How to serve 678 in a day

15 Feb 2013 by Nick Lander/FT WIP

Just after our plates had been cleared away, and what felt like only minutes after they had respectively sported slip soles with hedgerow garlic and caper butter and smoked haddock with a poached egg, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

Turning round, I faced Tim Hughes, who had just come up from the basement kitchen of J Sheekey, the long-established fish restaurant off St Martin's Lane in central London. Although Hughes carries the title of chef director of Caprice Holdings' numerous restaurants, he is invariably cooking in one of their kitchens. It fits his personality. Hughes is one of those chefs who are happy only when there are customers aplenty and his kitchen is under a certain amount of pressure.

At the moment, Hughes is happier than ever. He quickly explained that business at Sheekey's had never been better and that Saturday 26 January had been the busiest day since the restaurant first opened in 1896. 'We served 678 customers that day', he added, with equal amounts of pride and pleasure.

This is not just a lot of customers but a figure that has to be set in context. J Sheekey serves neither breakfast nor afternoon tea and doesn't open until noon. It is a restaurant not a brasserie, one that never seems particularly large either from the outside or when sitting in one of its seven dining rooms. And it has a high average spend, £60 per head at dinner, although judging by the smiles on the table of four who came in for lunch as we were leaving and were gazing down at their vast plateau de fruits de mer with lobster at £48.50 per person, the average spend at lunch may not be that much lower.

Hughes noticed the expression of surprise on my face and explained that six months ago they had expanded even further along St Martin's Court, doubling the size of the oyster bar and increasing the number of staff working there to over 80. And in the process of all this they have generated new business, particularly late at night, that he had never anticipated.

The following day I sat at the oyster bar and, over a bowl of crab bisque followed by a plate of creamed salt cod, consigned the following headings to my notebook as to why this restaurant could take £35,000, or more, on a single day.

The first and most obvious is its history. The oak-panelled walls, covered with black and white photos of actors, attest to this but what is more typical of its age is the fact that none of the dining rooms is particularly large. They convey a sense of intimacy, albeit rather cramped, that is human and not ostentatious. This focuses the attention on the food and those around the table. My French guest said that this was definitely where she would be bringing her mother on her next trip to London after they had enjoyed their customary martini at another favourite haunt, the bar at Duke's Hotel.

The restaurant's sales would not be as high if, however, this were not a fish restaurant. Steaks and burgers may currently grab the headlines but they certainly do not have the same drawing power. An extensive fish and shellfish menu will appeal to the young, old and everyone in between and of all nationalities, as Maguy Le Coze has exemplified at that other great fish restaurant, Le Bernardin in New York, where her dining room now attracts so many young Asian customers.

And these are dishes that can come fast or not. Hughes's kitchen brigade would not have been able to serve anywhere near the same number of customers had all the dishes been cooked in the tiny, basement kitchen and sent up in the electric lift. But so much can be prepared from behind the counter of an oyster bar and delivered swiftly and not just oysters: crab; plates of smoked salmon; lobster mayonnaise; and pink Atlantic prawns by the half pint. And what makes this potentially challenging process considerably easier is that both the restaurant and oyster bar menus are models of design clarity.

The final ingredient in Sheekey's record-breaking performance is something that lies outside its control: the quality of the plays in the several theatres that surround it as well as the popularity of the opera at the ENO only a short stone's throw away.

Nothing quite brings the same smile to any chef or restaurateur as a great review for a play at a nearby theatre. The

theatres bring the crowds but offer no hospitality of their own and theatregoers, particularly visitors to London, never want to stray too far. And they come in waves: late afternoon and early evening to eat pre theatre or after the curtain as those with that much sought-after 8 pm booking are on their way out.

Last year saw record attendances at London's West End theatres and Hughes rattled off the names of the actors who come in regularly. But the success of these plays has brought unexpected business once the curtain is down, as Hughes explained. 'When we built the extra area last summer we had to put a kitchen in there to ease the pressure on the basement. Unwittingly, we created a sort of private room which those involved in the successful productions nearby enjoy once they've taken their make-up off.'

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