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THE MARKETEEER
CHRIS HOLDEN

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

The Marketeer takes a step outside and asks, can operators bring more to their outdoor dining experience?

Regardless of which part of the country you live in, the arrival of the summer usually signifies a shift in the way that people feel and behave. Rather than spending our time indoors, we look for any and every opportunity to be outside.

For example, people are more likely to walk or cycle to work in the summer, compared to the winter months when nothing but the car or public transport would be considered. Our love of the outdoors is also true when it comes to food and drink, as we migrate from the bar or corner table to the gardens, patios and pavements of our favourite pubs and restaurants.

Despite this annual and predictable shift in where customers would prefer to be, it always surprises me on the lack of thought that so many pubs and restaurants exhibit in this area. It seems that for some operators it is simply a matter of putting a few extra tables and menus outside and just viewing outdoors as an extension of the main dining area.

While there is nothing wrong with this approach, it doesn't look to capitalise on this desire by customers to dine al fresco or take the opportunity to offer something

a little bit different. Rather than thinking about your outdoor areas as simply another room, why not consider alternative ways in which to create a real point of difference for you and your customers?

WORD ON THE STREET

Back in the day, buying food from a street vendor or at a local fête would more than likely have represented a distress purchase and usually an expensive one at that. Fast forward to 2017 and the landscape has significantly changed. The lone ice cream van and dodgy burger bar has now been replaced by a variety of food styles from around the world. International markets serving paella, rice 'n' peas and ostrich burgers can be found up and down the country. When it comes to the bigger cities, pop-up food markets are also an increasingly common sight.

While this growing trend in street food may represent a threat to existing casual dining outlets, it could also offer some valuable insight. One of the key drivers for the success of street food is the fact that people love the theatre that this type of cuisine brings. While many operators would shudder at the thought of customers



seeing inside their kitchens, we know that the general public love it. This fact being borne out by the popularity of TV shows such as MasterChef and Saturday Kitchen and the success of restaurants such as Randall & Aubin in Soho and Aiden Byrne's Manchester House. All of these make a feature from allowing people to see the food being prepared and cooked.

Taking your kitchen, or at least part of it, outside is definitely worth thinking about. You don't need to start too complicated either. What you should be aiming to do is to create that little bit of theatre around your own existing menus while still delivering food to the same quality expected at any other time of the year. If you aren't sure how this might work for you, then my suggestion is to go and have a look at some street food markets. You'll be amazed at what can be produced from quite simple outdoor cooking facilities.

Of course, taking your kitchen outside is fine if you have the space and room to do that. Sadly that option isn't available to everyone. While local councils may allow you to put a few extra tables out on the pavement, it doesn't mean that they will also allow you to begin cooking there

too. So how do you bring theatre to your outdoor experience?

One potential way to address this is to take a leaf out of the street food vendor's book. Rather than just offering street food, why not consider creating a pop-up restaurant? As the name implies, this type of restaurant is temporary in nature and may only last for a short space of time – in some instances this may be as short as a few days. How long it remains will often depend on how long the space you have chosen is available.

If you do choose this route then it is important you are very clear what it is you are hoping to gain. If it's all about taking advantage of al fresco dining because you haven't got the right space at your own venue, then make sure that whatever you do clearly delivers against that brief. That will help keep things simple for both your team and your customers. Location will be a key part of this. Ideally, you don't want to have somewhere too far away from your main venue. Wherever you choose also needs to be a safe place to cook and serve food. Remember, although it's a pop-up you will probably still need access to utilities such as gas and electricity, as well

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as taking into account what other facilities you need to provide for your customers' convenience. One way to address this might be to find a location which perhaps isn't used at weekends or in the evenings, but has sufficient infrastructure to minimise any additional expense.

While many unofficial pop-up restaurants don't always bother with licences or insurance, as an established business owner it is important to make sure all these bases are covered.

Finally, regardless of how you look to enhance or improve the outdoor dining experience of your customers, it's imperative that you have a plan B. With the best will in the world, at some point during a British summer the enjoyment of your customers will be ruined by the onset of rain. If nothing else, make sure you have enough patio awnings, garden umbrellas or even pop-up gazebos which can be called upon in the event of a change in the weather! 