

CHRISTOPHER NYE

MAXIMUMDINER

Making it Big in Uckfield



Acknowledgments

Neither the Maximum Diner nor this book would ever have happened without the ceaseless nagging of my brother Jeremy; extra special thanks also to Simon, Louise and my mother for all their love, support and cash. Thank you to all the wonderful staff and customers in Uckfield, especially to Liz, Catherine, Laura, Sally, Malcolm, Nigel, Claudia, Zita, Imogen, Cathy, Emma, and Sarah at the Riverside (for all the teacakes). And an enormous thankyou to Nat Jansz and Mark Ellingham for sensitively bashing my manuscript into shape.

Sort Of Books thank Peter Dyer, Henry Iles, Nikky Twyman, Rachel Partridge, Lance Chinnian, Sarah Barber, Andrew Stephenson and Isabel Hudson.

The events described in this book took place, but – to protect Uckfield’s fine upstanding folk – the names of various characters have been changed, along with their attributes. If anyone recognises themselves in these pages, the author hopes it will be with pleasure. The Maximum Diner, after all, was a lot of fun.

Maximum Diner. Copyright © 2004 by Christopher Nye.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher except for the quotation of brief passages in reviews.

Published in 2004 by Sort Of Books, PO Box 18678, London NW3 2FL.

Distributed by the Penguin Group in all territories excluding the United States and Canada: Penguin Books, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL.

Typeset in Minion to a design by Henry Iles.

Printed in Suffolk by Clays.

224pp.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0-9542217-3-7

Contents

Premises, Premises	1
What Ray Kroc would have said	13
Mi casa, su casa	25
It's the menu, stupid	37
We are Family	49
The Three Garys	63
Make a Wish	77
The Art of War	84
The Joy of Cooking	93
The whole 17.5%	102
Love and money	113
Night Riders	120
Jamboree!	132
Elvis comes to town	141
Bigging it up	149
Can't complain	165
Uckfield, c'est moi!	175
Underneath the (Golden) Arches	188
An act of God	204
The bill, please	211
Epilogue	218



Premises, Premises

UCKFIELD IS A BUSY LITTLE TOWN of around 15,000 people, set in the East Sussex Weald. For those not familiar with the area, this is a rather soggy strip of land south of London, between two ranges of hills called the North and South Downs (I have no idea why hills are called Downs). There's a High Weald and Low Weald, but let's not get too technical; the point is, if you were driving from London to Brighton and just before reaching the South Downs decided to turn left towards nowhere in particular, you might well end up in Uckfield.

This small country town has relatively few claims to fame. Its High Street used to get blocked with traffic heading for Eastbourne but they fixed that with a bypass. Lord Lucan was last sighted here. There was a train crash once, but despite five people dying it was barely reported; and the river that dribbles through the town centre – the Uck – floods occasionally. And that's about it. Uckfield could easily be dismissed as a little dull.

Yet I've always liked the place. The shops, which are crammed into the High Street that leads up from the dribbly river, may not be particularly exciting but they are useful – which kind of sums up the town. If you want to buy a plastic washing-up bowl for a pound, or try a new brand of economy toilet tissue, you're spoilt for choice in Uckfield. Unlike in Lewes, eight miles down the road, you would be pressed to find a 1930s Bakelite flyswat or organic underwear (really, you can buy pants made of fair-traded, organic cotton in Lewes), but no one seems to mind.

The countryside around isn't much to write home about, either, at least not since East Sussex's planners discovered the wheeze of circling villages in the Low Weald with new bypasses, so as to preserve the ambience of the traditional high streets, and then developing all the land in between. Acres of brand new semi-detached houses, each with faux-Victorian porches, little arched windows and calf-high conifer trees, now greet the happy motorist off for a meander round the country lanes.

2 Pretty countryside, however, wasn't much of an issue for me. Uckfield's pull was that it was in Sussex – I lived in Brighton at the time and preferred to stick to home turf – and that it met the exacting demographic conditions laid out in my business plan. I had figured that there had to be a demand in small towns for the kind of cheap, convenient, fast food service that McDonald's and the other burger chains were providing in the big ones. All I had to do was find a big enough small town – say 10,000 to 20,000 people – that was far enough away from the competition, then launch my own brand new business. The other details, like where the money would come from, were a little hazy. But Uckfield looked a promising place to start.

I knew this not from an idle whim but from sound scientific principles. I'd bought a map of Sussex, some coloured flags and the most recent census figures from the library, and had stuck flags into centres of the right size and with a number of satellite

villages around but no large town or city within half an hour's drive. Another flag showed roughly how many properties were for sale. Burgess Hill, for instance, had no empty shops; Newhaven had too many; Uckfield, yet again, showed a full hand.

This may be a male thing, but there's nothing quite like putting a giant map on the wall and sticking coloured flags in it to make you feel you're getting along in the world. In hindsight it all seems so momentous, or *meant*. When I stuck a red flag on Uckfield, I imagined myself Christopher Plummer playing the Duke of Wellington, casting a languid yet intelligent eye at the map before tapping it and saying, 'Let us rest for the night here... at Waterloo.' Around him groups of young officers would shrug or nod, little realising that at this very spot most of them were going to wind up dead.

In reality my flag-sticking was more like Alan Titchmarsh pointing to a chart and saying, 'Let us put the lupins in here, by the bush.' However, at least I was acting scientifically and in so doing was giving my business a fighting chance of succeeding where so many others would fail. The census figures showed that Uckfield had a good population density per household, such a huge percentage of children that it was officially the youngest town in Sussex, reasonable earnings, low unemployment, high levels of car ownership, and several other statistics that I wasn't sure as to the significance of but factored in as positives anyway (like dog distribution, average number of foreign holidays per year, percentage of people with separate sofa insurance). The picture formed was of an aspirational town, for people who've chosen their partner, are well on the way to 2.4 kids, and are settled into their career and the housing ladder. And hundreds more seemed to be joining them each year.

Kind friends warned me not to waste my efforts in the sticks, but to aim straight for the big time. Like Brighton. But Brighton's not really that big time, is it? London is big time and

so is New York, and maybe Paris – but Brighton? Anyway, the place was already crammed with grungy student cafés, ex-Londoners opening designer bistros, and extended family businesses with the entrepreneurial spirit and stamina to stay open until 3am. So why follow the herd?

Besides which, as I patiently explained, I *like* small towns. Not enough to spend my life in one, perhaps, but from a philosophical angle they strike me as an entirely good thing: dependable, unpretentious, manageable. I didn't want to open just another miserably insignificant little business in the city; my place was going to be the talk of the town, and then another town, and another...

Also, leases and rents are cheap in small towns, and since I didn't have any serious amount of money the option of opening big in Brighton or anywhere else was pretty much closed.



I took myself off to Uckfield for the day. With the morning sun winking back at me from rows of faux-leaded window panes, I drove past the outlying housing estates and into the centre of town. I was humming a medley from *The Sound of Music* as I always do on bright, optimistic, start-of-a-new-life mornings, and mulling over the outrageous good fortune that had begun the day. Amanda had phoned. What could possibly augur better than that?

- 4 Amanda was a beautiful, stylish (some might say out-of-my-league) colleague from the Hotel Metropole, who for a blissful week and a half had promoted me from a shoulder to cry on to temporary lover. I didn't care that it was on the rebound – her wine importer boyfriend having just ditched her for a teenager from Bordeaux. I just hoped I could turn myself into a habit. Sadly, the dream shattered when I lost my job. Amanda had an absolute rule against unemployed boyfriends and, eerily

mirroring the terminology of management, informed me she would have to 'let me go'. (She had a weakness for jargon that I used to find endearing.) But that was then. Amanda had obviously undergone some Road to Damascus enlightenment; she hadn't even asked me to diarise the date. Now all I needed was a career plan to impress her with, maybe a mission statement or two. Becoming Uckfield's very own Mr Budgen, or the Rocco Forte of the Road to Eastbourne, was surely a good place to start.

I parked my battered Ford Escort van next to a sign reading 'River Uck', clearly a site of relentless struggle between the council and the town's graffiti artists. In an effort to snatch victory the council had painted the two words one on top of the other with the 'U' hard up against the edge of the board, leaving no space at all to insinuate even the scrawniest letter. Paradoxically, this created the impression that an 'F' had been sawn off, and consequently seemed to hang beside it like an after-image. Or perhaps it was an 'M'.

The Uck flowed in a thin, mucky line along a V-shaped canyon heading for the equally unromantic Upper Ouse and the sea. A Tesco trolley, some traffic cones and an overturned wheelie bin had been dumped into the canyon, detracting slightly from its riverbank qualities. But I was in no mood anyway to linger by this interesting arterial waterway; I had a task at hand. I had to find myself some premises, and survey the competition.

Walking up Uckfield High Street, the first potential competitor I discovered was a Starburger, which is a bit like a Wimpy only less classy. The surfaces were covered with bright-red and white tiles whose grimy grouting and scuffed Formica put me in mind of a 1970s East German crèche. The waiter seemed friendly enough, though, and waved me towards a table, offering to bring a cappuccino. I was a bit surprised they had such a sophisticated range of drinks, to be honest, and I was surprised again when the coffee arrived, to find instead of the traditional sprinkle of

chocolate, the froth was liberally covered with instant coffee granules. Still, I like a bit of innovation, so I gave the waiter a cheery, encouraging thumbs up and stirred it in.

I walked further up the High Street popping into all the other competitors. There was a cakeshop-cum-café called The Three Cooks that had five bad-tempered ladies shifting savoury pastries around a heated cabinet and shooing kids away from the metal sides. There was Brandons, a teashop staffed by teenage girls smiling bravely through the embarrassment of wearing frilly lime-green tabards. and then, nearing the end of the row, The Charcoal Grill, one of those old-fashioned kebab shops that attempt to entice passing customers by rotating a sweaty, boneless lump of meaty substance in the window (how do the Environmental Health people allow that?). It also had a boarded-up door panel. I later discovered that the owner had been flung through it during some festive high jinks at the recent Uckfield Carnival. Kids, eh?

6 Further and further up the hill I climbed, munching on a sausage roll from The Five Stroppy Women and enjoying the sights of small town life. At the hardware and kitchen shop beside the crossroads, two large stars had been cut out from Day-Glo cardboard and stuck to the window advertising the shop's special attractions: 'TOYS,' shouted one; 'TOILETRIES,' screamed the other. Although impressed with their clever use of alliteration and broad family appeal, I couldn't help but feel there might be room in Uckfield for some new marketing ideas – ones I would be happy to demonstrate if I could only find premises from which to do so.

The road became steeper, but I ploughed on, undaunted by the stiff climb and blazing heat. No, indeed; I was ready to climb every mountain and ford every stream. This was my first mistake. If you have to make an extra effort to find a place, then so too will your customers. The phrase 'Location, location, loca-

tion' was first used by Lord Forte to explain the three key factors in the success of any catering enterprise (I don't know where 'serving edible food' was ranked). Before opening his first milk bar in the 1930s, the young Forte stood outside the earmarked site, counting, as he put it, 'all of the mouths walking past'.

These days choosing the right location is a little more complex, because people have so much more choice, so much less time, and cars. A pedestrianised high street location is great for Saturday lunchtimes but might become a barren hooliganised no-go area in the evenings. Parking, or a nearby off-licence, cinema or video shop can be crucial. But, in essence, location should be a no-brainer. Once you've established, through meticulous analysis, a location for your new business, the decision about the actual site comes down to one simple question: 'Will anyone actually go there?' After that you need to ask: 'Yes, but will they really?' And then perhaps: 'No but really, I mean will they?' and: 'Hmm, really?' You just can't be too sceptical.

Further up the High Street I reached a little crossroads and some traffic lights, and was rewarded with the road levelling out into a little plateau. Gasping for breath and with a stitch in my side, I found myself in a 'secondary trading area' of quiet little shops and takeaways. This was the old town, set on a relatively flat bit halfway up the valley side, above the floodplain and on the medieval pilgrim road between Chichester and Canterbury. Centuries ago, weary pilgrims would rest here for the night, clean the mud from their robes and look around for a nice leg of mutton and some mead to wash it down with. Nowadays they'd have to find what pickings they could from an anglers' supplier, wedding hire shop, two barbers, an opticians, an off-licence and a Chinese takeaway.

A lovely little collection of shops, and useful, too. But not many people were shopping in them, and had I been counting 'the mouths walking past' I could have done it on the fingers of one

hand. There was, nonetheless, a clear sense of community, easy parking and a property with a 'For Sale' sign over it that seemed to have been placed there by destiny's hand. It was a small, sophisticated little bistro called Cain's.

I gazed in through the window. Cain's really was small – just six tables and a counter – but there was something about it that snagged on the heartstrings. It was compact, but light and airy. And it had a drinks licence. This was the site that I'd been dreaming about.



8 Twenty minutes later I was pacing back up the hill from the estate agent's office with the bistro's owner. Kevin was a large bloke – a bit too large I would have thought to work in a tiny little bistro – but he had the sort of calm, relaxed manner that fits in anywhere. He was about my age, though way ahead in matters of local business. As well as Cain's, he owned the local cinema, which he had turned in less than a year from a standard small town cinema (the same films as everyone else, a month or two late) into one of the best independent movie houses in the country. Not only did he know everything about the catering trade but the man was a walking *Halliwel*'s. Also, presumably in the odd moment between threading celluloid reels and whizzing round with the cheese board, he had co-written a comedy TV sketch show called *Six Pairs of Pants*. No, I hadn't heard of it either, but it all contributed to a very favourable impression of a cheery, can-do, talented sort of man.

So why exactly did I jump to the conclusion that I could do better than Kevin and make a go of the restaurant where he had struggled to scrape a profit? What did I have that the polymath of Uckfield could have lacked? The answer was simple. I had a vision. I wasn't going to run a bistro – no, obviously bistros were

a big mistake – I was going to buy the site with its drinks licence and permission for A3 use (allowing the cooking and selling and eating of food on the premises) and turn it into an American-style diner. Anyone with any sense at all would realise that a diner was the natural choice for the site. Diners were small – they had to be, since they were designed to be loaded, fully prefabricated, onto railroad carriages and transported right across America. They were the perfect vehicle for the fast food domination of small town Britain.

Kevin was fascinated. He'd wondered about opening a diner himself, he admitted, popping the top off a beer and sliding it across the counter, ever since he'd seen the Barry Levinson movie, *Diner*. Had I seen it, he asked? I almost choked on my Becks. Had Tony Soprano seen *The Godfather*? Had the Pope ever seen *Song of Bernadette*? *Diner* was one of my all-time seminal influences. It was the film that, in my late teens, launched me across the States doing Jack Kerouac impersonations, hitching rides and washing up and waiting at table. Diners were my sort of places – hip, friendly and with none of the class war hang-ups, or crappy food, of the greasy spoons. They were the people's cafés, unapologetic and appetising. Also it just so happens that I lost my virginity with a waitress who worked in a diner near Pennsylvania. (She admired my English accent, slipped me a free apple pie, and asked if I'd like it *à la mode*. Well, I didn't need asking twice.) And suddenly here I was within a hair's breadth of owning and running such an establishment myself.

I didn't, of course, confide all this to Kevin. Only a sucker shows that amount of enthusiasm while trying to buy a lease. But we did knock the idea around in a not-uninterested kind of way. Kevin even knew some decent organic butchers who might be happy to do a deal on mince, though he wasn't sure the margins would work out. And, of course, he could throw in a load of equipment and sort me out with a good joiner for the

fittings. I nodded in a sort of insouciant ‘don’t mind if I do, don’t mind if I don’t’ sort of way and asked about the evening crowd. It was alright, Kevin asserted, buoyant if not exactly heaving. He suggested I came back that night for a meal ‘on the house’ and check it out. I said I was busy but would try and drop round in a couple of days’ time.



That was a lie. Later that same night I cut the lights on the van and manoeuvred stealthily into position to watch the comings and goings at Cain’s. I was equipped with a pad, pens and a secret torch.

Covert surveillance isn’t as easy as you might suppose. It’s mind-numbingly boring, for one. And then it’s all too easy to find yourself getting paranoid as you start believing that everyone else is spying on you, rather than you on them. I had parked outside the off-licence and became convinced that the lady in the shop was ringing the police in the expectation of me robbing her. Worse than this, my stomach was rumbling. In any decent film the stake-out is conducted with a plastic beaker of coffee in one hand and a hot pastrami and rye in the other, giving a light, if slightly greasy, touch to the gathering suspense. I, however, had turned down a very decent free dinner, a rare steak and sorbet perhaps, with maybe a wine from the Medoc, consumed in the friendly glow of Cain’s, to sit in the dark sucking on a boiled travel sweet. It didn’t seem such a great swap.

10

Then a whole load of youths sat on my bonnet and began shouting at passers-by to get them some cans from the off-licence. I didn’t want to hoot at them and risk blowing my cover, but I felt unmanly letting them just sit there and, besides, they were blocking my view of Cain’s. A few of them were passing round a joint, which seemed to help them, in a contemplative

sort of way, to come up with new and creative reasons for abusing passing strangers. So, convincing myself that twenty minutes' spying is more than enough to get a good impression of a place, I started the engine and, much to their surprise, drove off.

The area had certainly seemed to have its share of Uckfield's night-time action. Not quite the same slice as Piccadilly Circus or even the kiosk by the bus station, but it had a decent number of 'mouths' for a secondary shopping area up a steep hill. My mind was almost made up.



I mentioned that I had already made my first mistake. But I was making a second, equally momentous one, in choosing somewhere so small. The point of fast food isn't so much that it's fast, but that it's convenient. Its customers will always take the easiest option: not the best, or even the best value, just the easiest. They don't want to walk anywhere, least of all up a hill, when there's a chance that all six tables will be full, not if there's an empty table waiting for them much closer to home.

Take me, for instance. There's an Indian takeaway not far from my flat that has convictions (note, actual convictions!) for putting too much colouring in the curry sauces. But I can park outside the place and I have their number programmed into my mobile phone, so... forgive and forget. At least, until their competitors get parking spaces.

A little ironically, I was setting myself up by the very same rules of the game. I was being seduced by convenience, unwilling to stop and think earnestly about the shortcomings of the site. The search for suitable premises can take years but catering people are not the most patient types. Most chefs have to plan, prepare, execute, clear up and get paid for their work over the course of a lunchtime. We just don't have the mentality to grow a project

quietly to fruition. That's more for your cathedral architect, or Giant Sequoia plantation manager.

And there were other pressing reasons for plumping for Cain's. I was due to meet Amanda for dinner the next evening and felt I could do a much better impersonation of the dashing young businessman if I actually had a business under offer. Cain's was available, which was a good thing, and it had planning permission and a drinks licence, which was manna from heaven.

So Cain's it had to be.

There was just one small fly in the ointment. Kevin was asking £18,000 for the business. It was quite a concession, he said, as he'd paid almost double himself, three years earlier, and he led me to believe there could be room for negotiation. But this was still a little more than I could slap on the table – well, £18,000 more, to tell the truth. I made thoughtful, appreciative noises down the phone to Kevin and told him I was keen and would get back to him about it. Then I phoned my local high-street bank and booked an appointment.



What Ray Kroc would have said

IF I'D ASKED THE ADVICE OF THE MCDONALD BROTHERS or their friend and mentor, Ray Kroc, I would have been told to forget the diner idea, it would never work. Even in their heyday, in 1950s America, diners didn't stand a chance against the new branded burger franchises that were springing up around them. The good folks of southern California, home to the first McDonald's, might have thought they cared about the tiny, downhome Mom-and-Pop-style diners with their personal service, neighbourliness and good food cooked to order, but actually they didn't give a stuff about any of that.

13

Ray Kroc realised, with the insight of a true innovator, that all his customers cared about was having tasty, cheap food, served to them cleanly, consistently and, above all, quickly. Nor did it matter if there was hardly any choice, so long as the item ordered

(burgers and fried potatoes in their case) was exactly the same as the last time they ordered it. For this new generation of American baby-boomers, getting food would be a simple biological imperative, not an expressive act that defined them as human beings in any way. So restaurant food, like other convenience foods (tinned, frozen, whatever), could be prepared in an assembly line system and served without any meaningful human interaction whatsoever.

In fact, Ray Kroc decided that it was an inconvenience for staff even to have emotions: happy one day, unhappy the next – an attitude like that could affect customers and influence sales. So he decided that all the servers would say, to every customer, ‘Have a nice day!’ It was simple, short and right to the point. Enjoy your day. Don’t have a bad day. I really hope nothing terrible happens to you today, but don’t go overboard with something spectacular – just nice, okay? Well, who but the most curmudgeonly wouldn’t like to have their day blessed? Furthermore, there seemed no more need to motivate their staff or make any attempt to keep them happy in their work – even if said sarcastically, in the hubbub of a busy takeaway, the customer was hardly going to notice.

Of course some were bound to wring their hands and lament: Where’s the humanity? Where’s the generosity, the spirit, the human warmth? To which Ray Kroc might have retorted: But did we ever really care about all that? Didn’t the upper classes value their servants specifically for their ability to keep their mouths shut, and not spill the consommé? If you open a tin of beans, does it matter whether or not you’ve had a nice chat with the person who put it in the tin? It’s just food; convenience food, brought to the customer with the minimum of fuss, bother or expense. Sure, some people still think they want chatty, informal little cafés with personality, just as some people have a nostalgia for the sweet shop on the corner or the local greengrocer’s, but

they're just kidding themselves. Really they only want somewhere to drive to and be fed.

Well, that's what the founders of the world's most successful fast food chain, with no fewer than 28,000 restaurants worldwide, might have said. But it cut no ice with me. What did they know about Uckfield?

And in any case, these points were irrelevant because there was no competition for my diner. The nearest McDonald's, as I had already ascertained, was fifteen miles away in Brighton and no application for planning permission had been lodged by any of the fast food chains. Uckfield was a frontier town in catering terms, ready and waiting to be re-educated about the joys of eating at a small, local, stylish diner that served good food with all the efficiency of the big brand outlets. And I was the man who was going to show them how to do it.



I was talking a big game and Amanda, when we met in our old hotel bar, was impressed. In fact she was more than impressed. There was something about the words 'franchise' and 'brand expansion' that seemed to genuinely excite her, although admittedly the effect was slightly weakened by other words like 'Uckfield' and 'burgers'. For a moment the air crackled with sexual chemistry, and I was gripped by that light-headed feeling you get when you know you're just one tiny gesture away from beginning foreplay. And then her mobile phone rang. For the next half hour she gave a soft, breathy, intimate summary of all my business hopes and assets to someone called Guy, before happily inviting him to drive over and join us.

15

While we waited, Amanda explained that Guy was a friend of the family and an incredibly talented venture capitalist. She just knew that he would be the right person to fund the project. 'He's

so shrewd and experienced,' she enthused. 'And I just know you two are really going to like each other.' Somehow I doubted it.



My intuition was spot-on.

'Why don't you offer this Kevin character nothing at all for his place?' was Guy's opening suggestion, as he leant back in his seat and flicked the keyring of his new Lexus against his palm.

'What do you mean by "nothing"?' I asked, appalled.

'Yes, what do you mean?' asked Amanda, her eyes brightening at the thought.

What he meant was exactly that – a zero offer. Kevin was stuck with a lease but was probably sick to death of spending every evening cooking and serving food in a restaurant he had already mentally sold, knowing that every minute he devoted to it put his more lucrative enterprise, the cinema, in jeopardy. I should take advantage of his weak bargaining position, Guy argued, and show a to-hell-with-it buccaneering spirit.

He had a point, of course. Amanda was nodding emphatically. Paying nothing made a lot of sense to her too, and if I could swing it, well, it would be a smart investment, wouldn't it?

'Sure,' agreed Guy with a sneery grin. 'Come and see me, Christopher, when you've got your answer, and we'll hang a few ideas from the flagpole and see who salutes.'

16 Even without his muscling in on my ex-lover and demoting me to gooseberry of the group, I knew that Guy and I were never going to get on. Desperation, however, breeds strange alliances and I really did need his cash. So, to my utter shame, I wrote to Kevin and offered to take Cain's off his hands for free.

I didn't hear back. But that was okay, I reassured myself, because I could play it cool too. More days passed. I called Amanda to see if she fancied a night out, while I continued to

play it cool, but she couldn't spare an evening. I phoned Guy to see if he had any more tactics up his sleeve, like maybe bringing money into the equation. But no, he insisted – it was bound to be bumpy at first, Kevin just needed a little bit longer to face up to realities.

Meanwhile, my appointment with the bank arrived.



At polytechnic, studying for our degrees, we budding hospitality executives spent many hours looking at sources of finance. I must have passed exams on it, but all I remember now about the theory was that there's something called 'gearing'. Education, eh? What it boils down to are four simple options: either you spend your own money, your family's, someone else's (Guy's, ideally), or the bank's.

Self was out of the question for the usual, very simple, fiscal reasons. Family was a possibility. My older brother, Simon, had recently made a packet writing a TV script and was one of those effortlessly generous types who think of good fortune as a privilege that ought to be shared – a mad idea that could start revolutions if it caught on. But what if the diner failed? Could I face him every year, across the Christmas turkey, while his children played with their plastic treats from Toys'n'Toiletries? Or, worse, would I project my own shame back onto him in some complex 'why did you let me ruin both our lives' sort of way?

Guy would be an easier option. Guy was one of those venture capitalists who want to invest in a more entertaining way than just putting their stock market earnings back into the stock market. But in return for the risk he'd expect a higher rate of interest. That would mean his taking a large part of my profit, as well as getting to interfere endlessly and swanning in whenever for free meals. On the plus side, people like Guy are a lot more

business-orientated and experienced than your average bank manager and can give you quite useful advice. Also, unlike with family, should you go bust you can walk away from the wreckage whistling cheerfully.

Banks, of course, are the pits. They care only about making profit; they are not your friend or ‘business angel’ (they have no more idea about cutting-edge business than the paperboy) and they will do you no favours. Frankly, they don’t even like you, which is why half their branches have turned into wine bars. However, come up with some cash yourself, something to show your own commitment, and they may lend you a bit more or give you an overdraft. Then, as soon as they possibly can, they’ll be charging you £29.50 each time they bounce a direct debit.

I reflected on this as I sat outside the manager’s office clutching a smart plastic folder with all my research into food and equipment costs, some terrific photos of American diners, floor plans, graphs of projected revenues and profits, and so on. I still have the file – it’s beautiful. And it wasn’t all bollocks, either: over years of working in hotels and restaurants I’d learnt that it’s the drip of unforeseen and unbudgeted-for expenses (National Insurance, van repairs, rodent control) that can bring a business down, and I’d even factored a few of these into the plan.

The bank manager ushered me in. He was a tall, affable chap, who smiled patiently at me as he explained the basic banking tenets of risk and reward using the objects on his desk.

18 ‘Imagine this is the bank’s money,’ he urged, indicating the stapler. ‘And I lend some of it to you.’ He pushed the stapler tentatively across the desk to me. ‘Eventually, we’re going to want it back,’ and he pulled the stapler back towards him with both hands, ‘with what we call interest. In-ter-est. But, do you know’ – a note of solemnity crept into his voice – ‘often we don’t get it back because most new catering businesses fail before they’ve even got to the end of their first year?’

He moved the stapler to the side of the desk furthest away from both of us, where it sat isolated from the biro and hole puncher. The bank manager and I both stared at it glumly for a moment.

‘Now, about your overdraft...’

During the lecture he had slyly pushed my diner file further and further away from him across the desk, and now he began rifling through his own files looking for the account numbers of chequebooks and cards he intended to confiscate before yet another direct debit presented itself. Seven minutes later I was back on the street, stripped of any immediate means of getting cash, and hugging my diner folder protectively, as if it was a child who had just come last in a Beautiful Baby competition.

Oh well, I didn’t need a loan just yet anyway. I still hadn’t heard from Kevin and I had found no other even vaguely suitable property. I took some shift work, cash in hand, at the first hotel with room service vacancies and began to look around again in earnest.



Catering is such a hard, grimy, competitive living, you would expect to see plenty of failing businesses appear on the market each month. But you don’t. In reality very few get advertised and only a small number of these come with vacant possession, presumably because their owners, having coughed up the huge opening costs, prefer to hang on grimly in the hopes of recouping their investment. The prices they ask, therefore, can be outrageously high.

Initially it’s hard to imagine how their owners have the nerve to ask £30,000-plus for, say, a greasy spoon on a lonely windswept ring road, or a burger van in the car park of a B&Q; but they do. And all too often people pay these prices, perpetuating the cycle of unsustainable debt.

The difference between buying a business and buying a private house is that with a house one tends to be trying to buy into the lifestyle of the present owner – you’re not necessarily expecting to exceed their lifestyle. But with a business, you look rather contemptuously at the current owner, noting with all your business acumen and vision what they’ve done wrong. You see only potential and what riches that business can bring if you get it right (which obviously you will).

So £30,000, you might reason, if you’re in a property for ten years, is only three grand a year, less than £60 a week. Not much at all, when the overall costs of running that business might run into thousands of pounds each week. Not much, either, as an alternative to waiting four to twelve months for cheaper premises, or planning permission, or to build your own space from scratch. Heck! You could have earned twice £30,000 in that time!

There are pluses and minuses to that kind of thinking. On the minus side, as Mr Stapler had observed, well over fifty percent of catering businesses fail before the end of their first year, often for reasons beyond the control of the existing owners. It might be something indefinably wrong with the site. On some sites, shop after shop, restaurant after restaurant, have opened to a fanfare only to be picked over by bailiffs a few months later. Some London friends once asked me to help open an Australian steakhouse in an empty shop in Brighton. There was plenty of ‘footfall’ and ‘mouths going past’ but over the previous twelve years I’d seen the premises open and close as a bikers’ pub, a Ratpack-themed cocktail bar, an Egyptian carpet emporium and a bedding shop (The Bedding Shop: ‘We Don’t Just Sell Bedding’), and most often stand empty save for the fading signs of the previous occupants. Maybe there was some invisible force stopping customers from going in, something in the look of the place that wasn’t quite right. Maybe it was built on an ancient

Bronze Age burial mound. Maybe there was an over-rapacious landlord. Whatever the reason, I advised my friends, it just wouldn't work. (Funnily enough, there's now a massively successful restaurant there and my friends are quite cross about my advice but, hey, who could have predicted that?)

I let another fortnight pass and then I contacted Kevin. He was understandably a little cool, bristly even, but it's amazing what a frank and full apology, with a bit of grovelling thrown in, can do. I explained about Guy – we agreed he was a complete tosser – and about my hopes of linking up with him for the money. He offered the advice that I should try family first, and then, to show no hard feelings, dropped the price to £15,000. I was thrilled.

Guy was outraged. It was completely mad, he insisted. How would I have any capital to properly kit out the place? How could I afford uniforms for valet parking if Kevin demanded so much for the lease? The question took me by surprise. What valet parking? What uniform? For some reason, employing someone wearing Michael Jackson cast-offs to park your customers' cars while they enjoyed a carefree meal was the pivot of Guy's business idea. I listened politely, and told him I'd be happy to park his car for him whenever he or any friends of his arrived. But this was obviously not going to be enough. The man had plans to asphalt the lane to the side of the shop. He was chiding me about my over-modest plans – 'Think multi-storey,' he intoned.

We all have our breaking point and mine came at the point when he was designing the swinging 'Valet Parking' sign. 'Can you just shut the f— up about parking for one tiny moment and think about food?' I pleaded. Guy looked hurt. I watched him get up, pocket his mobile phone, toss and catch his car keys, and exit with my hopes for £15,000. 'No vision,' he muttered, shaking his head wistfully.

The time had come to chat to my brother, and it was, as I had suspected, all too easy. He said he could lend me the purchase

price as a lump sum, which meant I would have just the sort of sizeable chunk that banks are willing to negotiate on. I don't of course mean the branch that had severed all links with me, but Simon's own local bank. We went to see them together the next morning, and they pledged to advance me an extra £10,000 as long as Simon left his building society book in their keeping as a guarantee.

This amazed me. If someone with a good banking history and a high income job could be treated with such suspicion, how do new account holders or recent immigrants ever get a loan? Do they chuck in body organs as a bit of extra collateral? Still, my own immediate worries were at an end. I had £25,000 to get my venture underway. It seemed to me an enormous sum, though of course it barely buys a shiny whisk once you start getting into commercial equipment. But it goes a fair way in acquiring secondhand restaurant gear, as I was planning to do.

My strategy was to throw all my money upfront where it was most visible, in a Blitzkrieg approach. If the business made money I would be alright, and if it didn't then nothing much would matter anyway. Cutting things down to a minimum, doing a lot of the refurbishment myself, I calculated that I would need £13,000 to get some food on the tables.

22 So I phoned Kevin and offered £12,000, saying that this was all I had; if it wasn't enough, then thanks anyway, I hoped they'd sell it soon. Kevin said he needed time to think. Within a week the estate agent got back to me, asking if I could stretch to £13,000? I said no, I really only had £12,000. Two hours later it was mine.



A bitter north wind funnelled along the high street, driving grit into my eyes and wrapping old crisp packets around my legs as I fought my way uphill from the estate agents with the keys to

Cain's in my pocket. I don't think I'd ever felt quite so cold or wretched before.

It wasn't that I expected marching bands and a handshake from the mayor, exactly, nor did I expect the estate agent to carry me over the threshold. But a tiny bit of sun or human warmth would have been nice. Clearly the commission on £12,000 isn't enormous. The estate agent had informed me rather perfunctorily that my funds hadn't yet been transferred into his account, and that I should come back a little later (ie wait outside in the freezing cold). I gave it ten minutes, then returned to disrupt his cosy little den by shivering uncontrollably and blowing into my palms. He reluctantly handed over the documents and steered me back into the cold.

I don't think the weather was entirely to blame for my dose of *tristesse*. The night before, I'd phoned Amanda to ask her along to the ceremonial handover and Guy had answered. He couldn't help but tell me about his great new start-up investment. Funky cobbling for driveways. The money was just flooding in.

A 'Sold' sign was flapping in the wind in front of Cain's so I ripped it off with frozen hands and hurled it down the muddy alleyway, where it caught on a discarded metal pole. Then I unlocked the door and, shoving aside a pile of junk mail, stepped inside. I walked slowly round looking at everything – the crockery, the tables, the equipment – nervous about touching it. It didn't feel like it was mine. In fact, it felt very much like trespassing.

I sat for a while on the little brick wall that Kevin had used as a bar and tried to envisage all the changes I'd make. Right, I thought, off we go. Two hours later I was still sitting on the wall, colder than ever, as I'd failed to work out the heating. But an idea had sprung to mind. Dragging the metal pole in from the alleyway, I practised swinging it over my head a few times and then brought it crashing down on the bar. An hour later, choking

on dust, with rivulets of grimy sweat running down my face, I looked happily down at a pile of broken bricks and debris. Yep, my diner was taking shape.



Mi casa, su casa

BEGINNING WORK ON THE DINER, chunks were soon getting whittled away from the log of my idealism. For example, I had never understood why shopfitters covered their windows with that smeary stuff to stop you looking in. Surely the innocent interest people have in a new shop should act as kindling in starting the hoped-for wildfire of publicity? At the Diner, therefore, I decided to invite in anyone who showed an interest, and share a cuppa or maybe a friendly glass of wine, *mi casa, su casa*, style. We could bat ideas around; I could ask their advice on how to reach out to the community, and they could tell me what they would like me to include on the menu.

25

As it turned out, as soon as people started looking in at me I became self-conscious and either waved them away (if they were kids), or adopted a foolish grin if dealing with adults. Some people continued staring, nonetheless, which occasionally drove me to hide behind things until they'd gone, or even pretend to

walk down steps to a cellar, hidden behind some boxes. This wasn't too tricky; you just had to time the crouch right while edging forward as if descending. A minute or two with your head ducked down would suffice before the onlookers – as often as not twelve-year-olds intent on making 'wanker' signs – lost interest and drifted away.

One day, however, I emerged from my 'cellar' to find Kevin staring in surprise from the doorway. Kevin had never shown quite the same openness and trust since receiving my first offer on the place but now he seemed to have serious misgivings.

'You alright?' he asked, moving his eyes slowly from the boxes to me.

'Yes, fine,' I answered blithely, 'just having a sit and a... think, y'know... as you do.' It seemed to satisfy him.

'Fair enough,' he replied. And then turning back with a broad grin on his face, 'Let me know if you find anything interesting in the attic, won't you, mate?'

I decided to cover up the windows, and set to working out how to do it. You see whited-out, midst-of-fitting windows all the time, but what are you supposed to use to create the effect? Some kind of cloudy compound obviously, but what? My brother-in-law suggested it might be Vaseline. 'That's it,' I said, and bought a couple of king-size tubs. Which was how I came to be standing in the restaurant, smearing the windows in front of a small crowd of schoolboys, when a confident-looking teenager roughly elbowed them out the way and walked in.

26

'What are you doing?' she said.

'Isn't it obvious?' I said. 'I'm lubricating my windows. Did you want something?'

'I was going to ask you for a job,' she replied, 'but now I'm not so sure.'

Becky was pretty, with a freckly face and piles and piles of frizzy red hair, which she tied out of the way with a thick band.

For those who remember children's television of the 1970s, she faintly resembled Crystal Tipps, from *Crystal Tipps and Alistair*, only a less flakey version. She was the sort of girl who you would be happy to have babysit your kids (and your kids would love as a babysitter), at least until you met her older and scarier boyfriend. She claimed to be seventeen but eventually owned up to being sixteen, just – well, sixteen in a few weeks' time, more or less.

I pointed out that employing under-sixteens is a pain in the neck – too many rules and regulations and, besides, we were licensed, which made it illegal. Becky took it all in good part, then suggested that I use a watered-down white emulsion on the windows instead of the Vaseline. Clever. She offered to help me get the Vaseline off and, when the twelve-year-olds returned, popped outside to cuff them round the ear.

As we de-lubed, Becky explained that her mother had gone to live with her boyfriend in Crawley, leaving her the council house. Her own boyfriend, Lee, had moved in and was 'doing her head in', which was why she needed to get out for a couple of evenings a week. If we let her start at the Diner she wouldn't be in the way at all and wouldn't touch even a drop of alcohol. I found myself agreeing that she could pop in from time to time, but not in the evenings or school hours until her birthday. Then she'd be on the team.



With the demolition work almost completed I began to put some serious thought into refurbishing and decorating the place. Now, people have very fixed ideas about diners. They always picture that sparkly chrome 1950s look when, in fact, diners were supposed to be functional, clean and modern places for people to go and dine in. To restrict them to a particular

retro 'look' was like saying that any 'restaurant' had to be French and from the *fin de siècle* Moulin Rouge era of candlesticks and red flocked wallpaper. Obviously a daft idea.

For months I had been gathering design ideas together, cutting pictures out of magazines and buying fantastically expensive restaurant design books from America. While I was quite happy to plunder ideas from classic venues like the City Bakery in New York or The Louisiana Grill in Memphis, my instincts were set against a pastiche-y *Happy Days* style. Obviously, the seats would be set into booths and upholstered in deep-red leatherette, and the tables would have marbly Formica tops, but that was about as far as I'd go. There'd be no jukeboxes on the tables (couldn't afford them), no girls in pink dresses whizzing round on roller skates (why give it all away on accident insurance?), and no Buddy Holly either (much prefer Elvis).

While mulling over the final scheme for the decor, a succession of shopfitters arrived to offer professional guidance. Each one leafed through my design idea scrapbooks, raised admiring eyebrows at the cuttings and cross-references, muttering, 'Yep, yep. Got that, very nice. A-ha, no problem,' then looked up blankly and asked, 'So, what will it be then: Fifties *Happy Days* look?' A week later I would get a quote roughly equivalent to the GDP of Norway.

28 It was obvious that I was going to have to think laterally and look for a gifted, reasonably cheap, handyman to take on the job. Myself, for instance. Except that I'm no DIY expert (I blame the tools) and within a week I was at A&E getting a dressing for a hacked finger. This actually proved a lucky turn, as the nurse who filled out the injury questionnaire happened to have a master builder for a dad and, though he was retired, she thought he'd be quite happy to knock up some tables and a counter for me. Her husband, by an amazing coincidence, was a builder's mate and just happened to be looking for a job as well.

The following day, at 8am sharp, a neat-looking man with trimmed grey hair stood waiting outside the Diner. His name was Ken, and beside him, shivering and with the hood of his sweatshirt pulled over his head, was André, his unemployed son-in-law from Dieppe. Over the next three weeks the top of the High Street rang to the happy sound of the two men working hard, sawing, hammering and planing, and of me boiling the kettle and pouring them tea.

Ken proved to be the kind of competent, kindly older man that we all need to have living round the corner. He didn't tell me how to design my diner; just looked at the pictures and said, 'Yeah, I can do that,' and then began measuring up. André's job was to fetch and carry. At the start of the day Ken would patiently explain to him what he needed from the hardware store and off he'd go. Half an hour later he would return with an item so entirely wide of the mark we couldn't understand how he could even have considered it (think towel-ring instead of dowelling and you get the drift). Ken would then painstakingly run through the list again, perhaps throwing in some mime to help matters along. I can only imagine the fun those smug patronising bastards in our local hardware store were having. (Two years later they had scared off so many customers they were forced to close. Well, *quel dommage!*)

There was nothing for it but for André and I to swap jobs and, in doing so, a great mystery was explained. As young teenagers, an elderly aunt had taken my brother and I out to lunch in Littlehampton. At the end of the meal the French waiter, without any provocation or lead-up, leant across my aunt's seat and told us both to fuck off. 'Fuck off, you,' he said, in a calm, matter-of-fact tone as if said on a daily basis to all the English customers. Auntie seemed oblivious, but my brother and I were stunned, far too nervous to draw her attention to this astonishing insult. Now, twenty years later, it happened again as André turned to

me and, with a note of inexplicable enquiry in his voice, said, 'Fuck off, you?' I gasped and stared. André looked confused. 'Ken ees 'avin coffeh,' he explained; then slightly more hesitantly, 'F'coffe you, too?' So, at long last I could stop feeling tense around French people.

With Ken's help and lots more hot drinks and expletives from André, the Diner began to take shape. Expertly crafted, wood-panelled booths sprung up, each one with a customised table at the centre edged in stainless steel. The walls were half-panelled and half-painted with emulsion and the floor was covered in green and white tiles in a checkerboard pattern with blue tiles round the sides. The latter I did myself and, though Ken winced slightly and sucked air through his teeth, I could tell he was just a tiny bit impressed.



It was remarkable, given the very few concessions we'd made to the 1950s look, just how much like a classic diner it was turning out. The bulkhead wall lamps set a pool of light sparkling on the Formica and spilling onto the shiny red leatherette seats, and there was an air of clean, shiny efficiency about the place that almost compelled you to slide into one of the booths and order some food. Or might have done, if I'd sorted out some kitchen equipment to cook it with. I was beginning to worry that my strategy of entirely ignoring the small kitchen tucked away in a room at the back, and throwing all the money at the seating area out front, might have been a bit misguided.

30

Kitchen design matters, as any caterer will tell you, and especially so in tiny restaurants where profits depend on getting people in and out as quickly as possible. McDonald's, Burger King, KFC, they all know this and put plenty of money into getting the perfect juxtaposition of grills, fryers and worktops, as

their customers are paying for speed and consistency, not tasteful fittings or chic ambience. They also, of course, have ways of discouraging people from sitting endlessly over their polystyrene packages: using a mixture of bright lighting, seats angled just a tiny bit and Muzak playing on a loop that repeats subliminally the words 'Clear off we hate you' (okay, I made that last bit up). I was looking to be rather more welcoming than that but to keep the food moving in a similarly slick fashion, and there was only one way I could remotely achieve this – with a smart, efficient, totally redesigned kitchen. Well, that was the idea. A cheap makeover was about the best I could stretch to.

In the first days of feverish activity I had chucked out all the old pans and utensils, because using someone else's old pans feels a bit like wearing their old pants. This left me with only a couple of fridges and a cooker. Fridges are there just to keep food cold and as they were out of sight of the customer I refused to be seduced by the gleam of stainless steel or the satisfying velvety clunk of a new fridge door. The cooker, however, was another case entirely. Kevin had left an enormous old-fashioned range that looked like something Mrs Bridges might have used. It was made of iron and white enamel, so squat and so heavy it had its own special concrete plinth, with a capacious oven, six burners on top and a giant eye-level grill. All that's fine, but entirely unsuitable for the kind of food you serve in a diner, and it knew it, eyeing me like a fat albino toad, daring me to have a go.

Generally my way of dealing with really big problems is to ignore them until an even bigger problem comes along, at which point the original problem seems to fade away of its own accord. It's a technique worthy of a bestseller manual, and one I can't recommend highly enough, though there is a downside. You can find yourself jerking awake in the middle of the night and screaming out things like, 'So how am I going to cook the burgers, then? Boil them?'

At Hotelympia I had looked at beautifully designed and engineered Italian cooking ranges, created from rich alloys combined with thick chunky stainless steel, with no gaps for things to fall down or food to get trapped, with low-slung, streamlined, computer-aided controls set at a racey angle and internal lighting, like the dashboard of a very, very expensive sports car. These were the Ferraris of cooking equipment and I'd stared at them like a small boy at the window of a car showroom. Back at the Diner, I was saddled with a rattling old dormobile, propped up on some bricks.

One day André sawed through a power cable and we were without electricity. I tried to cope without coffee, but after half an hour I could take it no longer. I filled a milk saucepan with water and gingerly lit the gas and set it on the range. The water seemed to cook quite well and before long we were all enjoying a hearty cup of Nescafé and I felt ready to take a next step, with toasted teacakes. Again, the range met the challenge. Now there was no stopping me. Soup, French toast, baked potatoes, boil-in-a-bag fish – I could cook it all. I couldn't understand why I'd been so standoffish; soon the range and I were like old mates.

32 I set about designing the rest of the kitchen for maximum ergonomic efficiency. The staff budget only allowed for one chef, so the kitchen would have to fit him or her (or, more probably, me) like a second skin. I bought a new chip fryer at an auction, but that of course wouldn't help me cook burgers; I could hardly deep-fry them. I jokingly asked Ken if he could knock me up a griddle, and the next day he gave me a piece of paper with the plans to give to a blacksmith. It was shockingly simple: the blacksmith just cut out a square sheet of metal and we stuck it over the gas burners on the range.

The time had come to cook some diner food. I bought some organic mince from a local butcher and moulded and bashed it into rough burger shapes. Meanwhile Ken and André poured the

beer and laid the table, or at least moved some of the sawdust out of the way. I lit the gas burners underneath the metal plate, and we were off.

The home-made griddle got hot, got very hot, turned purple, smoked and then folded up like an origami tulip. I put the burgers on anyway but they immediately stuck to the metal and gave off a searing stench of burnt protein reminiscent of nastier incidents at the dentist's. Never mind, I chiselled away until the burgers came away from the metal (you're supposed to 'seal the meat' anyway, so that was alright), put the buns in to toast, and organised the salad stuff for underneath the meat. The fat from the burgers collected in the channel where the griddle surface was listing at an alarming angle and, as I lifted one side of the griddle to pour it off, I managed to tip it into the flames, where it combusted spectacularly, spitting oil over my hands and making my eyes water. In the excitement I forgot the buns under the grill, which were burning merrily, their smoke billowing through the restaurant. It was all quite exhilarating – men's work. Flames, hot metal, sweat, fear. I felt like Casey Jones.

André had requested his burger rare, but even he was surprised at just how rare it was once you got through the hard black crust on the outside. Ken asked if I'd ever done any cooking before and wondered if he might have another beer.

Still, the first burgers had been served at the Diner, and it seemed a pretty emotional moment. Or was that just the smoke getting in my eyes?



The trial run had thrown up some interesting discussion points. Fortunately, indeed miraculously, the griddle plate went back to its normal shape when it cooled down a bit, and I took it back to the blacksmith to get a grease channel put in. Further trials

showed that by controlling the heat a bit better I could keep it flat. The performance of the home-made burgers was slightly more of a worry but there was plenty of time to experiment. I pushed it to the back of my mind in order to concentrate on more crucial stuff, like what pictures to put up.

On this score, there seemed no harm in going to the professionals, so I looked in at a swish Brighton poster shop, where I was taken upstairs to their corporate art department. After several days of extensive research they suggested Edward Hopper and recommended that I buy from them several hundred pounds' worth of prints featuring pictures of people sitting in diners. 'Correct me I'm wrong,' I said, 'but isn't Hopper's work noted for its depiction of loneliness and isolation? Would anyone want to sit in a diner and look at lonely people sitting in diners? Might depressed people think we were taking the piss?'

Had they been looking for the very least suitable artist they couldn't have done better. It was a bit like suggesting Munch's *The Scream* as a nice, soothing print for a psychiatric hospital. Anyway, an unexpected bill from the extractor fan people meant that I had to scale down my plans. Instead I cobbled together montages from old postcards, books and magazines and placed them artily about the walls in clipframes. One can worry about the look of things too much.

One cannot, however, worry too much about a name, and although the diner concept was becoming reality before my eyes, I still had not decided what to call the place.

34



I'm convinced that two simple words is more than sufficient for a restaurant name – and all the better if one of them is 'The'. I was once interviewed by The Great American Deep Pan Pizza Company. Well, that's just crap, isn't it? And for a while I worked

for Pastificio, which is Italian for ‘pasta factory’ – very apt and good because we made our own pasta, but very bad because people were frightened about saying it wrong. ‘Let’s go to Pastifishio... pastifickio... pastaaa... oh sod it, let’s go to Pizza Express.’ (It was pasti-feetch-ee-o.)

But perhaps Italian names are a problem, as all too many descend into initials. I won’t go to ASK for oh so many reasons, but primarily because they have such a dumb name. And the same applies big time to ITS, Si, Est and – I can hardly type it – NTI (Now That’s Italian!). These aren’t names so much as clever ways to use up your last Scrabble letters.

I was still doing occasional shifts as a room service waiter while planning the Diner, and I put my shortlist of names into a little competition at the hotel. The names were listed on a large piece of paper and fellow staff were invited to vote for their favourite, or to suggest their own, the winners getting a free slap-up meal when we opened.

The list went:

The Big Diner (because it was very small, ho ho ho)

Pig Heaven

Burger Express (well, why not?)

Cheap’n’Greasy

Maximum Diner

Eat Up Rodney! (in homage to *Get Dressed Rodney!*, a clothes shop in Camden)

I forget which option was the most popular – I think it was ‘Pig Heaven’ – as I gave my own nomination, a large block vote that carried the day, for ‘Maximum Diner’. You need to be careful with competitions, anyway. Whenever I go back to my mum’s home in Henfield, I walk past a lovely, classy gift shop, the owners of which put its naming out to a very public competition in the local paper and somehow wound up with ‘Top Shelf’. It can’t just be me who’s reminded by this of adult only mags or the place where you hide unwanted presents.

During the 1980s the brave people at ‘I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter’ liberated forever the naming of products. This was such a seismic shift in naming that I brought samples home from America to show incredulous friends and family long before it was available here. My mother insisted on calling it ‘Let’s Pretend It’s Butter!’, which seemed even more surreal. But now any old marketing department thinks it can give a product a crazily honest name. Sometimes it works, such as the American removal company ‘Two Jewish Guys with a Truck’, and sometimes it can be frankly misguided: Safeway’s ‘Don’t Flutter with the Butter!’ means what exactly? A soft spread for cardiac patients?

‘Maximum Diner’, by contrast, was a clear winner. If you want to get technical, it was a combination of two naming techniques: firstly, finding a word that sounds effective, in this case maximum; and secondly, going for a slightly unsettling weirdness. But the main thing was that it just sounded right, while the rest of that shortlist – well, it speaks for itself.



It's the menu, stupid

BACK IN THE KITCHEN TIME WAS PRESSING ON and the Menu had become **Worry #1**. Borrowing from Bill Clinton's technique for concentrating the mind, I wrote, 'It's the Menu, Stupid' on the wall – but then ignored it. Meanwhile, the interior had pretty much come together, the liquor licence was transferred from a much happier, slimmer Kevin (the change was remarkable, but I was far too preoccupied to draw any lessons from it), opening day bunting had been ordered, and I'd even had some T-shirts printed for the staff with the logo 'Maximum Diner–Somewhere to Eat'. A snappy bit of advertising, to be sure, but to eat what? That was my problem.

Burgers, obviously. But even this staple was proving difficult to get hold of. I'd assumed when I'd planned the Diner that I could order organic or free range beef and chicken burgers, frozen, individually wrapped and ready to be flipped onto the griddle. How wrong could I have been? Extensive research and frustrated

phone calls to the RSPCA, Compassion in World Farming and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals all confirmed that there were no business-scale suppliers of free range pre-prepared meat. My only option was to find a decent farmer with a healthy, happy herd, negotiate a deal and then make the burgers myself. From my trial run I knew this would be disastrous. Ready-made burgers are flattened into thin round shapes so they seal and cook quickly and tend not to either fall apart or spit runnels of fat that burst into flames. But the only ready-made burgers, bacon or chicken products came from the standard suppliers, who could offer no comfort about how their meat was reared or processed.

A dark night of the soul followed this discovery. You see, I'm a special kind of vegetarian, the kind that eats meat. I know that sounds bizarre but just because I suspect that killing animals is wrong (though what's supposed to happen to all those dairy herds and shorn sheep, I can't imagine) doesn't mean I'm ready for a lifetime commitment to nut roasts and lentil lasagne. What I care about is that the meat I eat has had some chance of a happy life (okay, until the point when it gets strung up, amateurishly stunned and has its throat cut).

38 The question was, could I give up that last shred of principle and collude with factory farming, just to keep a business going; just to preserve myself from hideous debt and the humiliation of failing before I'd even started? Well, put like that, yes, perhaps I could. But to salve my conscience I decided that I'd buy the best quality meat I could afford, in the hopes that the animals had suffered less. (Obviously, once my franchise was up and running I could set up my own supplies.) At the same time I'd offer menu alternatives that would be tasty, innovative and not made of beef. But what? The question was starting to get repetitive.

I did have a few favourite recipes that I'd picked up through the years: my mother's lamb and apricot pie, flapjacks, Josceline Dimpleby's bacon and cheese hotpot, to name but three (in fact

to name all three). But there was no unifying theme, no new concept for customers to grasp. On the other hand, I did have a few buccaneering ideas about language. 'Cheese', for instance, could be used as a verb, as well as a noun. The staff would say, 'Would you like that cheesed, madam?' or 'Cheese it up for you, sir?' or 'Hey sonny, bet you'd like me to cheese that!'

I even explored the idea of adapting the French word for cheese, *fromage*, into an English verb, to *frommage*, pronunciation similar to 'rummage', meaning 'to add cheese to something'. But my computer kept writing a squiggly red line under *frommage* (it's done it again), suggesting that we'd got a way to go with that one. Ambitious? Perhaps. But one day long ago, at a meeting of McDonald's executives, someone must have had the courage to say, 'Hey guys, you know those kids' meals? Well, I've been thinking, let's call them Happy Meals!' And I bet someone else at the table sniggered, and thanked Christ he hadn't come up with such a stupid idea himself.

I'm not a chef, as might be clear by now. Chefs cook proper food in restaurants; they are alert to bold new combinations of flavour and texture; they like to make witty allusions to other dishes; and they speak their own language (French, mainly), bandying about such words as *soufflé*, *truffle oil*, *calves' liver*, *praline*, *jus*, *tatin*, *celeriac*, *flaaaaaan*, *confit*. Few of these filtered through to me at my course at Leeds Poly, where, to be fair, they weren't actually trying to turn out chefs so much as managers with academic qualifications – not a thing you boast about in the hot, bitchy, competitive world of commercial kitchens, although the worlds aren't always as far apart as they seem.

For instance, one visiting lecturer was keen to impress upon us how important it was to judge the market accurately when you're setting a menu. As an example, he cited the case of an ambitious young chef from the Yorkshire Dales who had trained at the Académie de Très Bien Cuisine in Paris during the glory

days of *nouvelle cuisine*. Having patiently learned his craft from the very best, suffering diabolical mockery from his Gallic colleagues before finally earning their respect, he returned home to show Yorkshire how it should be eating. His business lasted for three sad, argumentative months. As the bailiffs chucked his exquisite restaurant furniture in the back of a lorry, the young chef complained that the people of Yorkshire didn't understand that truly great food takes a lot longer to produce, that portions were supposed to be small, that was the bloody point of them, and that he felt very, very disappointed in everyone. He left catering quite soon afterwards and has hardly cooked since. 'I know this,' our lecturer informed us, shooting the cuffs of his frayed corduroy jacket, and staring at each row in turn, 'because I was that young chef...'

Fortunately for me, diner cooking requires a more simple style – one that, like peasant or café food, is based around cheap, fresh ingredients. This was good, because it's the kind of food I know best; no cause for any shame about that, as anyone going into business should know their strengths and limitations, and have clear goals in mind. Mine was to make money and provide a great service, not to push the envelope when it comes to what you can do with a monkfish.



40 My menu research might not have uncovered any great new culinary ideas, but it crystallised the huge changes that have happened with food in my lifetime. As recently as the 1970s, getting a 'balanced diet' meant eating enough of the basic five food groups (protein, carbohydrate, fats/oils, vegetables and the other one) to avoid a deficiency that could lead to rickets, beriberi, scurvy and so on. Now, when dieticians suggest we eat a balanced diet they are pleading with us not to get any fatter. It's a subtle change.

Five new food groups have now taken their place. At #1, still, is the cheap filling carbohydrate (pasta, bread, potatoes, pastry), and at #2 protein (meat, chicken or fish), more or less of it according to whether times are good or bad. But, while in the old days we would then have a veg or two, in the modern western world we now pass on this because they don't taste particularly nice and are annoying to prepare. Instead at #3 we have topping, which may but by no means has to be a vegetable (usually onion or mushroom, never pea or sprout); it can equally be another protein, like cheese or bacon, or – my favourite – both. This new food group is responsible for many of the world's problems, among them obesity, heart disease, cancer, piles (apparently) and road rage (arguably). Meanwhile, in at #4 is the tangy sauce: barbecue, blue cheese, thousand island, whatever – nutritionally worthless but lovely. And at #5 is side salad, including its subsets of garnish, coleslaw and, debatably, potato salad.

So, planning a menu for the Maximum Diner was actually quite simple. I just needed to find the most popular items in each of these five core categories – carbohydrate, protein, topping, tangy sauce and side salad – and there it was. The menu had almost written itself.

There is, though, a second principle to keep in mind: that nearly everything would have to be edible by hand while driving or watching telly, or at the very least one-handed with a fork, without looking at it (so one can still watch the TV/road). Snobs who dismiss such considerations might want to recall that the inventor of convenience food was the Earl of Sandwich. Not being minded to leave the gambling table, and wanting a food-stuff that he could hold without getting his playing cards greasy, the good Earl asked his servants for meat wrapped in bread.

Virtually every fast food item has to satisfy the requirement of not getting the steering wheel greasy, or not requiring cutting up for children, and those that don't have lost out to those that do.

Thus the revival of Kentucky Fried Chicken came about only when Colonel Sanders realised that his secret recipe was all very well, but what people wanted was cheap chicken products that could be easily held – chicken burgers, wraps, twisters – instead of those bony quarters of chicken that were difficult, hot and messy to hold in your hands.

In fact, the recipe for fast food is pretty much written in stone: a nice moist protein wrapped in a nice dry carbohydrate filled with a nice bit of topping for added value and something nice and tangy for flavour. The salad is integrated (for example, in burgers), or optional.

Although it didn't quite follow these rules to the letter, one idea I wanted to develop and popularise was *hash*. There's nothing new in food – I nicked the idea myself from a little café in Brighton, although I believe corned beef hash is a northern delicacy. It also appears in the chefs' bible, the *Larousse Gastronomique*, as a French dish, *hachis*, which uses leftovers in a stir-fry with potatoes. Everyone loves fried potatoes: Belgians like them with mayonnaise on them, the Swiss make them into complicated little cakes called *rosti*, and so do Americans but they call them hash browns.

42 Hash, or *hachis*, puts them in a stir-fry context. What you do is, you get some leftovers. You chop those and then fry them with some other leftovers. You toss in some leftover potatoes, also chopped up, fry them all up and add something (possibly something left over) to make the whole lot taste nice. Of course we were going to do it on a commercial scale not using leftovers (I emphasise NOT USING LEFTOVERS), but that's the general idea. It's nicer than it sounds, is enormously adaptable, can be eaten with a fork, needn't be cut up for children and is dead cheap. It is hot, fast, filling and economical. You can luxury-it-up or cheapen-it-down, cheese-it, *frommage*-it even, slather-it (another word I was trying to repopularise) in any sauce you can

think of, and adapt it for any culture, adding goat, say for Iraq, or extra potato for Ireland. It's a wonder food.

I was concerned that it might be difficult to sell the concept of hash to the people of Uckfield, or, worse, that it would be mistaken for its dopey namesake, but I took comfort from the development of Chinese food in this country. That must have been a tricky proposition to sell. When the Chinese started arriving, how many of us had tried or even heard of their food? I suspect they won us over with one entry-level dish that people simply couldn't resist: sweet'n'sour. It doesn't appear on any menus in China, so they must have inscrutably invented an item specifically to appeal to a western palate.

Then, in the late 1980s, as sweet'n'sour became slightly naff, and the Thais started setting up shop, stealing customers away with green curry, the Chinese came back with another humdinger and, guess what, it was fun for kids and you could eat it with your hands. crispy aromatic duck: a moist protein (duck) wrapped in a nice dry carbohydrate (pancake) with an oh-so-tangy sauce (hoi sin) and a topping/side salad combined in cucumber and spring onion. It was a work of genius; only the Chinese, the inventors of gunpowder, could devise so fiendishly clever a dish to see off the Thais. Now they just need to adapt it for driving.

With staples established, the remaining problem was to come up with a 'signature dish'. Marco Pierre White has his Omelette Arnold Bennett, Escoffier had his Peach Melba, McDonald's have their Big Mac, and Burger King their Whopper. I needed something of similar class for Maximum Diner. My favourite foods are cheese, bacon and barbecue sauce so it wasn't difficult. Any item with those three things on it would be given the sobriquet 'Maximum' or 'Max', and would be our signature dishes. The Big Max, for example, a quarterpounder burger with cheese and bacon and barbecue sauce on top and salad and mayo below, would be our very own Big Mac, all set for a nicely publicised

‘McPassing off’ court battle with you know who (which unfortunately never happened). The Maximum Chicken Dinner would be a griddled chicken breast generously cheesed-up and slathered in bacon, nestling on a bed of chips with barbecue sauce and coleslaw on the side. Maximum Hash was stir-fried onion, bacon, mushroom and peppers, plus potatoes frommaged and grilled until nicely brown, served with side salad and a dip (barbecue).

Apart from the twelve different variations on hash, the rest of the menu was made up of standards: there’s little point in being very creative with fast food due to Pareto’s Law. This rule, devised by Vilfredo Pareto, a nineteenth-century Italian economist, states that 80 percent of x comes from 20 percent of y . Pareto used his theory as an argument against socialism, citing evidence that (whatever political system was in place) 20 percent of the population always took 80 percent of the income. In my context, it meant that 20 percent of customers would produce 80 percent of turnover, and also that 20 percent of my menu would produce 80 percent of my orders. In short, a small number of regulars ordering a limited selection of items were going to be the making or breaking of the Diner.

44 It also meant that there was no need to hum and hah endlessly about, say, what drinks to serve – should we go for that range of flavoured fizzy waters or not? – because almost everyone is going to order the Coke, Diet Coke or beer (so make sure you’re well stocked on those and have set the price carefully). The same will be true of your wine list, as 80 percent of the customers will order from 20 percent of the wines, whether that’s the house wine or the second cheapest (which is the one I always go for).

Of course, Pareto’s Law isn’t to be confused with Potatoes Law, which states that 80 percent of your profits come from potato.



Having more or less established the basics I would need, in the way of drinks, canned food and sauces, I took myself off to Booker Cash and Carry in Brighton.

Booker's is a vast warehouse the size of two or three football pitches, with pallets stacked five high and forklift trucks gliding around silently on the polished concrete floor. The first time I got past security and in through the main set of doors (they don't just let anyone in), I was slack-jawed with amazement and had to almost stop myself shouting, 'JESUS H. CHRIST! WOULD YOU LOOK AT ALL THAT FOOD!'

I could imagine warehouses like this on far-off planets keeping colonies going for years and, as if to bolster the science fiction fantasy, the place seemed peopled by androids: busy, unsmiling characters whisking up and down the aisles, picking what they needed with mechanical efficiency. Only occasionally were these impressions broken, by a huddle of Asian shopkeepers chatting animatedly at an aisle corner, or a cash'n'carry virgin wandering around bewildered with one or two sample packs rattling around in a vast trolley.

At the till I bumped into an old catering friend, who told me that his Brighton hotel was hosting that year's Fast Food Fair and suggested I dropped by for some culinary inspiration and sample eats. 'It'll be the cheapest and best buffet in town,' he enthused. He wasn't wrong. The next day I joined the crowds shouldering their way through a vast hotel lobby and hall, packed with stalls from food manufacturers. There must have been hundreds of them and they were all offering free samples of their products, from burgers to biscuits, by way of an almost endless variety of deep-fried potato.

After a couple of hours of gamely sampling samples, I was too stuffed to talk sensibly with sales reps, so I joined some old hotel acquaintances at the bar and then decided to lie on the beach for a while.

In the end I had to make three visits on consecutive days to sample everything. This was only partly gluttony. There's an etiquette to be observed at these sort of events, for, while Pareto's Law shows people want the same few products, as we've seen from the Chinese there are world-beating new food ideas out there, waiting to be discovered. Hence each supplier feels duty-bound to invent new, exciting products.

As a rookie I got ensnared in a too-long conversation with a beautiful rep promoting tandoori-flavour fries as the next big thing. I suggested it might be better to have potato flavour 'chips' that customers could dip in tandoori sauce as and when required, but she looked at me blankly and said, 'Yes, but these have *integral* tandoori. The flavour is actually *inside* the fry!'

'I understand,' I replied, 'but why do that? I mean, why bother?' Someone had to ask the question.

'Because, it's like... the tandoori is within the fry, right? It's a whole, new, concept, in... FRIES.' She pronounced quite slowly.

'Yes, but... what was wrong with the old concept?' I asked.

'Look, I'm just trying to sell chips,' she snapped, suddenly looking very tired. 'If you don't want them, then sod off.'

That I could relate to. In an impulsive act of solidarity I bought four boxes. They stayed in a freezer for the next couple of years until we ran out of chips one night and they saved the day. Hurrah for innovation!



Now that I had the menu and the food costs sorted, it was time to start setting the prices. There are various mechanisms for doing this, but in general the rule is to take the total cost of the food, multiply it by three (to cover overheads) plus a tiny bit (your profit) and then add VAT. I did this for each product and then said, 'Bloody hell, I can't charge that!' Reverting to the

'slightly cheaper than everyone else' method, I quickly sent the menus off to the printers. I was starting to get fed up with all the preparation and wanted to start serving customers.

As well as the popularisation of hash, rewriting the language of food and bringing fast food know-how to the provinces, our other USP (Unique Selling Point) was our direct approach to describing our dishes. I simply don't believe you should burden customers with too much information about their food, and have a pet theory that the posher the restaurant, the less appetising the food, because they will insist on listing every single ingredient. For example, at a London gastropub I was recently offered 'Walnut sourdough cake with apricot compote and orange curd ice cream'. Now, I was more than happy with the cake, walnut and ice cream elements; reasonably okay with the apricot, a bit suspicious of the sourdough, but I didn't fancy that curd at all, so no thanks.

Another familiar tactic is to give the food a sort of mini-CV. We all know what garlic bread is, for instance. But do customers need to read that they'll be getting 'Three pieces of locally baked French stick, carefully sliced by Raul, drenched in garlic butter and fresh herbs, then lightly toasted and served in a little basket. We think it's the best in town. Enjoy!?' I doubt it, and they'll never, *ever* get back the 4.5 seconds it takes to read all that. So our food descriptions were going to be a model of brevity and clarity: cheeseburger, bacon sandwich – simplicity itself.

At the same time, however, I recognised that people often don't want to talk while out for a meal with their significant other, but feel it's rude to open a paper. To provide entertainment to these people, we put a few comments on the back of the menu:

YOU NEED THE MAXIMUM DINER BECAUSE:

We put the urge back into burgers, whatever that means.

We named a burger after you.

It's more than a fastfood restaurant, there's a payphone too.

*We're open 'til midnight, so you can come in when you're
rat-arsed!*

*If you don't come in we'll close down and you'll have to go
back to Starburger.*

*Our staff are polite and welcoming and one of them once did
a catering course.*

We don't know the meaning of gristle.

PRESS REACTION TO THE MAXIMUM DINER:

'Better napkins than at Burger King.' What Takeaway

'Succulent, moist meat, and that's just the staff.' Snack!

*'We were impressed by the friendly staff. Mind you, we don't
get out much.'* East Sussex Caterer

'These guys don't know the meaning of botulism.' Restaurant
Hygiene Quarterly

My sister-in-law vetoed *Our burgers are only made from criminal cows who deserved to die* on the grounds that it might frighten the children, while Becky felt that the phrase *You can come in when you're rat-arsed!* was a bit superfluous in Uckfield, as most of our customers would be anyway. I remember chuckling indulgently when she said that, so that she wouldn't feel her joke had fallen flat. Unfortunately, as it turned out, she was rather downplaying the problem.

That same week the new sign arrived, and in an emotional little ceremony Ken and André stood on ladders fixing it to the wall while I yelled up at them from the road, 'Left a bit, no right a bit, no hang on...' and Becky brought out a tray of celebratory coffees and biscuits. The four of us stood around in the chilly April wind, clinking mugs together and staring complacently as the glimmering sunshine bounced off the burnished metal. The countdown to opening had begun. All we needed were a few final bits of snagging on the building works. And some staff.



We are Family

THERE'S A SCENE IN *THE ENFORCER* where Detective Inspector Harry 'Dirty Harry' Callaghan is very cross indeed. His partner's been iced (again!) and Harry is out for revenge against the punks who did it. But the DA's had it with violent mavericks in his department and informs him he's being transferred to the personnel department. 'Personnel?' exclaims our hero, looking at his boss incredulously, 'but that's for assholes.'

Well, Mr Harold Callaghan! I may not know a whole lot about policing the mean streets of LA, but I do know that you'd soon find yourself in a pretty pickle without those assholes to pick up after you – organising funerals, new partner induction, a bit of positive feedback, not to mention a nice new uniform when you've just been shot! These things don't just sort themselves out on their own. I should know because I have to do the work those assholes do, without any back-up from a slick, professionally trained department. And, as any independent trader

will tell you, organising staff is the world's biggest headache. Why? Because it's one of your biggest expenses and, unlike food supplies and fixed costs like rent (which are, erm, fixed), it's the only one you'll be able to cut when times get hard. Though, even when times are good, staffing is a never-ending worry.

Labour is also the business input most likely to go wrong. Ovens can blow up, suppliers can forget to deliver, rivers can overflow and send five foot of sewage through your dining area (as we'll see in a later chapter), but at six o'clock on a Friday evening, when the phone rings, it's not going to be any of those things, but the mother of your number one waitress calling to say that she's not been feeling well all day and really shouldn't work around food tonight. What does the manager have to do then? He or she has to plead and beg and cajole and bribe the other staff. So you see, Harry – you'd better choose who you work with carefully and treat them well.

On the whole the catering industry doesn't. With its crummy pay, poor conditions and marginal security, the system tends to exploit the large numbers of people who simply can't find other paid work or who have to fit a job around their family or other commitments. In theory, 'the market' will sort it all out, ensuring that those companies that pay the worst will get the worst employees and so lose customers to those that employ the best staff by paying the best wages. But you could wait forever for that to happen and, as Winston Churchill (never I suspect a member of the Low Pay Unit) said in 1906: 'Bad employers must be made to pay a decent wage to prevent them from undercutting the good ones.'

During the infamous 'McLibel' trial, when a couple of British anarchists took on Corporate USA, McDonald's were accused of forcing down wages across the industry. However, in my experience it is the independent traders who are most likely to be shamelessly ripping off their staff. Large companies have profes-

sional human resources managers looking after staff affairs, and they know more than anyone that workers have ways of fighting back against bad employers. Which makes being a good employer simply better business. Human resources managers go even further, advancing the idea that professional, dedicated management create an efficient, loyal staff who have a family identification with their company, while weak, shifty management get liberty-taking shysters. Well, maybe.

I was determined, in any case, to be an intelligent, modern manager, getting the best out of my workforce – sorry, family – by fostering an idea that we were a genuine team, striving to do something great for Uckfield. Blue-skies thinking or a load of old cobblers? The proof of the pudding would be in the baking.



Amidst the hubbub of electricians reconnecting the power, Ken finishing off the counter, and André holding things, I tried to conduct staff interviews.

During my Wilderness Years of taking any old shift work in the catering trade, I'd attended an interview or two and knew a little about how they should be conducted. Basically, you make them as scientific as possible, with specific questions to ascertain specific points, and a progression that moves neatly from area to area, while cross-referencing to look for inconsistencies (lies); then you throw in a couple of open-ended questions to discover how interesting the applicant is. What you shouldn't do is pour the applicant a large coffee and say, 'Okay, so tell me all about yourself?' For one, the applicant has to finish the coffee, leaving agonies of silent slurping long after they've disclosed to you that they don't really like working with people and prefer chatting to the colonies of *E. coli* they keep in Petri dishes under the bed, or burbling on about the high cost of imported pornography.

Worse still is when employers just grab the limelight and drone on about themselves and their hopes for the business.

I was determined to avoid these pitfalls and take a proper, fair, organised approach. Then Marti, a handsome woman in her mid-thirties, popped her head round the door and asked if we might need an assistant manager. She'd heard about the vacancy through Becky and, as she'd had loads of experience of working in cafés and restaurants, and was incredibly flexible about the hours she could work, she thought she should apply. There was something about Marti's crinkly smile and sympathetic manner – the way she fussed over my multiple burns and injuries, and tutted when I said I didn't have a girlfriend (as if she knew where likely candidates were right now forming an orderly queue) – that was appealing. Though dressed in a suit for the occasion, she had a reassuring Earth Motherliness about her that I felt would be an asset. It was only after she'd left (with an agreement that she would start the following week as she was a bit tied up right now), that I began to wonder precisely where it was she had worked, and whether she hadn't just slightly overestimated her availability. Oh well, it doesn't do to pry too much.

52 For waitering jobs I had dozens of applicants. Becky seemed to know everyone in the town and yelled out comments as I went through the names. They were mainly unhelpful ones, along the lines of, 'No! Bitch!', 'No! Slag!', 'No! Brainiac!', though when I interviewed the youths they seemed perfectly okay and neither 'completely up themselves' or to 'think they were all that', as Becky had intimated. I finally settled on Catherine, a sixteen-year-old with catering experience, who seemed a calm and highly competent person.

The countdown to opening had begun. In fact, we had just two weeks left. So the idea was that Marti and Catherine would begin practising with the food and equipment, honing the menu to perfection and training themselves for those busy times when we

would have to struggle with capacity crowds. The basic food supplies were already in the freezers waiting to be practised on and Marti, though she still couldn't actually come into the Diner, kindly offered to take a load of new samples home to test out on her four children. Apparently they were all judged to be 'fine'.

Then disaster struck in its most familiar and predictable form. I ran out of money. The bank declined to authorise my Maximum Diner credit card, leaving me with only £12.50 cash and some notes earmarked for Ken and André. There was only one way out of the scrape. We would have to open early.



I know. I could have tried borrowing more money and waited to get the Diner completely right first, but that seemed the coward's way. And frankly it seemed daft not to open when customers were popping in every fifteen minutes or so to ask when we would. I was suffused with a Mickey Rooney-esque 'let's put the show on, right here in the barn!' enthusiasm. So, the day after the day after tomorrow it was going to be, no matter if I had to work round the clock to do it.

Two sleepless nights later, I was so tired I could barely stand, let alone hang precariously from a ladder repointing the facade. Forty-eight hours of cleaning and painting were taking their toll. I ate only chocolate and soup (pretty much as I usually do, only smaller portions), and though I tried to snatch the occasional forty winks on the new booth seats, my brain was in such a state of befuddlement that I couldn't tell if I was dreaming or hallucinating. Marti, on the odd moments when she managed to pop in, looked concerned; Ken, for the first time since I'd known him, sounded tetchy; and André sulked, with a pout that stuck out so far I worried he'd topple over. In hindsight it was probably a good decision not to mention that I couldn't pay any wages.

The phone rang while I was fast asleep on the floor beside the skirting board I'd been painting. I crawled towards it on hands and knees and it spoke to me, rather oddly, in Spanish. '*Hola Chris, que hay nuevo?* What's up?'

It was Cristina, a Spanish friend I had worked with, and shared a flat with, many years before in Mallorca. These days, she was a flight attendant for Iberia with a complicated love life; one that occasionally necessitated her getting away from Spain for a few days, often staying with me. I was one of her few male friends who could be trusted neither to lecture her about her choice of men nor make a pass at her myself. Or perhaps she just trusted herself not to succumb.

I explained the situation as coherently as I could; the lack of sleep, the lack of money, the need to open very soon, but dozed off mid-sentence. 'Don't worry, Chris. I need to escape from this nightmare of a city for a while. I'm going to come and spend a few days at your place and help you open your diner. I'll get the afternoon flight.' Eight hours later Cristina was perched on a stool in the Diner, slicing *chorizo* and pouring *fino* into tumblers and explaining to me precisely why all Catalan airline pilots are bastards (the married ones especially).

54 You shouldn't celebrate a friend's ill luck, but having Cristina there was such a boon I might be forgiven. Not only was she the best person I knew to share a kitchen with but she was beautiful too, with dark hair cut short and businesslike, flawless tanned skin and a casual style of dress that gave her the sort of classy look that Jackie Onassis used to aspire to. Cristina's great ambition was to set up her own English-style teashop in Spain, so on her frequent stop-offs at Gatwick I would meet her and we would drive off into the Sussex countryside to try out scones and cakes, and discuss business ideas.

Seeing how exhausted I was, Cristina packed me off home to sleep while she and Ken finished the last of the decorating. I fell

immediately into that blissful, empty-headed slumber of someone who has a trusted friend looking after their diner for them.

It lasted just a few hours, though, before I was jolted awake by my mobile phone Muzak. It was Cristina. 'I'm sorry Chris,' she said. 'But it is better if you come now. You have a neighbour here who says he is forbidding you to open.'

It just had to be Tony.



Tony owned the large house next door, a substantial property against which the Diner leant. In the 1960s, Tony and his wife Peg had converted the front of this building into a coffee bar, which became popular with the Mods en route to the seaside on their scooters for a bit of weekend violence. Then in the 1970s they sold the bar to Mr and Mrs Lee, a couple fresh from Hong Kong, who converted it into a Chinese takeaway. Over the years the two families became firm friends and, as little Lees were born, they seemed to fuse together, sharing the properties, with Peggy and Tony acting as surrogate grandparents in a Sussex-Chinese Waltons sort of way.

After retiring as a builder, Tony had become a leading light in the Uckfield Historical and Preservation Society, and he had an encyclopedic knowledge of almost every brick, stone and tile in the town. The Diner, he had told me on our first meeting, was built in the mid-eighteenth century and had seen former use both as an abattoir and a butcher's shop. 'Look', he urged, pointing at the wall, 'you can still see the marks on the old bricks where they sharpened the knives.' Now, given an enthusiastic expert talking about something relevant I can happily listen for hours, drifting into a state of trance-like relaxation. But Tony, alas, rather spoils the experience with his fussy approach. This was never more apparent than when the subject under historical

discussion concerned my right to run a new extractor fan over the roof of my own property.

Due to a Looney Tunes arrangement between solicitors many years ago, I didn't actually own the Diner roof; Peggy and Tony did. So before signing the lease I had to ask them whether they minded my changing the existing extractor pipe that ran across it to a slightly larger one that could cope with the extra fumes from cooking burgers as opposed to lighter bistro-type food. Tony considered the request for some days, talked endlessly about the pros and cons and eventually decided that he might just be able to live with the adjustment. However, while Cristina was busy finishing off the decorating the extractor people arrived and put the pipe up. Tony examined it and discovered with horror that it was a whole inch and a half wider than the last one and that it was stainless steel instead of black. He rushed back indoors and reappeared with a letter, which he solemnly insisted had to be placed in my hands.

The letter read thus:

I, Tony, hereby forbid you, Chris, to put any air through the pipe now sitting on my roof.

It was the planning permission equivalent of a citizen's arrest.

The pipe, Tony argued, was quite possibly a breach of planning laws. But, more crucially, he was anxious about the reaction of the Uckfield Preservation and Historical Society. How would it look if a founder member and leading light was allowing planning infringements to occur on a historic building right beneath his very nose? 'For goodness sake,' he exclaimed, 'I could be drummed out of the Society!'

Extractor systems are always a source of drama. They cost more than almost anything else in the kitchen, cause dreadful problems with neighbours, planners and freeholders, and always go wrong, threatening to asphyxiate first the staff, then the customers. The TV documentaries about Gordon Ramsay and

Jamie Oliver opening their own restaurants both featured extractor crises. When it comes to finding ‘engineers’ to install them, picture the problems one gets with plumbers, then multiply by ten. Extractor engineers are impossible to find, never return your calls, charge whatever they like (and then some), talk gobbledegook about air-flow velocity per second per square inch, fan speeds and ‘bend factors’, and always, but always, install the system late. Oh, and then you find they’ve screwed it all up and you’re still choking in smoke.

Knowing Tony, I could guess that he had already found a solicitor to put his air-flow banning order on a more legal footing, so simply going next door and trying to bribe or cajole him wasn’t an option. I also knew he would need time to get used to the idea, mull over the arguments, consider precedents, etc. I would have to be patient – perhaps modelling myself on Pippin negotiating calmly with Treebeard for reinforcements while the fate of Middle Earth hung in the balance. And I would have to stop Cristina rushing to the back door, shouting at their window and brandishing a waffle iron. One false move could blow it.

At last, though, after several pots of tea and lots of putting the world to rights (‘You’re not wrong, Tony’), I got him to accept planning permission was inevitable and agree to lift his prohibition. So long as I got the go-ahead of the Preservation Society.



The weekly gathering of the Society was, happily, set for that evening: the time, 6pm; the place, Bridge Cottage, an ancient hall in the centre of town. The rest of the afternoon I spent pacing the Diner, with a tube of mastic in my hand, muttering speeches to the esteemed members of the board, while Cristina, Becky and Ken looked on sympathetically. By 5.30pm the Diner was more or less ready. The menus were written on blackboards, the

tiles were all polished, the front window sparkled. We could open, if only Tony would let us.

I went to the meeting with my speech scrawled across the back of a menu. It was a passionate piece of rhetoric that suggested the Diner was a direct descendant of the type of hostelry that Chaucer's pilgrims might have swapped tales in, and how it offered the best, nay almost the only, chance to breathe new life into our historic part of town. As a final flourish (yes, I still have these notes), I was going to conclude that 'if things of inherent importance are to be preserved, then things that have none (like my extractor fan) will need to change'. Hah!

Tony met me outside the hall. He said that he had explained the situation to the members and as a party to the case he would wait outside while I presented my arguments. Then he ushered me towards a large room paved with flagstones and empty except for a large oak table around which the preservationists had convened – all of them, oddly enough, wearing brown. It brought a medieval moot strongly to mind. The chairwoman, a small lady in a beige headscarf, cleared her throat.

'I'm afraid, Mr Nye, that we simply can't understand what your extractor pipe has to do with us.' She looked towards me with a baffled expression. 'Do you think you can enlighten us?'

58 This was it. I wasn't sure whether to pace about like an attorney in an American courtroom drama, or try and look small and helpless in my chair. The latter seemed the easiest to pull off. 'Tony is worried that the pipe is out of keeping with the look of the building,' I began, 'and that he might be criticised for allowing...' whatever I meant to say next was cut off by a collective exasperated sigh.

'But we don't give a fig about your pipe,' announced the chairwoman to murmured agreement.

'Well, that's great. Thank you very much, er... goodbye,' I replied, earnestly shaking hands with the few people closest to

me before turning lightly towards the door. Tony was pacing apprehensively outside. I shook his hand too.

‘They don’t give a toss about the pipe, Tony,’ I said. ‘It really is okay.’

‘In that case, I will allow you to go ahead,’ he replied somewhat stiffly.

‘Thanks. Can I have that in writing?’



I returned to the Diner for an opening party organised for family and friends. It was a happy occasion, with gifts and cards and everyone getting drunk, but it was tinged with sadness for me, because I knew that I wouldn’t be seeing much of these people any more. I might as well have been sailing to Australia to start a new life, since it is an established fact that opening a restaurant spells the end of the opener’s social life. We would be serving the good people of Uckfield seven days a week, from 11am until midnight, and since even I didn’t have a clue how it was going to work, it would be a long time before anyone else would be able to run the place for me.

After the party I stayed behind on my own to sort out a few last bits and pieces, and as I sat arranging utensils in the kitchen, a feeling of dread crept over me. It felt like starting at a new school, and suddenly I didn’t want to swap the warmth and cosiness of my old friends for the chaos and hassle of a crowded restaurant, each and every day for the foreseeable future. My mood wasn’t helped when a bunch of lads appeared at the back door and shouted for a free burger. They were joking, but there was an unmistakable edge of menace.

The next day was opening day. Marti couldn’t make it, because she’d had trouble getting a babysitter, but with Cristina’s help I got everything ready. The salad items were prepared and put on

ice, the burgers put in a neat stack by the griddle, the buns, chips and garlic bread all within easy reach in their allotted places, the cheese and bacon in the fridge, the cooked potatoes ready to make up the hash in a Tupperware container.

At eleven o'clock precisely I turned over the sign on the door and off we went.

The first customer was Ray, the barber from next door, and two of his rugby-playing friends. They seemed impressed by Cristina and huddled round the counter quizzing her on the different ingredients of hash. 'Can you do me the one with the wacky baccy in it?' Ray's friend quipped. I could tell already that the dope jokes were going to pale on me.

Cristina, however, had switched into casual stewardess mode and was handling it all with consummate ease. I wished she were staying but she'd already agreed to work the next day's flight to Palma and, besides, I'd learnt long ago that you can't be too possessive with Cristina.

'Corned Beef Hash, Big Max and Chips and a Maximum Chicken Dinner,' she called out.

The very first order! My mind went blank. Suddenly I didn't know where I was or what I was doing. I hadn't the foggiest idea how to cook anything and would have struggled to make toast, let alone all that lot. Where was I to start?

60 In moments of total stress, my brain seems to revert to its default setting, which is to get something to eat. So I cut a slice of cheese, got a wedge of tomato, and using a dab of mayonnaise, stuck the two together. Then I added a slice of cucumber to it all, and opened a jar of Branston Pickle that I'd bought just in case. I was well on my way to creating a Scooby-Snack when a dim thought came to me that the Big Max is a burger, so I should put a burger on to cook. Then, a chicken fillet for the Chicken Dinner. Then, the stuff for the hash in a little sauté pan. Slowly my brain clicked into place and I began cooking.

Needless to say I hadn't remembered to open the tin of corned beef in advance and struggled with it, slicing my finger in the process. It didn't matter, though, because now I was in The Zone; frying, griddling, bandaging myself, plating the food and sending it out to Cristina as if I had been doing it for years.

Early the next morning I took Cristina to the airport and said a very fond farewell to her. It was a Friday, not the best day of the week to have as your second day open, with new staff, but I needed the weekend's takings to give to André and Ken on Monday, when they were coming to sort out anything that needed finishing.

Marti arrived early and we sat around self-consciously waiting for the morning's customers. When one did eventually come in I had a mini-crisis again, but gradually it all slotted back into a normal sort of routine. By five o'clock, with about eight hours' work behind me and another eight to go, I was hit by a huge wave of fatigue. Fortunately Catherine had just arrived for her first shift and took over the kitchen. She had been working in a teashop all her teenage life, so she rearranged things to her satisfaction and then concentrated on looking after the orders while I fell asleep on the floor of the storeroom for a few minutes.

We served a slow but steady stream of customers, most of whom made appreciative noises about the food. It was all quite relaxing. Then at 11.15pm the proverbial shit and fan made contact as a stampede of drunks arrived from the pub, ushered in by Marti and Becky. 'Bottle of Stella and a cheeseburger, mate,' was the order over and over and over again as a mob four-deep crowded the counter. Some people wanted two bottles of beer, and amid the hubbub and while cooking about fifty burgers I had to try and explain the licensing laws to my new customers.

Those laws, as far as I understand them, state that you can serve alcohol until midnight so long as it's drunk on the premises and so long as the alcohol is ancillary to the meal. In other words,

your customer has to have arrived for a meal and then thought, 'You know what, I think I'll have a beer as well!' rather than 'Right, time for beer. Oh, and I'll have a burger.' That's quite a concept to get through to a very drunk person at 11.30 at night. And it was made worse by the fact that I'd told Becky, rather stupidly, the little-known fact that restaurants can sell alcohol to sixteen-year-olds so long as they're eating a meal. Becky had made sure that everyone in town knew this fact, so we had a good percentage of Uckfield's thirteen-year-olds in, with the boys all trying to look tall and serious, putting on daft, theatrically deep voices as they ordered beer.

Despite a few awkward exchanges, I managed to avoid getting lynched. In fact, I seemed to be everyone's new best friend. By a quarter past twelve, everyone had been served and was either sitting on the steps outside, or swinging on Tony's gate. I took a quick glance inside the till and it was full. I rang my brother and woke him up to say that his investment was safe.

How precipitous was that!



The Three Garys

A PATTERN OF TRADE SOON EMERGED, with Friday and Saturday nights providing most of the stress and takings, other evening trade rolling along okay, but daytime pickings distinctly thin. A few local office or shop workers might come in for lunch, or a group of kids might drop by for a milkshake after school, but for much of the day it was worryingly quiet. Some mornings I'd only have one customer, an elderly, almost blind, evangelical Christian called Miss Green, who would sit for hours over a cup of tea, with maybe a slice of bread on the side (margarine preferred), enthusing loudly about God. The gist of it was that God had been wonderful to her and had arranged for her the most glorious life – except, perhaps, for the blindness and the hospitalisations following fractures and cuts. On some mornings, as a concession to my sounding a bit hung over she would tone down the cheerful stoicism a bit and ask how the Diner was getting on, or relay nuggets of news from her vigil with the radio.

I liked Miss Green. She was one of those doughty, companionable sorts who does wonders for moral fibre. There were moments, however, when I would watch her shuffling towards the Diner, arms outstretched, bag wrapped around her chest like a parachute, and wonder about the customer profile I'd so hopefully drawn up. When planning my venture, I'd imagined the place thronged with hip, youthful types, sipping cappuccinos and greeting new friends who'd rushed to the new diner to be part of the in-crowd. Still, it was early days, and compared with some of my post-pub regulars, such as Guppy and The Three Garys, Miss Green was a model customer.



I first met Guppy when he fell through the door in a drunken haze one night just before closing time and landed in a heap on the floor. It was obvious from the word go that he was trouble. Or, more precisely, it was obvious from the word 'C-U-N-T' tattooed across his knuckles, as he gripped the counter and attempted to pull himself to his feet. I heard a sharp intake of breath from behind me and turned to catch a glimpse of Becky crossing herself.

'I'll have... hang on,' he paused, preparing himself before attempting the multi-task of thinking while standing up, 'chips... and a beer.'

64 'Sorry, we're just closing,' I said as nonchalantly as I could, while signalling to Becky to nip behind him and put the 'Closed' sign up on the door.

'Alright, just the beer.'

'We're not allowed to serve alcohol now, we're closed,' I replied amiably, indicating the still-swinging 'Closed' sign.

'No beer?'

'Sorry, no. No beer.'

Guppy seemed to sober up a little. He leant over the counter, allowing me a close-up of the home-made tattoos that covered his face, and breathed fumes straight up my nose that spoke of alcohol, cigarettes, methadone and prison.

‘Give me a beer or I’ll nut the fuck out of you, twat.’

Well, there’s a time to stand up and be counted, but this wasn’t it. ‘Large chips was it, mate?’ I said cheerily.

He paused again, then: ‘Yeah, with chilli sauce.’

Now, did you notice what I did there? By cleverly ignoring the issue of the beer, I diverted Guppy to less contentious matters. It’s a time-honoured technique: when things get sticky you revert to the other side’s previous proposal, and ignore all the nastiness that’s built up since. It helped the Kennedy brothers avoid nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1963, and it helped me now, as Guppy waited quite happily for his chips while perhaps, through the alcoholic haze, wondering whether or not he’d been tricked.

Fortunately, he never got to the end of that contemplation, for just then, belying the old cliché about there never being one around when you need them, two policemen walked in. They knew Guppy.

‘Hello, mate! Out again, then?’ said the younger one, as he led Guppy quietly off to the car for a lift home. His senior colleague meanwhile took me to one side and said they were concerned down at the station at ‘the element the Diner was attracting’. The general feeling was that we had been misguided in writing on the back of the menu, ‘We’re open ’til midnight, so you can come in when you’re rat-arsed.’

Frankly, the joke had started to wear a bit thin anyway. While most of the drunken youths (in Uckfield the term extends from nine to thirty) weren’t threatening the staff or me directly, they were looking for post-pub entertainment and if they couldn’t generate it amongst themselves they were more than happy to

see who else they might provoke. So it was like *Straw Dogs* every Friday night as the alpha types tried to impress their giggling underlings. At ordering time (11.20pm), the sheer volume of people demanding food kept trouble to a minimum, as the entire drinking population of Uckfield crammed against the counter with their fivers waving, yelling at Catherine and me (Marti hadn't been able to do evening shifts, after all). But when the food had all been served, the wrappers chucked on the floor, and people were replete (11.30pm), the effects of nine pints of lager would kick in and the trouble would start.

Firstly there was the stealing. At 10.30 each night we removed those items that might be used as missiles, such as ashtrays, ketchups, salts and peppers. But then pictures started going missing, and pot plants, magazine racks, even mops and brooms. So everything had to be taken out and stored, leaving just tables and chairs. To be fair, what was stolen usually came back, either thrown through the back door (which was left open to cool whoever was doing the cooking), or returned from nearby gardens by the few neighbours who were still speaking to me. The lane at the side of the Diner looked over the back of the kitchen, so on particularly fierce nights we were surrounded, and it was all a bit too much like Rorke's Drift.

66 Then there were the food fights, which we dealt with by reducing the portion sizes to a level whereby every chip was precious. Over zealous shaking of ketchup bottles caused two serious incidents that had to be broken up by the police, and there was once a running battle up the High Street after one Friday night yob had put vinegar on another's chips. We introduced sachets, and I also took the advice of the police and stopped serving alcohol after 11pm.

As we all now know, it's legal to serve drinks to anyone over the age of sixteen, up to midnight, even without an adult present, so long as they're sitting down for a meal. But it's a less known fact

that it is illegal to serve alcohol to anyone who is drunk. Rather sensible licensing laws, in theory. In practice, of course, it didn't make a spot of difference, because people just bought a couple of bottles on the way out from the pub and drank them at the Diner. (I was supposed to confiscate them?)

We still let one person have lager after 11pm. He was the owner of the local building firm and a man so dangerous and fearsome I shall only call him 'Fat Harry'. In fact, no, I shall just call him 'Harry'. Harry sat at the end of the counter on his special stool, gazing at Becky, and occasionally pointing out when one or other of the jobs was 'bang out of order'. No one quibbled.

I saw it as a kind of cheap protection scheme. Employing bouncers was not an option, as we would have needed half a dozen big ones, just to sell a few burgers. And if I'd employed a cut-price, weedy bouncer I could see myself having to wade in and help, and there was a strict 'no fisticuffs' clause written into my personal contract.



There were three main troublemakers, and weirdly they were all called Gary.

Gary A was a mechanic and some kind of lieutenant to Harry. His brief was to stand on the sidelines quietly egging his numb-skull sub-jobs into violence with, for example, a quiet 'Eh Robbo, that bloke in the tie just called you a wanker' in Robbo's ear. Afterwards, as the bloke in the tie lay groaning on the floor, Gary would help him to his feet and say, 'Blimey mate, that Robbo's a mentalist isn't he? Nutter!' Though Gary A had been implicated as a ringleader in the nationally reported 'Crowborough-Uckfield riots' I never felt especially worried about him, sensing that his desire for quality late-night burgers would keep him sweet enough.

The same couldn't be said when it came to Gary B. He was truly nasty, with a face covered in scars and pockmarks, and a prison stretch for beating up a policewoman. From Monday to Friday he was a scaffolder but at weekends Gary B led a subset of Uckfield lowlife who had taken all the cheeky-chappy charm out of being a hooligan and replaced it with more violence. Gary B had adopted a kind of cartoon nastiness that involved looking at you with half-closed eyes, head lolling like he was permanently stoned, talking in that voice that Kenny Everett used to employ for Sid Snot. The first time he came in I found the whole act so laughable that I treated him like he was meant to be funny. Big mistake. I had to be rescued by Becky when things got a bit too *GoodFellas*.

Last of the fearsome threesome was Gary C, one of the bored youths who had been hanging around the Diner waiting for us to open. He wasn't so much fearsome as intensely annoying, in the ways that fourteen-year-old boys specialise in. His gang was comprised not only of the neglected teens and tweens who you expect to see loitering around the off-licences, but also the rich kids that like to hang around with them. Perhaps the latter provide the cash and the former provide the street cred and ideas. Then together they create mayhem.

68 The main bone of contention I had with them was over smoking. Though I allowed smoking in the Diner, I didn't want it filled up with fourteen-year-olds puffing away while sharing a Diet Coke, which is precisely what they wanted to do. They would roam around each non-school night, in a gang of up to thirty, ages ranging from twelve to sixteen, most of them drunk, all smoking. At some point they would invade the Diner.

Not all at once, though, they were smarter than that. A couple of teenagers would come in for chips and milkshakes, which seemed nice. We'd chat and get a bit of rapport going and everyone would relax. Then some girls would come past, see their

mate with a new boyfriend and come in to check him out. They'd invariably have a few boys in tow, including Gary C, who would sit at a different table, trying to look cool while filling up the ashtray and not buying anything. With three of the six tables occupied for about £4.75, I would intervene and tell the crew that if they weren't going to buy anything they'd have to leave. At which point Gary C would seize his chance and say that no other customers were coming in anyway, so why didn't I just chill. 'I'll chill when I bloody well feel like it,' was the irresistible reply – and always a mistake, because he'd then tut and say there was no need for 'fucking language' (to titters from the crowd), but alright, he'd have a Coke if it would make me happy. So now I'd have seven kids filling my restaurant on a Friday night, for a total profit of £1.25, sipping from bottles of vodka concealed in their Puffa jackets and looking at me smugly. At which point I'd start getting cross.

Eventually push would come to shove, literally, and I would have to physically throw 'C' out onto the pavement, his mates would follow, and then I'd have to patrol outside so nobody could chuck a bottle through the window. All this was awkward enough, but if there was a 'normal' family trying to enjoy a meal at the same time it was embarrassing beyond belief. One minute I would be taking their order, all suave and in control and the next I'd be chasing youths up the High Street before coming back breathless, surreptitiously trying to wipe the sweat off my face as I served their drinks and apologised for the 'minor little interruption'.



I'd hate to sound here like some sort of whining shopkeeper moaning on about yob culture because I'm not at all sure that yob culture exists. What I've discovered is that yobs, once they're

'off-duty,' can often be the very brightest and nicest of our youth. The drunk vomiting in Leicester Square might be the son of our Prime Minister, the kid selling dope to his mates might be the Foreign Secretary's, while the couple shagging in the alleyway might well be your Employees of the Month. Even among our post-pub crowd there were a few who managed to stay perfectly pleasant. Dani and Scott, for instance, were a lovely couple who would always be returning glasses and plates and thanking me above the hubbub for a great burger or asking Catherine how her old man was doing. And some of the drunken banter was quite funny. Sure, I didn't want to be serving a great crowd of them food at 11.30 every night but my problem wasn't so much with jobs, per se. My problem was with the violent psychopaths that hid out among them.

I thought of closing early at weekends, of course, but we weren't making enough money the rest of the week to dispense with the vital post-pub trade. So there I was standing up for the amusement of the Garys and their mates like an inept supply teacher, wondering if I could run a business and stay out of Casualty at the same time.

70 In more reflective moments, I mused on how the problem wouldn't arise if we could attract a classier clientele. The dream for the new restaurateur in these celebrity-obsessed days is to get one in your establishment, so I had made a list of potential stars who might drop by: Paul McCartney lives in Sussex, Bob Hoskins lives somewhere off the A22, a Spice Girl (I forget which) was spotted in nearby Lewes, and Jane Torvill has been seen in Tesco's. Sky Sports presenter and ex-gymnast Suzanne Dando actually grew up in Uckfield and occasionally came home to see her mum, bringing her ex-*Neighbours* actor husband. I looked forward to signed photos (*Chris, mate – Your veggieburgers Please Please Me! – Macca xx*) gracing the walls of the Diner before very long.

Imagine my delight, then, when Jilly Goolden turned up one Friday evening. Jilly Goolden? Presenter of BBC2's *Food and Drink*, regular on *Call My Bluff*? It was a start anyway, and once Becky and Catherine heard the magic words 'She's on TV,' they leapt into action. Was the cutlery buffed to its finest stainless steeliest? Did Jilly have the very fullest, whitest salt pot on the table? Had any youth amusingly loosened the top of the ketchup bottle so that when she shook it, it would go all over the person behind her? Was the music just right for a person of Jilly's age and social standing? Was my apron clean enough, but not too clean, obviously? Should I speak to her? How was my hair?

Jilly was exactly the kind of contact I needed to get into television. Keith Floyd, after all, was discovered by some hungry TV executive when he was running a restaurant in Bristol, and offered his own show just like that. Thoughts of my own cookery show flashed across my mind: *Christopher's Complete Cookery Course: Series One, Chips to Hash*. Meanwhile, everything that was to pass Jilly's lips had to be checked and rechecked, while I sent Becky out to the off-licence for their top wine. In the event Jilly chose Budweiser (she was disappointed it wasn't the Czech version – that's our Jilly!) and a Veggie Farmhouse Hash with Side Salad and Blue Cheese Dressing. I'm glad to say she ate most of it.

While Jilly and 'her party' (as we say) were finishing their meal and were reported to be relaxed and happy, I was agonising about whether or not to say hello and introduce myself, or treat her like any other customer. Eventually, after a frantic whispered discussion with Becky and Catherine that Jilly probably heard, I decided to compromise, and say a bright and breezy 'Hello' – but not, crucially, 'Hello, Jilly.' The important thing, we all agreed, was not to jump in with both feet and ask for a guest spot on *Food and Drink* straightaway, but first to wow her with my easy manner and crisp, calm sense of catering know-how.

I approached the table and managed a friendly but slightly too high-pitched, panicky almost, ‘Everyone finished?’ I told myself to calm down and started clearing the plates, before suddenly blurting out ‘HELLO!’ much too loudly, completely out of context, and to no one in particular, then following it up by emitting a sound that was part sigh, part ingested scream. Jilly, Jilly’s husband, Jilly’s children, Jilly’s friends, Jilly’s friends’ children, all looked at me in surprise before one of the kids offered a tentative ‘Hello?’ back, in a small voice.

After that I left Becky to sort out the puddings and retreated to the sink, where I furiously did the dishes and cursed my lack of sophistication. ‘For God’s sake, man,’ I told myself. ‘Paul McCartney will probably be in next week with his lot, maybe Ringo, too. How will you cope with that!’ I shouldn’t, however, have been torturing myself about these events, for there were more immediate ones at hand. Had I looked at the clock I would have noticed that it had just gone eleven.

Jilly and the Gooldens had evidently enjoyed themselves so much that they had lingered almost half an hour over coffee and ice cream. This was a problem. Time was ticking on and we still hadn’t cleared away the movable items in the restaurant on the grounds that Jilly might think it odd if we leant over her to take a picture down or removed the chair that her daughter was sitting on. I was still muttering to myself over the dishes when Becky appeared ashen-faced at the door. ‘For Chrissake, it’s ten past eleven,’ she hissed. ‘What are we going to do?’

72

The enormity of the problem suddenly hit me. Within minutes our very first celeb was about to share her dining space with Sussex’s dimmest lager-boys. I hurriedly wrote out the bill and lunged through the door, determined to bundle her out under any pretext – we were closed, we were on fire – but was just seconds too late. ‘OY! ISS THAT WOMAN OFF THE TELLY!’ came the unmistakably slurred voice of Gary C. Becky, Catherine and

I quickly formed a human cordon to cover the exit path for Jilly, while she and her party gathered up their coats. Fortunately they had already mentally left so they didn't seem to notice the drunken comments as a few more regulars stumbled in; and they were already well round the corner at 11.20pm when the rest of the youth of Uckfield swept in like a mighty Atlantic roller crashing onto the beach and the cry went up: 'Bottle of Stella and a cheeseburger, mate.'



As we went onto autopilot and concentrated on cooking and serving as quickly as possible, it became evident that the necessary preparation hadn't been done. Whereas the operation was normally slick as a pit stop at Silverstone, tonight we kept running out of things that we'd forgotten to take out of the freezers ('What do you mean you've got no fucking burgers?'), and the fryer went cold because in the excitement over Jilly I had forgotten to boost the power on it. Bored youths having to wait ages for food quickly saw their chance for mischief. While I was rushing around the kitchen like a helium-injected version of *Ready, Steady, Cook!*, listening to snatches of Catherine and Becky's postmortem of our star-studded night, the place erupted in scuffles, shouts and laughter.

It couldn't go on. I had to abandon the cooking and investigate. Pushing my way through the crowd I discovered Robbo trying drunkenly to bundle my expensive American swing bin through the door. I grappled it back and turned to place it by the wall when I noticed something else had gone. Oh, yes. The television was missing. And so were some of the seats. The crowd went quiet, expectant, and a small clearing formed around me. I expect there are more intimidating sights than violent hooligans out for trouble – for example, I've always found the sight of a

very thin woman playing the cello particularly alarming – but this must have been what the early Christians felt like in a little provincial amphitheatre trying to negotiate with the lions.

‘What happened to the TV, then?’ I asked the mob, in as calm a voice as I could manage.

Drunken lads stifled giggles.

‘What TV would that be then, Chris?’ said Gary C.

‘The TV that until a few minutes ago was on the wall over there.’

More muffled guffaws.

‘I hope you’re not calling us thieves...?’ menaced Robbo, to murmured agreement from the crowd. Since I’d just caught him nicking a designer trashcan, I felt the evidence was on my side, but you can’t reason with these people, and as I turned to go back to the kitchen a tomato ketchup bottle flew over my head and smashed on the wall, spattering it bright red, just as the police arrived.

Catherine was able to identify the ketchup thrower and the police escorted him to their car, where he immediately burst into tears. His life would be ruined, he cried, if they arrested him. He’d just got a job as a social security clerk and he’d be bound to lose it. Some hooligan. In the end we relented and the police let him off with a caution.

I returned to the (now empty) Diner and began to help Catherine and Becky clear up the mess. Something else was missing apart from the few chairs. Ah yes, that nice picture that had recently been hanging above Jilly’s head.



Good, as we know, can sometimes come out of bad and though we never did get the TV, light fittings or pictures back I discovered a whole new respect for Becky and Catherine. Catherine

especially, whose dad was a builder, and who had grown up knowing some of the toughest site hands in Uckfield, showed an impressive confidence in dealing with the jobs and the police. She seemed, in fact, to be taking on the role I had imagined for Marti – the mature organiser who works overtime when needed and calmly defuses the trickiest situations. Marti might also have been good at these things. But then I never got a chance to judge, as Marti was almost entirely absent.

Ironically, Marti was one of those caring types who like to ‘be there’ for people. When teenage friends of her four children were kicked out of their homes, Marti was there for them; when they needed someone to go with them to the police station, or to the doctor’s or the dole, Marti was there too. Even at work (and Marti only managed nineteen out of thirty shifts) she’d be there for someone, so long as they didn’t actually want to order some food. Ten minutes into the shift some sullen teenager would inevitably appear and Marti would light a fag and prepare for a mammoth counselling session.

Having Mother Earth on your books just isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. A push came to a shove when Marti bought a guard dog and then had to stay at home to protect the kids and babysitter from being bitten. We had words and Marti opted to leave with a month’s wages and promised to come and do shifts whenever we were stuck. It was the last I saw of her.

At college I remember one of the business lectures dwelling on a rather alarming statistic: that to calculate the cost of replacing a trained and experienced employee, you multiply their hourly wage by three hundred. So just taking the minimum wage of £4.10 per hour, it will cost the employer £1230 to replace his or her staff. A lot of people will dismiss this as a load of crap, just as I had. But they shouldn’t. There are the obvious costs, like advertising the post, taking time off for interviewing, induction, training and so on, and then there are the less predictable ones –

little leakages of productivity here and there, the demoralising effects of staff losing colleagues. When everything is included I think £1230 could seem like a bargain.

So when it came to replacing Marti I was determined to get it absolutely right.



Darren seemed the perfect candidate. He'd had experience in the trade, came with good references, an ability to turn his hand to anything from car maintenance to origami with napkins to breaking up job fights. He had that intensity of ambition that not going to college can give – and at nineteen he was engaged and managing a mortgage. I didn't know it was legal to take on that much responsibility at that age.

The only problem was that Becky and Catherine took against him from the moment he arrived.

To be fair, Darren was a curious chap. Ginger hair, nothing wrong with that, unless it's combined with little round eyes in a great white slab of a face that reminded me of Wensleydale cheese. He tended to stoop slightly, too, and as he beetled about getting things done, he resembled just slightly a large ape with a clipboard. Darren really was a treasure.

76 I should add that he was also an ideas man. Darren's ideas were ceaseless, and one of the first was that we should be offering kids' birthday parties, what with Uckfield having so many kids. 'Great idea, Darren. Good to have some positive input,' I replied. But it wasn't. Holding birthday parties at the Diner was a very, very bad idea indeed.