



Expanding horizons

An opportunity to lease the neighbouring property was the beginning of a dramatic transformation for Browns of Brockley, and the business has gained a lot more than solely floor space, says Tristan Parker

Browns of Brockley

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“Originally I wanted to sell coffee from a tricycle,” laughs Ross Brown. “That didn’t go well. I’ve still got the tricycle, it just sits in an office across the road.” Things have come a long way since one of his earliest business ventures, and he now runs Browns of Brockley, a busy neighbourhood coffee shop that’s firmly established in south-east London.

These days, Brockley is brimming with independent cafes servicing commuters and young families moving to the area, though Browns has been there longer than most – since 2009 – in a prime site opposite Brockley station. The cafe serves light lunches, cakes and Square Mile coffee, reflecting Brown’s training at the American Barista and Coffee School in Portland, Oregon, and under Dan Thompson, Head of Coffee Development at Soho House & Co.

Over Christmas, Browns underwent a major refurbishment, with everything in the shop except lights and floors demolished and refitted. Most dramatically, however, they knocked through into the newly acquired adjacent unit to expand and create a room with seating for 20 covers in addition to the handful of seats in the original unit.

Brown says the expansion is a welcome addition. “The old shop was really crammed together,” he says. “You’d have staff with plates

trying to squeeze through people sitting down – it felt quite stressful. With the new set-up, there’s a room for front of house and takeaways, and a room for sitting down. It just makes more sense.”

As well as providing an extra 300 square feet – almost doubling the original space – the aim of the expansion was to increase efficiency for staff, for sit-in customers and for those ordering to-go, which accounts for around 65% of the business. Brown realises there will be adjustments and practical considerations with the new set-up and the biggest challenge with the extra room is that staff now can’t see everyone in the shop. However, the expansion has also allowed him to create new revenue streams, most notably a larger retail shelving unit – a bold wooden block built into the counter which holds artisan chocolate, books and retail coffee. “There’s a good margin on selling that,” says Brown, “and we wanted to make it more available for customers.”

As time-consuming as the expansion has been, that hasn’t stopped the shop’s owner from launching a new, separate Browns venture. Once again, this project is based on wheels – though this time it’s a little grander than a tricycle. When Brockley Market – an award-winning outdoor food market that runs every Saturday – approached Brown to >



EXPANDING A PREMISES

- **Plan how you'll tell customers about any disruption or closures,** in person and by social media, and explain the benefits of the new set-up.
- **Find out how an expansion will alter the business rates** you pay on the property.
- **Mitigate turnover losses** by scheduling closures around fallow business periods or existing regular closures.
- **Ensure that changes to premises will improve workflow** for staff, as well as your customers.
- **Unforeseen adjustments to systems may be needed** once the new space is active, even with meticulous planning, so being adaptable and flexible is key to the transition.



become a vendor he was keen, but needed to find the best form of mobile coffee stall. The solution? A Vauxhall Movano van with custom-built cab on the back, housing a Victoria Arduino Black Eagle coffee machine that runs through a heavy-duty Fischer Panda generator. It's an expensive but unique undertaking. Other cheaper, options were floated, but ruled out when Brown realised he needed the off-site operation to replicate the high-quality coffee served in the shop.

"The school of thought is: if we're going to do it, I want to do it once and I want it to be the best it can be. It's at least possible to hit a million pound turnover from a van with a big output, rather than paying less for something and your profits being capped. That seems counter-intuitive." The result is a versatile mobile unit, in theory capable of servicing everything from markets to film shoots to festivals, but Brown admits it's still a gamble. "It's a huge risk and it is daunting, but I think it's the right thing to do," he explains.

This willingness to take risks has served him well so far. Alongside the all-encompassing

premises expansion and high-end coffee van, Brown has always been confident to follow his instincts. Last year, inspired by similar systems in Denmark and Sweden, he made Browns a cash-free cafe. The decision made headlines and raised eyebrows, but it's boosted the business significantly. "It's been a 100% positive change," says Brown.

It's hard not to see Brown as a progressive thinker, especially when you learn that he's travelling to Michigan for a training course on open-book finance and is planning to introduce mobile ordering for customers, likely via WhatsApp, later this year.

"I don't have much interest in doing the same things as other people," Brown says. "I'm interested in thinking differently and looking at different outlooks. I like trying to do the best of the best." ○