



Written by
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Learn how to be a successful restaurateur



Details of a new day-long course in London designed for those tempted by the restaurant business.

I had just been taken on a pre-opening tour around the new Barrafina, the fun Spanish tapas bar and restaurant that will open in the Coal Drops Yard section of the new King's Cross redevelopment on 26 October by Sam Hart (pictured), who, along with his brother James, is one of its owners.

This was a noisy affair. The wind was howling. There were scores of builders working not only on the Barrafina site but also on El Pastor, their Mexican restaurant on the ground-floor level as well as The Drop, their adjacent wine bar.

There seemed to be just as many builders working trying to get the 57 new retail outlets ready for the grand opening on the same date. Plus there were the 180 new staff eating trays of sandwiches packed around the counter area of Barrafina, all of whom the Harts had just recruited and who had started work here the day before.



Amid all this I was able to ask Sam how his younger brother Eddie was getting on in Mallorca. Eddie had been half of the duo that opened Fino, Barrafina and Quo Vadis before deciding that his future lay in opening a restaurant called El Camino on the Carrer de Can Brondo in the heart of Palma.

'He has opened it to great acclaim, I hear', came Sam's happy response. 'And now I suppose he will have to concentrate on making the place profitable, which was my contribution when we worked together in London.'

This is an all-too-familiar refrain. Being busy when one has just opened a restaurant rarely equates to being profitable and London's restaurant history is littered with examples of famous restaurants being saved by the prosaic introduction of an accountant rather than a far more high profile chef or a more glamorous menu.

It is this state of affairs that has prompted Nigel Simon to launch a one-day course entitled The Ultimate One-Day Restaurant Course, the first of which Simon will host at Quo Vadis (although there is no connection between Simon and the Harts) next Tuesday 23 October.

I had met Simon before, several years ago at the Ballymaloe Literary Festival, but on this occasion it was he who got in touch with me as he was facing problems getting the news of his course out to a wider audience. The main conduits to the wider restaurant audience - *Big Hospitality*, *Caterer* and *Restaurant* magazine - don't believe his course is relevant to their readers and so have decided not to give him or it the oxygen of any publicity.

This is a shame for three very different reasons. Firstly, Simon comes not from a restaurant background but from a successful commercial career. Secondly, while the business of opening your own café, bar or restaurant has never been as appealing as it is today, the problems facing anyone planning such a career have never been greater. And thirdly, other than Danny Meyer's excellent book *Setting The Table* and to a lesser extent my own book *The Art of the Restaurateur*, this is a discipline without that many textbooks, anything in fact that can obviate the need to open somewhere before appreciating the enormity of what you have taken on.

Simon's career included time spent at INSEAD and the London Business School before taking early retirement 14 years ago. Since then he has spent time mentoring for the Prince's Trust and working with small businesses and start-ups. He has attended several restaurant courses, and found them all disappointing in one way or another. He has also enhanced his wine knowledge via the WSET. His love of food and wine he inherited from his father, who was torpedoed during the war and spent several years in Sri Lanka, which imbued him with a love of jazz and curry, a dish he used to cook back in the UK when 'the presence of large pieces of banana and pineapple in the curry' were seen as a positive advantage.

Simon therefore brings a very enthusiastic business approach to the whole subject - backed up by knowledge of the most up-to-date techniques. There are video interviews with Will Beckett, the founder of the very successful *Hawksmoor group*, who memorably comes out with the line 'make sure you know what you are getting into before you open your first restaurant'. There is a certain amount of reliance on virtual reality, including one section on the all-important subject of stock taking. This is a discipline Simon intends to enhance as the courses progress.

Most of the day revolves around a single piece of paper entitled 'Today's Menu and what you will learn'; under the rather predictable headings of starters, main courses and desserts there is a host of pertinent topics, all of them sensibly and thought-provokingly covered. These range from 'why do you want to do this?' to 'numbers that will make or break your business' and including a section on 'location, leases and landlords'. A large chunk of the course focuses on satisfying customer needs profitably and includes branding, naming, the restaurant's target market, website, Google, social media and PR.

But where Simon really opened my eyes was when it came to the question of financing your restaurant. I remember back in 1980 there were only two ways: a loan from my father (happily repaid) secured against a bank overdraft from the then-friendly bank manager at our local Midland Bank. Today there are far more opportunities, with crowdfunding playing an increasingly important role in this crucial, initial step.

I would concur with the successful restaurateurs that Simon has interviewed for the course, all of whom agreed just how helpful the course would have been to them had it been in existence when they were thinking of opening.

After the 23 October session, the next course is on 20 November. Full price for the day-long course is £495 but entering CODE400 will entitle visitors to this website to a special price of £400.

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