Kitchen secrets

26 Aug 2011 by Nick Lander

As I drove across central London, James Lee gave me a very particular tour of the buildings we passed. At the sight of almost every significant restaurant, hotel or club, Lee talked about their kitchens, why working on them had been particularly tricky, how awkward it had been sometimes to get paid and, most consistently, how much fun he had from his professional involvement in them all.

Lee, 51, occupies a unique position in the British restaurant trade. For the past 30 years he has been one of the most respected kitchen designers, having been involved in the opening of about 2,000 new restaurants in the course of his career. But for the past 12 years he has also owned a significant shareholding in two very successful restaurants, Racine in Knightsbridge together with chef Henry Harris, and as Heston Blumenthal's partner in the highly acclaimed Hind's Head pub in Bray, Berkshire, now serving 1,200 customers a week. Most recently he has put his expertise alongside his partner's money into re-opening the Beeches Grill, on the edge of a 500-acre wood on Farnham Green, Buckinghamshire, an adventure that has been driven more by sentiment than profit. 'It's the pub we used to drink in when we were younger', he explained.

His considerable time in and around chefs and their kitchens has left its mark. Lee boasts a considerable girth and a very ready smile as well as a rapid delivery of all the information that will be required to make a kitchen perform successfully. No sooner had we sat down than he gave me a handy calculation on what a professional kitchen will cost. 'For a middle of the range restaurant, that does not include the bespoke Rorgue ovens I sometimes fit and can cost up to £100,000, then the cost is roughly £2,500 per cover. So if it's a 100-seater restaurant, the kitchen will cost approximately £250,000. That's a lot of money for something the customer never sees but has to work very efficiently if the restaurant is to prosper.'

It is easy to see from his manner and obvious love of food why Lee has been so appreciated by so many chefs over the years and it was this shared interest that first brought him into contact with Blumenthal. 'I used to deliver the pots and pans he bought because I lived nearby and I started eating at The Fat Duck long before it became famous. Then the opportunity came along to take on the pub but Heston could then only afford the lease. I helped him out and then ran it for three years, which was great fun."

This is in stark contrast to the argument that usually initiates Lee's involvement in any new restaurant opening. Two sets of initials, FOH and BOH or front of house and back of house, are crucial, even though they have no relevance once the restaurant is open. BOH refers to the kitchen, the cloakrooms, the storage areas, in effect all the vital but non-sales areas, whereas FOH refers to the bar and the restaurant, and any area that will generate sales.

From the beginning, the restaurateur will seek to maximise the FOH while Lee will argue, invariably long before the chef is appointed, for the most effective BOH, and over the years a rough arithmetic formula has evolved. In a more formal restaurant, 40% of the available space will be BOH as the kitchens will have to be bigger, the cloakrooms more luxurious, and a separate area will be required for staff changing. In a café, the BOH requirements fall to 25%.

Once the layout of the interior has been fixed, Lee has only one priority. 'It's all about the flow between the kitchen and the restaurant, how efficiently the customers can be served. It doesn't matter how much money the restaurateur wants to spend. If there is a contra-flow between these two areas, then the whole thing will collapse.' At this point, Lee's face fell as though even the mention of an ill-functioning kitchen had upset him.

He immediately brightened when I asked him whether the size of a kitchen would also determine its success. 'No. There are very few big kitchens in London and lots of places serving great food, so that goes some way to prove this point. But any kitchen will inevitably be at its most efficient when a chef only has to take a single step in any one direction to get all he needs to do his job. If I can do that, then I know I've done my job well and the kitchen will work. The basement kitchens at J Sheekey are like that. Compact but very efficient.'

Although there have been significant changes in the style of food many chefs produce today, this has not been matched by major changes behind the swing door. 'In practice there are still only two successful layouts, the linear approach with a long cooking line opposite a long service line that is the norm in high-volume restaurants and the more classic layout for the fine-dining restaurants with the meat and fish chefs on one side, the vegetable and sauce cooks on the other feeding

the pass at which the head chef stands. There are, of course, permutations but these are still the norms.'

Nor has technology impinged that much. The most obvious advance now is induction cooking, where the practice has finally caught up with the principle in Lee's opinion, leading to considerable energy savings and a cooler environment. Water baths, a technology pioneered by Blumenthal, for slow cooking meat and ideal also for fish, are increasingly common, and the combination ovens that can steam, roast and hold food at a low temperature are another of Lee's favourite toys.

But whatever and whoever is in the kitchen, Lee added, it's all about the flow. And with that he was off back to what he called his 'dungeon of an office' to design a kitchen for a bowling alley, for a golf course at a castle in Scotland and for a pub in Norfolk. And to wonder how to fit a two-tonne grill, recently arrived from Argentina, into the new Scott's Grill in Mayfair.