

My career in brief...

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Industry: Food Service Management
Company: M&S/Compass Partnership

I. Please give a brief overview of your career history – where you started, how you progressed, the companies you have worked for etc

My career started in a strange way. After gaining first class honours in Geography, I decided to return to St Andrews in Scotland to undertake a Research PhD in 'Changing socio-cultural attitudes towards marriage in Western Europe'. Some three years in and the funding ran out so I had to get a part-time job and this is where my career started.

By chance I asked the Manager of my 'local', The Rat and Parrot (Scottish and Newcastle) in Dundee if she needed staff and luckily she did, but Cath was aware I had never made a coffee, served a table, made a dessert or pulled a pint in my life. However she took the chance because she had faith that personality would win over any skills gap and that everything else could be trained in - and it could.

Here is where I gained my first bar and service training. From there I moved into a full-time job as a Hotel Porter in the St Andrews Golf Hotel - this is where I gained my passion for Hospitality and so packed in my PhD. As a small four star hotel, I was not just a porter but worked with the F&B Manager and learned to run 200 cover functions, stock management and where I took control of my first wine cellar. The Head Chef Colin Mason 'took me under his wing' and taught me about food, seasonality and flavours and it was through him that I was approached by Peter Jukes (Chairman of The Masterchefs of Great Britain) to move to his Chef Proprietor world famous fine-dining Three AA Rosette, The Cellar in Anstruther, to help him double it in size, update and re-create the interior design and to turn around the finances and image of the restaurant.

Some four years later, having worked with Peter to develop the restaurant's image and fortune in everything from service standards, food presentation (it's our dessert on the cover of the book 'Scotland on a Plate'), right down to working with furniture companies to physically create the dining tables and chairs to transform every space and surface in the restaurant. Having clawed around everywhere from car boot sales, TKMaxx and to salvage yards to create the interior, in 2004 we re-launched the restaurant with a rave review in Decantor by Master of Wine Rose Murray-Brown, followed by being the nominated restaurant to launch new trade dining ranges for Steelite and Spiegla in Scotland and, most importantly, to do the trade launch of Bollinger 1996 in Scotland.

Finally, with Peter I gained recognition in The Glasgow Herald as the most affable and efficient Front-of-House Manager in Scotland, in September 2004 The AA awarded the restaurant the title of 'Best Seafood Restaurant in Scotland'. British Airways recognised us as the Second Best Seafood Restaurant in the world and my wine list of 554 bins gained a Black Bottle in The Good Food Guide.

From here I returned to Northern Ireland to seek a new challenge and I ended up changing sector from restaurants and bars to travel

and tourism and landed in Turkey with Friendship Travel to create and launch a first in singles holidays - an 18 bedroom villa where two hosts ran the whole hotel challet style involving everything from the initial one month hunt to furnish and staff the hotel in a language I could not speak (you learn Turkish very quickly when needs must!).

Two of us then ran it, cooked for the guests, took them on trips, to help them climb mountains and even just take them down the doctors or to the pub - 6 months of the greatest challenge yet, recognised in Hello Magazine as one of the top five singles holidays in the world.

From this, thankfully, at the end of the six month contract, the MD Colum gave me the chance to run occasional city breaks for the company, which gave me the chance to travel to Istanbul, Barcelona and to spend three weeks exploring Kos and Rhodes with other guests.

From here I briefly went to Choice Hotels to re-launch 'The Counties' in Portrush until my agent had been approached by a couple in Mayo who had spent two and a half million redesigning their ten bedroom hotel but could not get the brand right. So, up for the challenge I moved to Mayo and worked with the owners of JJ Gannons to create the food standard, service standard and focus on the detail of the overall hotel brand which created the award of Best Pub Food In Ireland, with the Licencing News and our Head Chef being named the Best in The West in 2007.

Finally, I am where I am now - my biggest challenge to date - the first ever retail bar in Ireland and catering in a retail environment - the M&S Deli Bar. Although I work for the Compass Group, the partnership of two FSTE 100 companies has one in-store brand which has blown Northern Ireland - the deli bar. Launched in 2007, the deli is the first in-store bar in Ireland, unlike the UK where other chains like John Lewis and Harvey Nicholls all do this.

The deli has been a reknowned success within the company and is a fast paced, service focused concept where the detail of service and food are most critical to its success. In fact, the success of me and my teams focus and passion on the deli brand has resulted in it being named number one for M&S in sales and standards. And even as I write, I know that the builders moved in last night to expand the 'little deli' by 60% to create a second bar in the leading M&S in Europe. With a full relaunch on Friday this week - fast paced it is speed and the success that drives me and my team everyday to create our wonderful brand and hio.

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2. Have you always wanted to work within hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism and why? If not, how did you end up where you are now?

Quite simply, as a teenager and in my twenties, I never dreamt of hospitality as a career. However, why? Doing my PhD, which was a study of people and attitudes, once I started behind a bar and got into it, I was learning more about people behind a bar than I ever did in an interview and I was having more fun!

As for now... it came through a determination to learn, to succeed and to be the best in everything I and my team do ... and to give my team the training and knowledge to be top of our game and that if they go for another job they are in demand.

3. What sort of qualifications and training have you had and what else would you like to do?

In all fairness I have no official qualifications in hospitality. I have a first class honours degree in Geography (of all things) and have taken advantage of training courses any one of my employers has given me. This includes Compass, which has given me the advantage of chef training to greatly enhance my front of house skills and a greater understanding of running all aspects of a hospitality business ... My future? I focus on consistency, brand development, training people and giving people the opportunity to learn, progress and advance like some people gave me the opportunity to.

4. What are the top 5 activities you would typically carry out on a daily basis?

My day to day is a challenge and that is what I love. Key activities ... daily sales and labour reporting, pre-service team briefs, pro-active hands-on service during power hours to drive sales and service standard. Afternoons are spent on forecasts and long term planning for events, new menu/food design, functions, recruitment needs, special offers... and the fifth one ... always expect the unexpected. No two days are the same and it is the unexpected challenges on a day-to-day basis that make each one different and exciting. This is what drives your mind, quick pro-active reactions and quick and accurate decisions.

5. What do you most enjoy about your job?

What I enjoy most is the sheer volume of customer retention. To see people come back again and again purely for the hospitality and quality of the experience and product that you have trained your team to provide is one of the best feelings in the world. It gives you not only a pride in yourself but in the team you have come to love and helped create and build, and who have helped you and their colleagues do the same.

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6. What would you say is the biggest challenge you face on a daily basis?

I would say two things;

1: The chief one is never go in to work thinking all is fine (in a positive way!): expect the unexpected and when a problem arises, it's not a 'problem' ...it's a challenge; so I rise to it and make sure my team do too.

2: My other biggest challenge is what to wear each day! Yes, vain, but first impressions last, and if you are the face of the business then it's important. Plus, it's fun and your team follow your lead and take a pride in themselves and their service and product. This isn't just hospitality, take a pride in what you do...this isn't just hospitality, this is simply great hospitality.

7. What would you say is your biggest achievement to date?

To date it is winning Seafood Restaurant of the Year in 2004 with The AA, but as I and my team are in a period of transition, I hope it is the first M&S deli bar to get bigger.

With the launch literally on the day of writing this, the decision to expand came from a continuous 23% year on year growth in sales

even in a credit crunch...we must be doing something right! And if we succeed in continuing our sales and service standards, then not only will we be number one in these factors, but be the flagship in a number one high street brand. For this will be my number one achievement.

8. Who has been the greatest influence/role model in your career and why?

This has been Bryan Hughes - retired owner of the St Andrews Golf Hotel - although Bryan only met me once a week, he had the confidence and faith in me to take over his wine cellar (my first one and his precious one). And it was through his once a week sessions on wines, food, organisation and time management that I progressed so quickly in my career. To this day, I still write to him for advice...because he believes phones are impersonal. Much to his disgust I now have three but I still write when I need to (or just for a friend).

9. Do you have a favourite tale or most memorable moment from your career? If so, please tell us about it!

Robert Wagner - One night he walked in with his son and needed a private table ... the only one available in the restaurant was bang in the middle. We explained. He accepted and had dinner, and then with a word in my ear, he stood up and entertained the whole restaurant unannounced. I always loved Hart-to-Hart, so this fulfilled one of my dreams.

10. What piece of advice would you offer someone who wants to work within our industries?

Knowledge is power - if you want to learn, if you want to move up - ask questions, ask for advice, ask for training. Motivate yourself and those above you will motivate themselves to help you...but you need to work, read and learn for yourself as well and show you are worth putting the time and money into.

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11. Why would you encourage someone to work in our industry?

Why? The dynamic, the need to be organised and motivated...In the last month, me and my team have cooked for Mylène Klass, done two live cookery demonstrations, launched a new menu and done a re-build ... it's the dynamic of everything new. I go to bed excited for the next day.

Further information

For further information on career opportunities in the hotel or other hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism industries, please visit www.uksp.co.uk.