

NOTES FROM THE KITCHEN WITH...

GLYNN PURNELL

Glynn Purnell started cooking professionally from the age of 14, when he took on a work placement at the Metropole Hotel at Birmingham's National Exhibition Centre.

As his career flourished, the talented chef often dubbed the "Yummy Brummie," went on to work at Simpsons Restaurant and Jessica's in Edgbaston – the first Birmingham restaurant to be awarded a Michelin star in 2005.

His namesake, Purnell's was opened in 2007 and was awarded its first Michelin star in 2009, as well as being named AA Restaurant of the Year.

Glynn has trained under top chefs including Gordon Ramsay and Gary Rhodes and has gone on to become a household name after appearing on the Great British Menu and BBC's Saturday Kitchen.

HI GLYNN, LOVELY TO CHAT TO YOU! SO, TELL US ABOUT YOUR INTRODUCTION INTO THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY AND WHERE IT ALL STARTED?

I've been part of the hospitality industry since the age of 14, and I am now the ripe old age of 46. So how long is that... 32 years! That can't be right...! I did a work experience placement at the age of 14- a couple of weeks working in the kitchen of a hotel, and I absolutely loved it. They offered me a part time job, which then somehow snowballed into what I'm doing today... with this grey beard and constant look of pain upon my face!

TELL US ABOUT HOW COVID AFFECTED YOUR OWN RESTAURANT BUSINESS AND HOW MUCH OF AN IMPACT IT HAS HAD ON TRADE?

Covid just crushed the business, really. It literally wiped out 12 months of business out of the last 15 months. Cash flow dried up, savings went to zero. If it wasn't for the furlough scheme and business rates exemption, then Purnell's probably would have gone under. I still had to pay the rent, which I did by drawing on a few other bits and pieces, and I'm thankfully still here to tell the tale.

WHAT DO YOU THINK THE MAIN CHALLENGES WILL BE FOR FIXED SITE AS WE COME OUT OF LOCKDOWN AND BEYOND?

The challenges will be slightly less for those fixed site businesses who are reputable, established brands who have been in those sites for a good amount of time. When you become part of the DNA of the high street or an area, the main challenge will just be to breed the confidence in people to come back out. I'm doing this

interview on the first Thursday that we've been open this year and we're full for lunch and full for dinner today. Instilling that confidence in people to come back out is key, and whether that's on a local high street or an inner city restaurant, I think we all face that same challenge. Looking slightly further ahead, we'll have increased overheads to deal with again soon- when the business rates kick back in, and the furlough scheme ends, and the grants dry up, and the landlord wants his full rent, and the VAT goes back up to its usual level, and the corporation tax which got deferred needs paying again... all that's still to come, and that will be a challenge in itself.

DO YOU THINK CONSUMER CONFIDENCE IN EATING OUT WILL GO BACK TO NORMAL QUICKLY ONCE WE COME OUT OR LOCKDOWN OR WILL BUSINESSES STILL NEED TO OFFER DELIVERY, HEAT AT HOME OPTIONS ETC.?

Just looking at the first couple of days of us being open, and the demand in bookings, I think that it will bounce back quite quickly. How long that will last, I don't know. For instance, when the euphoria of being able to go back out again fades, what will happen after that? I think that the home delivery and the heat at home options will still have a place and will continue, but it won't be anywhere near as popular as it was when we were in full lockdown. People want to get out at the moment. People always want to be around other people. Always. People want to dress up. People want to be seen by other people. And that's not even taking into account the quality of the food and drinks. It's the aftermath that I'm more worried about, which is after Christmas- January and February next year, when the cold light of day hits. It's tough in the winter anyway, but coming out of the back of this, how many restaurants will have survived into next year? And how many people will still have that confidence?



ADVICE FOR BUILDING CUSTOMER TRUST AFTER SOMETHING AS SIGNIFICANT AS COVID?

I don't think that restaurants should look at doing mad offers, halving their prices, and things like their own version of the 'Eat Out to Help Out' scheme that we saw last year. We've all got to charge what our worth is. I think that the key thing is showing people that we're following the government guidelines, and that we're training staff in that area, and our staff are confident in that area when they're serving people. Coming out of this isn't a sprint, it's a marathon. It's not about making money over the next two months, it's about making enough money to be able to continue for the next several years.

DO YOU THINK PROFESSIONAL KITCHEN CHEFS MOVING INTO STREET FOOD WILL BECOME A MORE REGULAR THING FOLLOWING COVID?

I think it's a much bigger thing than chefs moving into street food, actually. I think that people in general in the hospitality industry will look at options like street food and things like home delivery and 'heat at home' offerings, but I think the biggest challenge will be people who have worked in the hospitality industry looking at other areas of work entirely after the last 14 months. For example, things like working in supermarkets and doing deliveries for Amazon seem like more stable and secure jobs. The work-life balance in those jobs suddenly seems very attractive to those people who have spent their lives scrubbing stoves at midnight on a Saturday night.



People want job security after the time we've just been through. I've been through hell this last year, whereas if I'd been a supervisor at Tesco, or I'd done the home deliveries for a supermarket, or I'd been delivering parcels for Amazon, I would have worked like normal. In fact, I probably would have worked more than normal. The positive and the negative of that is that employers will realise how difficult it is to get the quality of staff we need.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE POSITIVE CHANGES THAT COVID HAS HAD ON THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY?

None! It's honestly very difficult to think of any positives. Just like other industries that have been hit as hard as we have- travel, performing arts, cultural venues such as museums and galleries, etc- there aren't many positives to take out of this. But I am a man with a half full glass, and I would definitely say that people who love the industry and have worked in the industry for a long time are glad to be back. Not just financially but also creatively. It's good for us to have some mental focus. I also think that the respect for the hospitality industry from a lot of people has gone up over this time. A little bit like the NHS- I mean, don't get me wrong, I've always massively respected the NHS, but since the pandemic more and more people have realised that they're going above and beyond every single day. I think it's a bit similar with hospitality- the respect for the industry has improved. And I don't necessarily mean the chefs- I think that chefs and what we do is highlighted on television all the time, in programmes such as The Great British Menu, Saturday Kitchen, Masterchef... all those kind of programmes. But I think that what's happened to the hospitality industry during the pandemic has highlighted the service side. 50% of the industry doesn't put food on a plate. 50% of the industry carries the food out and serves and pours wine, which is equally as important as what the chefs do. Some young chefs wouldn't agree with me on that! You don't realise until you get a bit older and you run restaurants, that the right arm always needs to know what the left arm is doing.

DO YOU BELIEVE PEOPLE'S MINDSETS HAVE BEEN CHANGED SINCE COVID - I.E., HAVE THEY NOW MADE IT MORE OF THEIR MISSION TO SUPPORT INDEPENDENT BUSINESSES AND SHOP LOCAL? ARE THEY LOOKING MORE AT SUSTAINABLE BUSINESSES?

I think that there's a good percentage of people whose mindset might have changed. Not everybody, though. There's always going to be a good percentage of society that doesn't really care whether their food is processed, doesn't really care where it comes from, doesn't care whether the seas are being fished dry or the way that animals are treated. That's a battle that will always constantly be going on for us professionals to put that across. But I think there are more people who have realised that little

local shops and independent cafes and local pubs need support. But we've still got a big fight on our hands to put across just how important it is to support sustainable farmers and small independent businesses, otherwise all we'll have is high streets full of Nandos and Pret.

With independent businesses it's quite simple- you've got to use it or lose it.



IN WHAT WAY CAN THE LESSONS WE'VE LEARNT DURING COVID HELP TO SHAPE OUR INDUSTRY MOVING FORWARD?

I think the main thing is to know how to change what you do and adapt to what's happening, to still keep the income, still keep your staff on board, and still pay the rent. It's no good having blinkers on and saying, "This is what we do, and we don't do anything else." I, for one, never thought that I'd be serving four course menus out of a cardboard box being delivered to Sheffield. But doing that served a purpose. It supported the business in a time that it needed supporting.

AS A SUCCESSFUL RESTAURANTEUR, WHAT WILL YOU NEVER TAKE FOR GRANTED AGAIN ONCE COVID IS A THING OF THE PAST IN YOUR OWN BUSINESSES?

Freedom! Being told that you can't open your restaurant is the hardest thing. I'll never take for granted again that I can just open my doors when I want, and I'll never take for granted again that I've got a job. I'm so grateful for what the industry does for me as a person. I love coming up with new dishes, having a laugh and a joke with my staff, talking to customers... and I've not been able to do any of that for so long. I've thrown myself into this industry, I've not done anything half-heartedly over the last 32 years. I didn't just decide to become a chef because I was bored of doing something else. And I've got respect for this whole industry that I'm fortunate enough to work in, at every level of the industry. Anyone who puts a tabard on to make cheese sandwiches in a canteen, to those chefs working the meat and fish sections in a three Michelin star restaurant all get the same level of respect from me. That respect is across the board. We all put an apron on. ↻

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO INDUSTRY COLLEAGUES WITH STRUGGLING BUSINESSES AT THE MOMENT?

Stay strong. Look at the obvious stuff. Look at the areas which are successful and highlight those. Make yourself known out there- whether it's social media, or the local press. Look at repetition of business- make sure you do the job right first. Even if it's a slice of cake and a cup of tea, make sure it's the best slice of cake and cup of tea. Look after your staff. And run everything on a day to day level. That's as much as you can do. Don't try to plan for the next six months, because none of us know what's going to happen.

SUM UP THE INDEPENDENT FOOD INDUSTRY IN THREE WORDS?

Interesting. Hard-working. Unappreciated.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU?

Dinner service tonight! I'm going day by day, service by service, at the moment! No, I do have some future projects coming up. Obviously it all depends on how the country opens up over the next few months. But I've got a massive project opening in Coventry,

which is very exciting. It's in a 14th Century cloister. It will be a café and pizzeria, with a fine dining restaurant on the same site. I've also had a couple of books that have come out during the pandemic, so now is the time to really put those out there, as I've not been able to do much with them over the last year! And, to be honest, I'm just looking forward to running Purnell's again, and enjoying the freedom.

NAME THE RESTAURANTS YOU'RE MOST LOOKING FORWARD TO BOOKING A TABLE AT ONCE IT'S SAFE TO DO SO?

I'm not going to do this until it's completely safe to travel internationally again and we've ditched the traffic lights system... but my old Restaurant Manager, Jean-Benoit- probably one of the best looking people in the world- has got a small Bistro and cocktail bar right next to the Lyon Opera House. Hopefully he doesn't read this article as I'm planning on surprising him and one day catch a plane over there and rock up, walk in and order myself a nice glass of champagne.

FAVOURITE MOTTO OR INSPIRATIONAL QUOTE FOR RUNNING A BUSINESS?

"How do you eat an elephant? Bite by bite."

