later I saw a van with the same logo outside the St Moritz, a long-established Swiss restaurant, only a few hundred yards away. On this occasion a tray of professionally sharpened knives was being delivered into the restaurant, to be followed only a few minutes later by a second tray, this time of blunt knives, being returned to the back of the van.

Knife sharpeners have been an important and romantic part of society for centuries and the fact that professional chefs either sharpen their knives themselves, or have them sharpened, more regularly than amateur chefs makes a very significant difference to what each is capable of.

A phone call to Emilio Nella, who now runs Nella Cutlery with his brother Mark, alerted me to the fact that they play an unsung but vital role in the way many British chefs operate. After an initially guarded conversation, Emilio eventually invited me to see his sharpeners in action. I caught the train from London Bridge to Hither Green, not fully appreciating that this 10-minute journey would take me to Italy, the US and Canada and to a company with a stock of half a million knives which it supplies to around 21,000 restaurants around the UK each month.

Emilio, 45, is the great grandson of the man who founded the company when he left his village of Carisolo, attached to Pinzolo above Lake Garda in Italy, in 1901 and settled to ply his trade as a travelling knife sharpener in the villages around south-east London. Escorting me through the area where the next day's knives were being sorted for delivery, he pointed to a dark wooden block. 'That's the sharpening block he brought over and traveled around with attached to a cart. It weighs over 300 kilos and was attached to a cartwheel which he used to pedal with a pot of water on a stick to ensure the blades didn't burn.'

Nella lost this folkloric aspect in 1965 when Emilio's father realised that a shortage of skilled sharpeners meant that the knives would have to come to him rather than vice versa. 'Today', Emilio explained, 'we're predominantly in the knife rental business. We own the knives and weekly, fortnightly, or once a month, we deliver the same number of sharp, colour-coded knives to our customers, take back the blunt ones and we charge between £1.50 and £2.00 per knife for the service. There is also a premium service for about 100 of the top London hotels where we collect their knives at 3.30pm on a Thursday and return them professionally sharpened early the following morning.'

The heart of the business is a large, noisy room in which 20 young men, all Brazilian and almost all with their baseball caps on back to front, stand in front of circular grindstones inserting knives until they are fully honed before they are hygienically washed and re-packed. The atmosphere is, not surprisingly, pungent with the smell of filings mixed with a combination of oil and water from the tanks below ground that allow the sharpening systems to work incessantly.

Although Nella was proud to show me round, he would not be drawn on two aspects of his highly competitive business: the source of his knives and who and where the electric grindstones are manufactured to his specification. 'The key to my business is buying the best possible knives at the right price', he explained. Try as I might, inspecting the cases on racks and shelving at every opportunity, I could see no give-away shipping marks. The only visible name was CESTBON (it's good), conceived of by Emilio's brother Mark.

If Nella is now a part of the vital supply chain to so many chefs, it is also a reflection of the make-up of British restaurants today and how they have to operate. Several of the aluminium boxes in which sharpened knives are stored held blades as long as two feet, specifically for slicing the lamb lengthways in the doner kebab restaurants now on almost every High Street. Out of context, they look particularly lethal.

Health and safety and basic economics are important, too. Accidents in the kitchen are less likely to happen with even the sharpest knife than a blunt one because blunt knives are far more likely to slip while cutting through food. Nella has found himself called in by insurance companies as an expert witness on personal accident cases.

But it is the sales pitch on how much extra a kitchen can yield by using regularly sharpened knives that is Nella's principal calling card. 'We proved to the senior management at Toby Carveries that if they used one of our carving knives on a joint they could get an extra 20 portions out of it. We now supply all their 120 restaurants around the UK and I reckon we save them over £100,000 a year.'

While Nella's voice resonated with pride at the continuation of his family business, he was quick to acknowledge his own debt to Carisolo. Following his great-grandfather's example, other members of the family subsequently left there to start knife-sharpening businesses in Brooklyn, Philadelphia and Montreal. Fittingly, there is now a statue (see above) depicting a knife sharpener at work on the outskirts of this picturesque town.