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Restaurants - the Russia effect



The smile that was beginning to reappear on the faces of many restaurateurs across the UK, inspired by a slight increase in business confidence, may be beginning to fade somewhat.

This has very little to do with the quality of the food their kitchens are producing; or the range and style of the wine lists their sommeliers are creating; or the friendliness of their waiting staff. Standards have to be so high as demand is now so international and so critical that today, I believe, no one can open without all these elements being first class. And, given the fact that everyone with an iPhone is an instant food critic, no one can get away with anything below par.

But after a long, wet spring, summer arrived early in Britain. May is invariably a good trading month despite two bank holidays and the disruption that they cause, particularly as the second one coincides with school half-term holidays and the knock-on effect this has on bookings for private dining rooms in particular.

This May was the hottest on record since UK records began more than 100 years ago and, as I have written before, heat plays havoc with the restaurant business. We only want to eat out of doors. We eat less. We drink more water, which now most considerate restaurants give away for nothing, and we order less of the more profitable alcohol.

On top of the still unanswered questions posed by the slow advent of Brexit, the draining away of precious, overseas staff and the weakness of the pound, come two new reasons to explain the current lack of optimism among British restaurateurs. And both share a common country of origin: Russia.

The first relates to the ongoing squeeze being imposed by the British government on those wealthy Russians who have made London their new home. Many of them have, with little previous experience, quickly learnt to appreciate the finer aspects of food, wine and the city's most expensive restaurants. But suddenly they are somewhat less inclined to show off their wealth – certainly in all-too-public places such as restaurants.

I recall one meal at Le Gavroche with Jancis. In after us came a young Russian couple who ordered a magnum of expensive red burgundy (DRC, in fact). They ate, drank not quite half of their wine, asked for their bill, paid it and got up and left. And they left what remained of their expensive bottle – annoyingly and tantalisingly just out of reach! Such customers are difficult to replace. And this, we subsequently discovered, was a custom this couple regularly followed.

Then, hot on the heels of the hottest May on record, comes the World Cup that kicks off in Moscow next Thursday 14 June – just in case anybody has missed news of this event. This is bound to have a serious effect on the restaurant business in any country whose team qualified for the competition.

Every four years this all-encompassing, month-long football tournament invariably presents thoughtful restaurateurs with a quandary. Should they uphold all the long-term objectives that set them on such a noble, professional path or should they abandon these temporarily, perhaps downstairs in a private room, and let their customers eat, drink and watch the football? In effect, turn the restaurant into a sports bar.

This option, which may be feasible for many for the England v Tunisia fixture that kicks off in Volgograd on Sunday 24 June at 1 pm UK time, would be a test of any restaurateur's resolve because there is no doubt that eating in restaurants will lose out to the appeal of the game until the final, which takes place on Sunday 15 July.

Certainly Karam Sethi, the culinary guiding light behind JKS restaurants, is under no illusion as to the importance of the World Cup for their new restaurant, Brigadiers, in the equally new Bloomberg Arcade, by Bank Station.

There are five television screens in both main dining rooms as well as one in each of the private dining rooms. The latter have all been booked for the England fixtures with one already taken for the World Cup final, which, happily or not, immediately follows the men's singles tennis final from Wimbledon.

By just how much, however, normal service will be disrupted depends entirely on the performance of our English team. And who can forget the *Private Eye* cover of four years ago headlined 'England Team Fly In'? It showed the players disembarking from the plane in Brazil with a bubble coming out of the pilot's mouth that read, 'Shall I keep the engines running?'

The unpredictability of the England team's performance adds a further dilemma for the restaurateur as, while participation in the final seems out of the question, how close could the team possibly get to it?

One factor has changed since I had to face this dilemma back in the 1980s. Then, to maintain staff interest in the kitchen, there had to be some form of radio service at the very least to keep the predominantly European staff happy. Today there are far more Brits in restaurant kitchens and at least neither Scotland, nor Wales, nor Northern Ireland qualified for the World Cup, which should cut down on the number of avid radio listeners.

So if you do manage to get a booking in the restaurant you want, at a time you want, during the second half of June and early July, the weeks when London restaurants would normally be at their busiest, thank Vladimir Putin and those who have somewhat clandestinely organised this World Cup in Russia. Without them, most restaurateurs in the UK would probably be much busier over the coming month.