



Skills for Service

Now in its 15th year the Skills for Chefs conference is welcoming some exciting new changes. It will now be running alongside the inaugural Skills for Service conference, which takes the focus out of the kitchen and onto front of house. *University Caterer* caught up with four of the influential speakers lined-up for the event

Gordon Cartwright

After hanging up his 'whites' in 1996 at the age of 27 Gordon went on to develop a distinguished career within AA Hotel Services as a Hotel and Restaurant Inspector. Gordon now runs his own successful business, Visionary Dining.

Why do you think good service is so important?

Service alone is only part of the equation. We add 'service' to 'hospitality' in a 'wrapper' of customer care. It's the correct blend of customer care that is important with service being the delivery and hospitality providing the friendliness. One without the other often provides a poor experience.

Are there any things that continue to surprise you about the industry?

The UK is almost unique in that as an industry we don't attract more young starlets, and that hospitality in itself isn't promoted as a serious career option within schools and the careers service. I'm always surprised at this. Hospitality provides more opportunity on a global scale than most other industries. Because our industry depends on kinaesthetic learning, an individual doesn't have to be a genius to rise to the very top. If only youngsters knew this, we'd be flooded with even more talent than we have. I'm not surprised that most of our industry icons have never been to university but joined our profession at 16 with limited choices.

What do you think is the most important element for a successful restaurant?

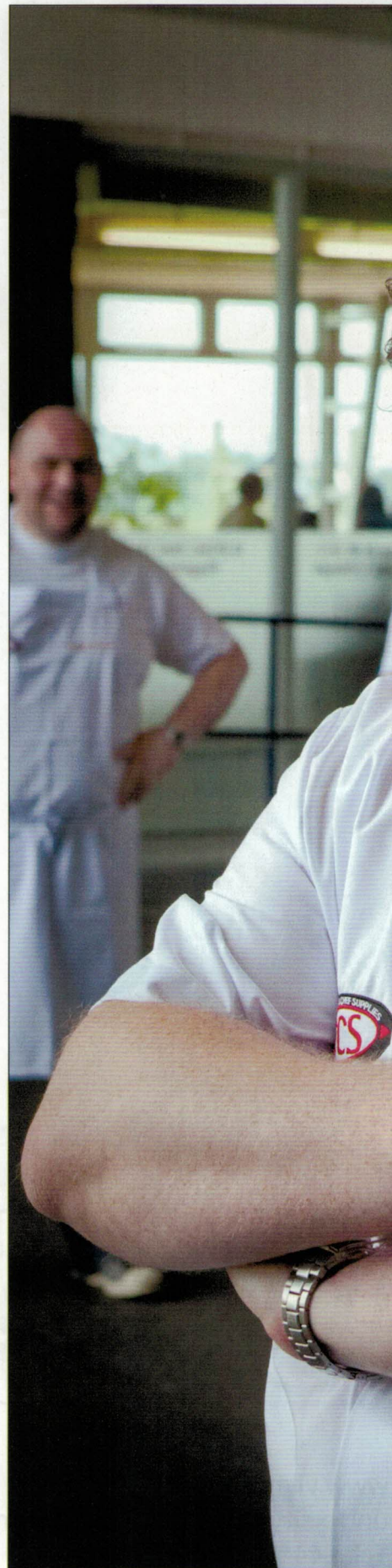
The most successful restaurants in the world succeed because they provide an experience that exceeds the sum of their parts. They produce such a unique identity that the need for the diner to perceive value begins to fall away.

What is your favourite restaurant and why?

Good question. I have different restaurants for different occasions. The family get together venue differs greatly from the business lunch with high-profile clients. On a personal level, where I am most comfortable as a foodie and hospitality consultant, my choice would be, El Celler de Can Roca, Girona, Spain.



The UK is almost unique in that hospitality in itself isn't promoted as a serious career option within schools.





Fred Sirieix

Fred Sirieix is the General Manager at Galvin at Windows, the Michelin-starred restaurant on the 28th floor of the London Hilton on Park Lane. He was nominated for Manager of the Year in the 2010 Catey Awards.

Since the Skills for Service conference runs alongside the 15th Skills for Chefs Conference, chefs will also be listening to your session – how do you think they will respond?

At the end of the day, the job that we do is a team effort. You can't have a good restaurant without the front and you can't have a good restaurant without the kitchen. So it's about understanding that nobody's more important than anyone else, and I think everybody who is good at what they do knows that. I think that is the major thing really – to be in it together.

What are the most important things to consider about service?

Well there are three things. First and foremost, the guest is king – always and forever. The second thing is you need to understand the difference between a customer and a guest and the difference between serving and looking after people. And the third thing is to understand that if you want to look after people you have to put yourself in their shoes and see the world through their eyes.

Why does Galvin at Windows work so well?

It's non-stop training and non-stop staff development and developing people. There is a big team here so you need to just be constantly at it and create a culture and a philosophy of service. It runs through the veins of what you do and what you are.

You have also developed a board game, why did you decide to do this and how can it help industry?

It's important to innovate and motivate and inspire people. People get fed up and bored with the same training all the time and you've got to come up with different things.

The board game is a training tool to help managers teach staff about hospitality and service. There are a lot of people able to do a job, but they're not able to teach others and because it is a very simple tool to use, it is very easy to follow. Therefore you know what your managers are teaching and they are following a system. There aren't two ways to get it right – you either get it right or you get it wrong in service.

The conference includes a small exhibition, what types of exhibitors interest you?

I like to see things about wines and also I'm interested in the technology of the kitchens, like ovens and things like that. I find it very exciting to see what you can do with new technology and how it makes life easier for the chef, because if it makes life easier for the chef it makes life easier for us at the front, we need to understand what is out there.

What elements of service theatre do you believe all restaurants should consider?

Soul. Everyone needs to have soul. It doesn't matter what you do, if you don't have soul there is no point.

You can do anything in the theatre you can do carving you can have a cheese trolley, it doesn't matter if you have that – if you don't have soul you won't be a restaurant where people want to go. People come to see people, you have to have personnel full of personalities.



Everyone needs to have soul. It doesn't matter what you do, if you don't have soul there is no point.

Gerard Basset, OBE

After training in Lyon, Gerard Basset moved to England to start his career as a sommelier. In Santiago de Chile, Gerard achieved his long-held dream and won the title 'Best Sommelier in the World 2010'.

What is the most important thing to consider when tasting wine?

The overall picture, and by that I mean the balance of the wine, its purity or complexity and also its length. It is also important not to get influenced by other people. Nothing wrong to ask the opinion of someone else, but after you have tasted the wine yourself first.

Is it possible to develop a good palate or is it something you are born with?

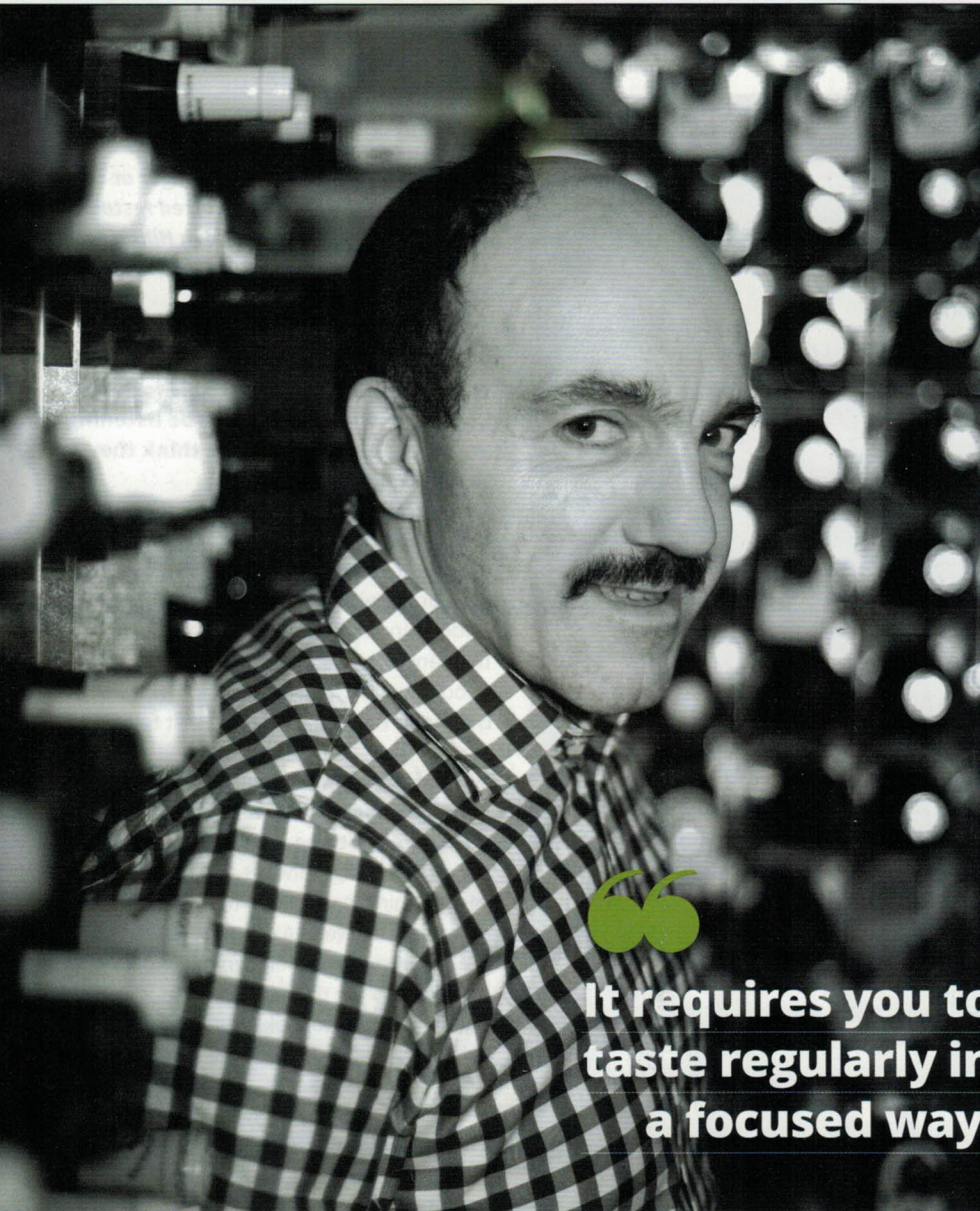
Unless you suffer from a rare disorder affecting your sense of smell and taste, most people can develop a good palate. It requires you to taste regularly in a focused way, following certain tasting techniques which can be learnt and then put into practice.

Do you ever get sick of the taste of wine? Are there any unexpected downsides to the job?

Extremely rarely – I just love wine. There are a few downsides, but they are easily outweighed by the upsides.

What do you think makes a restaurant a success?

Friendly staff who know what they are doing, great atmosphere in a lovely location, delicious food and wine at a fair price (even if it seems expensive – fair price does not mean cheap).



It requires you to taste regularly in a focused way

Esher Williams

Hospitality Consultant, Trainer and Lecturer, Esher has worked for the top tier of the industry, such as The Dorchester Hotel, L'ortolan Restaurant and The Fat Duck. Her unique style and approach to the highest standard of working practices, guarantees service excellence.

Why do you think good service is so important?

Service is the factor that can make a difference between a good experience and a great experience. Service is about feelings and emotions that are at the core of everyone.

How important is the relationship between chef and service?

At the beginning of my career I worked in few environments where the relationship between the kitchen and front of house was far from healthy. I'm glad I had those experiences as it has instilled in me the importance of strong relationships throughout an organisation.

It still disappoints me when high-profile chefs make derogatory remarks about the front of house. It is unnecessary and creates an unhealthy culture. I believe it's time to move on and reach a place where we are all confident in our roles



What was it like working with Heston mental?

Working with Heston was such an honour, the team made all of my dreams come true. Heston has a marvellous way of keeping his team on their toes. I remember on my trial shift being very emotional. One of the dishes made my eyes fill with tears as I could see the amount of care and intricacy that had gone into producing it.

I learnt so much from my time at the Fat Duck. Never settle for less than the best. Take the approach that will produce the best results, not necessarily the easiest and most of all, don't give up.

You have worked with Alan Murchison who is presenting at the conference, what do you think makes him such a success?

Alan is one of the most driven people that I know. It almost borders on obsessive. He has a way of rubbing his passion off on other people and getting them on board with his vision. The amount of regular customers that he has and loyal members is indicative of this.