

Playing with Fire



Gordon Ramsay

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Gordon Ramsay's

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Аннотация

Not a sausage. That is what Gordon Ramsay had when he started out as a chef, working 16-hour days, 6 days a week. When he was struggling to get his first restaurant in the black, he didn't think he'd be famous for a TV show about how to run profitable eateries, or that he'd be head of a business empire. But he is and he did. Here's how."In the beginning there was nothing. Not a sausage - penniless, broke, fucking nothing - and although, at a certain age, that didn't matter hugely, there came a time when hand-me-downs, cast-offs and football boots of odd sizes all pointed to a problem that seemed to have afflicted me, my mum, my sisters, Ronnie and the whole lot of us. It was as though we had been dealt the 'all-time dysfunctional' poker hand. I wish I could say that, from this point on, the penny dropped and I decided to do something about it, but it wasn't like that. It would take years before the lessons of life, business and money began to click into place - before, as they say, I had a pot to piss in. This is the story of how those lessons were learned."This is Gordon Ramsay at his raw, rugged best. **PLAYING WITH FIRE** is the amazing story of Gordon's journey from sous-chef to superstar. In his no-holds-barred

style, Gordon shares his passion for risk and adventure and his hard-won success secrets.

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FOREWORD

THE BEGINNING

And in the beginning there was nothing.

NOT A SAUSAGE – penniless, broke, fucking nothing – and although, at a certain age, that didn't matter hugely, there came a time when hand-me-downs, cast-offs and football boots of odd sizes all pointed to a problem that seemed to have afflicted me, my mum, my sisters, Ronnie and the whole lot of us. It was as though we had been dealt the 'all-time dysfunctional' poker hand.

I wish I could say that, from this point on, the penny had dropped and I decided to do something about it, but it wasn't like that. It would take years before there was any significant change – before, as they say, I had a pot to piss in.

This is the story of how that change took place.

CHAPTER ONE

EARLY DAYS

Work and opportunity come hand in hand, but don't miss the big picture

MONEY ONLY CAME into my life when I received my first weekly wage. It came in a brown envelope with my name on it, and its contents disappeared faster than Jack Rabbit looking down the barrels of a sawn-off shotgun. Whatever money might have come in during my all-too-brief football days, my dad 'handled' for me. Whether it paid for his booze or his musical dreams, I don't know, but very little of it came my way, and I'm pretty sure Mum didn't see much of it either. To be honest, I was far too busy trying to be good at football to worry about it much, but in later years – much later years – I think it brought on an almost pathological need to know where my earnings went, who was handling them, and God help anyone who couldn't explain what was happening.

This way of working, to climb the greasy pole of recognition rather than earn a living, followed me right through the early kitchens, where the only aim in this war zone was learning how to be the best. I think that this need to be the best was something that was always with me. It was, in the first instance, nothing more than a competitive streak. If I was racing my snail against the field, then mine would have to win. If I was washing pots, then mine were the cleanest, driest, and finished in the shortest

time.

But after a while, this changed. I began to take notice of the competition around me and, in doing so, I realized that I was much keener to get on and do things in a way that blitzed everyone around me out of the water. Being the best was like a vanity, and I became ever-conscious that just being better was nowhere near enough. I had to attain a height that was unassailable by others.

To do this was to search out teachers, example-setters, heroes, whatever. Anybody that could point the way forward was someone whom I needed to know. The early chefs of my teenage years were not always easy to get near, but, in time, they picked up on me. They knew that there was one hungry little bastard in their kitchens and that I would do anything, work without stopping, and consume every scrap of guidance.

All I wanted was to understand how to do something, and I was the fastest learner they would ever meet. Those chefs who were good (and by that I mean lived in three dimensions) watched and encouraged me. Those with a single dimension carried on frying eggs.

As I continued along this culinary towpath, I began to see that, not only was it necessary to learn my trade thoroughly, but to try and move it up a gear. What I also noticed was that, while it was relatively easy for me to do this, nobody else seemed so driven. For me, it was just natural, the only route, and I used to listen to my mates argue and complain about conditions, the hours, the

pay. All these things I couldn't give a flying fuck about, to be honest.

Was I ever jealous of anyone who seemed to be ahead of me? No, that was never going to happen. That person became just a milestone and someone I would overtake as fast as possible. It was just like being a car in a race, and all the other cars were there to be overtaken. Even now, that is very much the case. The only difference is that it's no longer about being the best pot washer. Now I look for more Michelin stars than anyone else, I need to have the highest audience ratings on my TV shows, and I need to sell more books than all the other celebrity chefs.

Am I always successful at being the best? Am I fuck. Instead, I just think of Jack Nicholson in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* when he tells his fellow inmates that he can tear the faucet from the floor and throw it through the window. They take bets because this boast just isn't going to happen. The camera watches him struggle, sweat and grunt until it is clear that the faucet is staying where it is. Nicholson eventually stops and looks around. 'Well, at least I tried, which is more than you bastards did,' he says. That's me. Just sometimes I aim too high and fail, but it will never stop me shooting for the stars. I might quietly have to accept that Jamie is going to sell more books than I am. For now.

In the meantime, the hours were forever and blotted out any time in which to think about money, far less spend it. Time off was also for sleeping. Seventeen-hour shifts, an hour each way for travel, and the rest was for sleep. A day off once a week was

also for sleeping. All fucking day. I needed rent money and I needed cash for fares, and then it was all gone. No movies, no restaurants, no cars, and I never drank.

After kitchens in London, my days in Paris were no different. I had gone there, as I knew that that was still the home of fine dining, and I was searching for the places that would inspire and teach me. This was my choice, even if at the beginning I couldn't speak any French and knew no one. There was a constant obsession with learning, with looking for respect in a kitchen where the culture was to be as dismissive as a fly swatter. Asking for a rise was as far from my mind as ringing in with a sickie.

In time, I returned to London and started working with Pierre Koffmann at *La Tante Claire*. It was while I was there that I was approached by a diminutive Italian with an offer to start a new restaurant down some back street off the Fulham Road. When you have nothing except your knives, when everyone insists that you are nothing but a piece of shit on their shoes, a kind word with the promise of recognition and money is like discovering a high pair in your dysfunctional poker hand. Suddenly, there was someone inviting me to run their kitchen for them. I was going to be called 'Chef', with my own small brigade and, moreover, there might be some proper money on the table. The restaurant was to be called *Aubergine*.

A pair in cards seems a lot when you have nothing. It blots out the fact that all the other players might have a better hand, and the last thing on their minds around the table is your welfare. But,

suddenly, here was this godforsaken, beaten-up old restaurant site that had already had a long history of failure. Had I but known it, this was the last-chance saloon for the Italian owners who had somehow gotten it into their minds that I could save the day for them.

Too bloody right. The salary was better than I could ever have imagined, and all I had to do was what I do best.

I had come back from Paris in 1993 and started *Aubergine* not long afterwards, by which time I was twenty-seven and the owner of a flat. Well, not quite a whole flat, as I went halves with a mate and we and the Building Society were the proud owners together. We let one room out, but were either too busy or too exhausted to collect the rent. The tenant didn't come up with the goods very often, so one way or another, it was always a fucking fight to pay the mortgage.

From this early desperation, I suddenly had a boat to steer in the form of *Aubergine*, and it would not be long before I was getting married. Another thing happened that would also have one fucking big effect on my life, and that was meeting the father of my wife, Tana.

I had met Chris earlier on when Tana was dating another chef who, anticipating wedding bells, had brought her and her parents to *Aubergine* on the second night that I was open. I had gone up to their table, sat down and told them about how things were going. A nice, informal little chat and then they were gone. I learned later that Chris, Tana's dad, had said to his wife, Greta, that I was

totally preoccupied with myself and right up my own arse. Greta apparently smiled sweetly and said that I reminded her of Chris at that age. It wouldn't be long before Chris would be playing a central role in this story.

Either way, Tana fell out with this other dickhead of a chef and, before I knew it, we were dating and got married in December 1996. In the meantime, *Aubergine* was fast becoming a big hit and I was earning £6,000 a month. £6,000 a month! My mate, the Building Society and I sold the flat, and Tana and I were able to put down a deposit on part of an old school building in Battersea. We moved in, and suddenly there was a seismic shift in my life because *Aubergine* had become a phenomenon.

The *Aubergine* phenomenon is interesting. This was the stage, this tiny little fledgling restaurant, where I started to make a name for myself, where I was suddenly the unknown winger who was filling the goal net every Saturday to the extent that the press looked up and started mapping out my future as a name in their columns. Newspapers, magazines and the restaurant media are always looking for the next story, and they hooked on to me big time. Why did this previously unknown, off-street restaurant suddenly have the most sought-after reservations book in London?

Celebrity status didn't exist. Gordon Ramsay was a name that rolled off the tongue like broken glass, and the place had started on a shoestring with no big design budget, no PR and no launch party with 200 C-list celebs. If the truth were known, I didn't

really know what PR stood for. What worked was that I was putting superbly executed, modern European dishes on the menu at the lowest prices. When I look at an old *Aubergine* menu now, we were selling – no, giving away – three courses for £18. I also had the makings of a strong, motivated staff in both the kitchen and the dining room. The staff were all young and all looking for classical training. The hardship that we were enduring in the kitchen was probably the glue that bonded us all together. They could see me pitching in, and maybe stories of my days in Paris, mixed with the obvious dedication of working like a hungry dog, bonded us together. What would seal this bond was the success that suddenly swept over us. I had proved, with the help of my staff, that hard work and self-conviction really will work. What we all knew about was obsession and the pursuit of perfection, so every guest who came into the restaurant liked what they saw and went off to spread the word. It appealed to affluent locals who boasted about the little restaurant that they had discovered as though it were their own. No wonder I didn't need a poncey PR firm.

On the other hand, it was also a question of timing. I can't take any credit for that. We just happened to be pursuing perfection at exactly the right time and place. And there also were at least two vital things I didn't yet understand.

One was that those days were producing what would be a fantastic stable of chefs-in-waiting who, one day, would put Gordon Ramsay on the world stage. I didn't know that's what I

was doing when I hired them or when we worked alongside each other to get it right every time. I didn't know it then, but they would be one of the most important factors in my later success.

The other issue was that, as successful as *Aubergine* was, I was doing everything wrong if I wanted to make money and run a business. The restaurant was certainly making money, but it wasn't my money, and my head was buried in a hot stove all day. I had no understanding of the horizon, no wider picture, and – at least then – I didn't realize how much I had become a means for others to feather their own nests.

The situation would not last.

CHAPTER TWO

FIRST STEP ON THE LADDER

Before diving in, break the ice and think through the basics.

AUBERGINE WAS OWNED by people who were more interested in the money than the food, and this was the lesser known side of the story. The constant rowing and the politics that spilled over from the boardroom were soon having an effect on me, and as the restaurant grew more successful, plans were being hatched for laying a string of golden eggs. And they would be spilling out of my arse. Pizza parlours and roll-outs featured regularly in the boardroom plans, and I knew that it was time to go.

I had been given 10 per cent of the shares in the firm that owned *Aubergine* and, occasionally, a few thousand pounds came my way as a sort of drip-feed to keep me happy. But with each director trying to secure my support against their opposing number, I soon began to look around in spite of the stratospheric reputation of *Aubergine*. My problem was that I just hadn't thought through what I was really after. That was the first lesson I needed to learn.

From out of the blue, a small hotel operator called David Levin approached me to take charge of his restaurant, which had just lost its Michelin-starred chef. Before I knew it, he had offered me £150,000 a year and 5 per cent of the profits. Fuck me. This was double what I was earning, and I could see that the

site in Mayfair was just right for the three Michelin stars. They shone in my mind much brighter than any share certificates or, come to think of it, any roll-out Italian pizza parlours.

However, although I had had lots of talks with David, I was a bit confused about how this might all pan out. There was a son who was clearly going to take over the business at some time, and in the back of my mind, I was wondering why the other chef had left. I can't say that it was a case of once bitten, but I had acquired a sixth sense about who really might be my friend and who might ultimately sell me down the river in a leaky sieve.

So I spoke to the one person who would have my interests at heart, and that was Chris, my father-in-law. I explained the offer and asked if he would meet with David and let me know what he thought. I didn't know it then, and I am fucking positive that Chris didn't give it a further thought, but this was the very first step we took together in the world of commerce. It was to be the initial, tentative coming together of two people who were totally different in their skills and ages. As time went on, these differences were to meld together in an unusual alliance, and it became clear that we were as alike as two wings on a plane.

The two old-timers met for lunch at *The Capital* and, like so many successful businessmen, David failed to listen to a thing Chris said about my ambitions or dreams. As far as he was concerned, it was a done deal and Chris was in the way. Be courteous enough to the father-in-law and he will, no doubt, go along with the grand plan.

I think that Chris was a little wary of trying to muscle in on my life and into a business that he knew very little about. Either way, it was not long before I was invited to the offices of Withers for what I thought was just another meeting. Chris agreed to come along, and there we were in front of three lawyers, none of whom was mine, and David's son. Apparently, David was on the golf course, treating today's procedures as a done deal. Chris looked puzzled as he scanned the documentation in front of him. One of the three lawyers smiled and indicated that this was a contract now awaiting my signature.

The kick under the table from Chris came as a surprise and fucking well hurt. It was to become a regular method of communication in later meetings when things were going wrong. Chris asked if we could have five minutes, and out of the room we went. He looked at me and asked two simple, amazing questions. 'Gordon, what do you really want to do in life? Do you want to work for someone, or do you want to go it alone?' I was beginning to realize, at last, that the world was beginning to rotate.

Ten minutes later, we had proffered our apologies to the signing committee, who, no doubt, relayed news of our departure to the golf course, and we were on our way out of this firm of very expensive lawyers.

We had, in that one moment, agreed to go it alone. Two unlikely partners and only a dream between us, and I had just learned an important lesson: you need to know what you're

aiming for in order to reach it.

The saga at *Aubergine* still had another torturous six months to run. I was still refusing to sign any contract, especially as one of the clauses would bar me from opening a restaurant within a twenty-five-mile radius of *Aubergine* if I ever left. Franco Zanellato and Claudio Pulze sold their shares to Giuliano Lotto, giving him 90 per cent of the company, which meant he could do what he liked. What he liked, at this point, was to raise prices, move my staff around, and talk about strange plans for bistros in Bermuda. Of the three Italians, Giuliano, a former stockbroker, knew the least about the restaurant trade.

What we were now looking for was the big chance, and that chance suddenly appeared with a call from my old boss.

CHAPTER THREE

ROYAL HOSPITAL ROAD

When the time is right with plans, designs, borrowings and staff, mix them in a bowl with a spoonful of intense passion.

IT IS STRANGE, but of all the influential chefs who have been documented in my life, the one who gave me the greatest leg-up is hardly ever mentioned. I had worked for Pierre Koffmann at *La Tante Claire*, and had even taken Marcus Wareing from him to be my right-hand man at *Aubergine*, and it was he who was about to give me the very opportunity that I needed.

Pierre had been running *La Tante Claire* for twelve years in a strange backwater of Chelsea called Royal Hospital Road. The road was named after the home of the Chelsea Pensioners, the retired ex-soldiers who bring colour to the area with their scarlet coats and incredible personal histories. It runs parallel to the River Thames from Pimlico to Cheyne Walk, a rat run where National Express buses come barrelling along to avoid the snarl-ups of the Embankment traffic, and its buildings camouflage a wealthy population of socialites and Sloanes.

I had worked at *La Tante Claire* as head chef after returning from France. It was a brief period of employment, marked by Pierre's disappearance the day before I arrived, leaving an enigmatic, dismissive note. He was on holiday, and a three-day handover before he entrusted me with his beautiful cuisine would

have been helpful. But he was a man of few words and, being very French, had little time for anything except cooking and rugby.

La Tante Claire had three Michelin stars and, as such, it was a destination restaurant. It wouldn't have mattered where it was located because people sought it out as a centre of gastronomy. Any other restaurant in this location might have struggled if it relied on customers just passing by, as nobody ever did, except to buy a newspaper or walk the dog. But Pierre was comfortable there. He had a fabulous reputation and was happy to close seven weeks each year for holidays, as the French tend to do, and his staff were more than happy to follow suit.

I didn't really know why he wanted to move, but he had lost his wife not long before, and had also been offered the chance to move *La Tante Claire* to The Berkeley, a hotel that was part of the Savoy Group. So his immediate problem was how to shift the existing lease on the Royal Hospital Road restaurant, at which point his Gallic gaze fell on me. Would I be interested in buying the unexpired lease for £500,000? I had no money and, quite frankly, he could have been asking for £5 million. But this was where Chris came in. I was happy to sit on the sidelines and watch him deal with this tiny obstacle.

I had no idea about Chris's personal finances. What I did realize was that the money Pierre wanted would be just the half of it. There would be a much bigger bill if we were ever going to change this rather tired restaurant into Gordon Ramsay's début as a chef patron. That sort of money was just not lying around

in people's bank accounts, and we were going to have to get involved in the world of banking.

Chris put together a proposal and sent it down the wire to a bank manager he had known and dealt with for years at the Bank of Scotland. Iain Stewart had been involved in earlier restaurant businesses at the highest culinary level, including none other than my much-respected boss in an earlier era, Albert Roux. This was lucky because it gave the bank an insight into the economics of Michelin-starred dining – what it cost, but also what it could earn. Claudio Pulze, one member of the Italian trio at *Aubergine*, once told Chris that a three-star restaurant could never make money. Fortunately for us, Iain Stewart had seen the living proof that Claudio was wrong, and he was able to reassure the bank's credit committee. This removed any lingering doubts that the bank might have had about lending us the money.

So I dug out my one and only suit from a very sparse wardrobe and set off with Chris to the old P&O building at the bottom of Trafalgar Square for an introductory meeting. I could feel my bollocks shrinking as I was shown into the meeting room with three or four banking individuals dressed in grey suits, blue-striped shirts and forgettable ties.

So forgettable, in fact, that I can remember little else. All the talking from our side came from Chris, and I just prayed that no incoming missile of a question came my way. Do you know today's price of a barrel of oil, Mr Ramsay? What return on your equity capital do you expect in Years Two and Three, Mr

Ramsay? Fuck me. I kept my head between my shaking legs.

Just as I felt we were getting these people on our side, Chris suddenly let loose a tirade of abuse about greedy bankers who screwed their clients wherever they could. They had just suggested an administrative fee of a couple of thousand pounds, and Chris countered it with £500. I didn't know where the fuck to look. If this was business, then I would stay in the kitchen, where I could safely bollock my brigade without getting involved in any confrontation.

It was such a nightmare that I nearly missed the men in grey agreeing to Chris's revised figure. Their suggested £1,500 fee was big wonga, and not only had Chris saved it, but he had also shown me that bankers really can be wankers. The exception was Iain, who, I could see, had a sardonic smile on his face for much of this 'delicate' negotiating. He knew that what we were setting out to do was just the beginning of bigger stuff to come, and he was instrumental in these first, tentative steps.

Suddenly, the meeting was at an end, and there was this short-arsed, gritty Scot with a sharp eye and tongue smiling, shaking hands and wishing us well. Fuck. Easy as that.

But, of course, it wasn't quite so. It's one thing to borrow the money, but then you have to pay it back – with interest. Also, just as we were getting the loan agreed, there were things happening that would later have a big effect on my business. But at the time I didn't know that, and it just seemed to be threatening my deal. In fact, there seemed no solution. What had happened was that the

Savoy Group had been approached by what was then an almost unknown financial animal called ‘private equity’.

Private equity has become controversial for a number of reasons, and it is a familiar phrase today. It means powerful investment funds not available to the general public or traded on stock exchanges, which buy up companies in return for a share in the ownership. In this case, Blackstone Private Equity were the Savoy Group’s suitors, and it was the first time that I ever heard the name that would become so important to us. On this occasion, they were offering over half a billion pounds to shareholders of the Savoy Group to buy Claridge’s, The Connaught, The Berkeley and, of course, The Savoy.

Once this deal had gone through, the idea was that these private equity players would bring about changes to increase the value of the Savoy Group in order to make it saleable at a profit acceptable to their investors. The trouble was that it meant that everything to do with the Savoy Group was on hold while the deal was going on, and that included Pierre Koffmann’s move, too – which, in turn, meant ours. Before we knew it, we were back on the streets looking for alternative premises. We searched and looked at half a dozen sites, and each new potential restaurant we saw made us realize that Royal Hospital Road was, by far, what we wanted most. It was heart breaking to accept that it just wasn’t going to happen.

Months went by. Updates on the Blackstone front were hard to come by. Their deal had eventually gone through, and they

were now busy thinking about a million different changes they wanted to make in the way the Savoy Group was run. Whether they wanted Pierre Koffmann or not was just one of the decisions that they would make in the fullness of time, and we just had to wait. Pierre's advisors had long ago stopped returning calls, and I could feel the deal going cold.

One of these advisors was a particularly irritating 'fixer', a slobby suit who had clearly eaten well and frequently at *La Tante Claire*. Perhaps he sensed that this cosy arrangement was coming to an end and, as it became clear that Pierre's deal with The Berkeley actually might happen after all, Slobby became more elusive. Luckily for us, there was a lively partner from Pierre's accountancy firm who grabbed the ball and ran with it. Without him, I think we would still be on the touchline.

The deal progressed, and suddenly, there we were in the offices of the lawyers who were acting for *La Tante Claire* with a mile-long paper trail of agreements, leases, indemnities and guarantees ready for Chris and me to sign. As the snowstorm came to a finish, the lawyers wheeled in lunch and champagne to mark this momentous occasion. In all the completion meetings that took place later – and there were a lot of them – this was the one I'll always remember. Not just because it was the first, but because of this small gesture of kinship and kindness.

The bank had sent down a lesser minion to make sure the right signatures were attached to the borrowings documents. He was last to leave, having drunk enough bubbly to match what he

considered an onerous task.

It was, without doubt, a fucking relief. I could now be open about my plans. I could leave *Aubergine* and stop stalling about signing the contract they had been pressing on me. I could now tell Marco Pierre White that I would not be part of his stupid plans for the *Café Royal*, as I now had the beginnings of what I had dreamed about: my own restaurant.

But I owe Pierre Koffmann for more than just placing the opportunity of my own restaurant in front of me. I don't know whether or not he thought £500,000 would be more than I could afford, or whether or not he just wanted me to succeed, but, without me asking, he delayed payment of £175,000 for a year to let me get some cash flow coming through.

Even so, we now had this vast loan, with monthly interest payments to go with it. So you didn't have to be a partner in super-league finance like Blackstone to realize that, having bought this tiny little restaurant, we urgently needed to get it open. We now had a staff ready and waiting, because forty-six of them walked out of *Aubergine* when Giuliano Lotto sacked Marcus Wareing. We certainly had our menus set out, but we needed to make the restaurant look right – and there wasn't much time.

We decided to get help from a small interior design firm that I had come across on an earlier project. The problem was that, years earlier, Pierre Koffmann had commissioned David Collins, who was then unknown, to design his restaurant, and his design had become so much a part of *La Tante Claire* and its cuisine

that, inevitably, everything had to come out. This left a concrete shell and just thirty days to build something in its place.

The concrete shell is always going to haunt me. No one really knows what makes a restaurant successful. There are only a few real variables: the food, the location, the design, the price, the staff, the ambience and the clientele. But every time you think it can't be too difficult to crack the code, up pops a restaurant that should fail because the food is overpriced and atrocious, the location is in the middle of a railway arch, the staff are arrogant arseholes or the clientele is fickle – and they have to eat in a concrete shell. We all know of examples. The amazing and galling thing is that sometimes they don't fail.

So here we were, spending enough money on a designer to pay the gross national product of some African country while we knew of a famous fish restaurant on 55th Street in New York that is full every lunch and dinner in its original concrete shell. But then, I also know of a restaurant where the food is not fit for a dog, the fit-out cost 5 million quid and the tables are booked like Wembley for the Cup Final.

So, on balance, we had to do something about the walls at *Royal Hospital Road*. We needed to extract some kind of ambience out of this concrete, and I hadn't a clue how to do that. The interior design firm came up with their ideas, simple and uninspiring, but easy to fabricate and install. Their one creative touch was to introduce us to an artist called Barnaby Gorton, who painted a large, dreamy figurescape in blue and grey for a bargain

£10,000. His vision, speed and enthusiasm meant that we hung on to him for the future. It was a pattern that we followed with a range of people we were to meet later, and who became part of our team for years to come.

Even so, the timetable was fucking tight, and half an hour before we opened for our first evening service, the front desk was still being put together, the carpet was being vacuumed and the glasses polished. The night before, it suddenly occurred to me that the dining room was desperately bleak. There was empty shelving in recesses, and I remember coming up with some appropriate language for the fuckpots who had moved on from their design mission and forgotten the last chapter of their brief.

I called Chris, and he immediately took from his flat a collection of Murano glass. Just for the opening week, of course, until we could find something else, except that it stayed there for five years and became an iconic part of *Royal Hospital Road*.

In many ways, the building was the easiest part. We just had to get the builders to perform, and they did so with all the usual sucking of teeth, streams of tea and stonewalling of any question that required the answer: 'Yes, we will finish on time.' The transferring of staff from their *Aubergine* existence to *Royal Hospital Road* had been a sensitive part of this journey. When the crunch came and everyone walked away from *Aubergine* after the Marcus Wareing fiasco, the only meeting place we had was Chris's flat in Mayfair.

There we all sat around this vast oak table looking with ashen faces at Chris, who was about to announce the new dawn. I often think back to that evening. Chris was sitting there in front of them, having just agreed to move forward with this unlikely band of refugees from *Aubergine*, all looking imploringly at him. They needed to know that, shortly, they would be transferring to Chelsea in peace and without the Italians. I don't know what he was thinking, but it must have been nerve-racking for him, too. One of the partners in our firm of lawyers, Joelson Wilson & Co., who had known Chris for twenty years, asked him if he was sure he knew what he was doing. Nothing like a positive, well-timed question to boost morale.

The first few nights were soft openings to welcome family, friends and staff. These were dress rehearsals to give everyone confidence in what they were doing and to find the rhythm and flow between kitchen and dining room that you need in a well-run restaurant. By the time the first till-ringing night was upon us, we were ready. It was an exciting moment, and it was then – at about 8 p.m. – that the air conditioning suddenly went down in the kitchen and the temperature rose to a sweltering forty-five degrees. There was nothing to do but get on with it and wait for the engineers in the morning.

By midnight, sweaty from the kitchen, we were able to count our first day's takings. By the end of the first month, September 1998, we had made money. Of course, that didn't even come near to writing off the capital expenditure, but we knew we had a

business that was making a trading profit, and this was a fucking great relief so early on. Within six months, we were clearing £50,000 every month, and our debt to the bank was beginning to come down. It meant we were able to draw the £175,000 from cash flow to pay the final tranche to Pierre Koffmann and thank him for his patience. The other indicator of success was that our reservations book was stuffed solid. I had restricted the bookings to one month ahead. I had learned from my *Aubergine* days that a reservations book without any time limit gave people the impression that they would never get a table, so they often simply gave up.

The whole concept of reservations is always tricky. You need a definite policy so that guests know the score. All sorts of myths have grown up around the reservations books of popular restaurants. Try calling *The Ivy* for a table at eight o'clock tomorrow evening, and all they will want to know is who you are. No fame is no name, and your chances of a table between the hours of six o'clock and 10.30 p.m. are slim. It became a joke at *Aubergine* that reservations could be bought or sold on a commodity market so that punters had to pay money to someone else – I never saw it – just to book a table, which ought to be free. No different to touts outside Twickenham, Wimbledon or Wembley.

Just as *The Ivy* sees celebrity table allocations as a commercial way to make the restaurant work, we had to have a plan, too. And it needed to be flexible. Think of table arrangements on two of

the year's big restaurant dates, St Valentine's Day and Mothering Sunday. Who wants a table for four on St Valentine's Day? The reservations manager has to plan ahead to get as many twos in as possible. Mothering Sunday is a family day, and suddenly, we need tables of four and upwards. Outside these special days, there has to be a balance of twos, fours and more. Too many twos need a lot of space, more laundry, more staff, and usually less money is spent on drink – and that's a problem. Tables of four usually mean higher drinks bills. More guests bring a bonhomie, which means more wine being poured.

And whatever happened to the table for one? That's always there in my restaurants. It's never going to be a money-spinner, but any restaurant that refuses a single guest for a booking shouldn't be in the business. Few people eat on their own in a restaurant, but there are some blessed people who come just to taste the food. What greater compliment can there be? One of Chris's old haunts is a wonderful, laid-back restaurant called *Rules*, serving some great British dishes – coincidentally, it's London's oldest eating establishment – and there is a table that only accommodates one guest. I have never seen that table empty.

There are only forty-five seats at *Royal Hospital Road*, which makes things easier. When the bookings for a day are complete, that's it. If the Queen called after that and asked for a table for two that evening for herself and Philip, you'd have to offer up your apologies. There is no room to manoeuvre, short of calling a guest and cancelling their booking, and that, believe me, is never

going to happen. In a bigger restaurant like *Gordon Ramsay at Claridge's*, it is easier to rearrange the bookings, and there, to be honest, we always have a table up our sleeve.

But when you're planning reservations, you have to time them. Imagine two fully booked restaurants, one where everybody turns up at the same time, and the other, where all tables arrive at fifteen-minute intervals. Which restaurant is going to perform better? You have to give the kitchen a chance, and our guests have learned to appreciate this. Not only are they happy to book for 8.15 p.m., rather than eight o'clock, but they actually turn up on time.

When I think back to the early days at *The Connaught*, the procession of the old school diners into the restaurant at eight o'clock was a living nightmare for Angela Hartnett, the head chef. Then there's the appearance of London's power brokers for lunch at *The Savoy Grill*, all on the dot of one o'clock. Of course, it's difficult for the kitchen to handle. Actually, it's a fucking nightmare.

People say that restaurants where you have to book can never attract people who are just passing by. It's nonsense. My favourite scenario is when a party of six or eight knocks on the door at *Royal Hospital Road* late on a Friday night and asks if there is a chance of a table. Too bloody right there is. You wheel them in and come to an understanding that they are more than welcome, provided we can serve them with whatever we have left. It means that we can empty the fridges for the weekend and have a large

bill to round off the evening. And we make the guests happy, too.

That combination of good planning and passionate staff is exactly what you need to make a restaurant successful. It's all part of the mix that makes a brilliant restaurant stand out from an ordinary one. That was what we had set out to achieve, and it soon became clear that we were getting there. And, suddenly, there was the chance of doing it twice.

It was in this same period that we were offered a second restaurant right in the middle of St James's. Someone had thought they would run a restaurant for fun, bring their mates, and wondered why it had all gone pear-shaped. I had a look at it, with its trolley of sweating cheeses, white-painted piano and filthy kitchen. The menu was a disgrace, and the owner was flat broke.

Before the ink was dry on a hastily cobbled contract, the bailiffs moved in. But they were just a day too late. The builders were stripping the last remains of 33 St James's and we had secured our second premises. The name was to become *Pétrus*, and the chef I brought in was Marcus Wareing. He was the first person to experience the elevation from chef to a shareholding chef patron.

This was where the stable of chefs-in-waiting that I built up at *Aubergine* became a reality. We have been able to expand because we have brilliant chefs, and giving them a share in the ownership of new restaurants was to become the way forward for us. I knew that the chef would always be the most important player, and it became a rule that we never planned a restaurant

without the chef. The location, the design and the front-of-house staff were all important, but first we had to work out who would be in charge of the kitchen.

Pétrus was not an easy site. The kitchen was below the dining room, and everything had to be carried upstairs. It was a long room without a central arrangement for guests, so familiar at *Royal Hospital Road*, and without the easy, comfortable ambience. But all of this was more than balanced because we had a passion and energy to get this restaurant up and running profitably, which is exactly what we did.

The next job was to find a name. The name *Pétrus* represented the very finest claret. I wrote to the owners, asking if I could use the name, and they agreed. It meant a considerable investment in the cellar: as well as all the usual bins, we decided we needed to carry one of the finest collections of this Bordeaux wine, all the way back to 1945. It made me think that what we were becoming was a purveyor of wine, rather than food. After all, you can't charge any more than £100 per head for the menu, but there is little or no limit on what people can spend on wine.

This is a kind of kick in the bollocks for someone like me, for whom the cuisine is all important. But the business reality – whether I liked it or not – is that wine provides us with the profit we need to keep going. And I was determined to keep going. It was less than one year since I had opened *Royal Hospital Road*, and already I had the beginnings of a stable of restaurants, and I simply had to make them both successful.

And, on occasion, I could live with wine taking priority over the menu. One night while I was in the kitchen at *Royal Hospital Road* and Chris was in the office in Fulham Road, we got a call from Marcus to say that a table of six bankers had ordered £13,000 from the wine list. The feeling was electric, and the voltage increased in line with the spend. When the bill increased to £27,000, Chris started to make old man noises about credit card clearance. By the time it had reached £44,000, we made the decision to remove all food charges from the bill. After all, what was £600 in the face of this extraordinary wine spend? By noon on the following day, the news had somehow leaked, with front-page coverage in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Straits Times*. It was one of the few occasions when Pétrus was on everyone's lips.

CHAPTER FOUR

A SCOTTISH FAILURE

Vanity should carry a health warning When it bites you, take action. Bleeding to death can kill you.

ROYAL HOSPITAL ROAD was paying its way. *Pétrus* was winning praise for Marcus Wareing's cuisine. We were confident and on the look out for more sites, but – as it turned out – I was sleepwalking into my first failure. Good lessons are best learned early, but they are never easy, as I was about to find out in an ice-cold, down-your-neck way from a wild foray into Scotland at a time when I was still learning to walk in a business nappy.

This is a story of vanity, plain and simple. Open a couple of successful restaurants in London, and you are ready to take on the world without it ever occurring to you that there might be factors you've never thought about before.

As is so often the case, it began with a phone call and a proposition at the end of the line. In this case, it was Edinburgh beckoning with a prime site on the Royal Mile, and Chris was off like a gunshot. First, he checked out the proposal, talked to the finance director, who was on show-round duty, and then moved off. He was up there for the rest of the day to have a look around the Edinburgh restaurant scene before getting an early flight back to London the next morning.

The idea was to see if we could offer something to the stiff, up-your-arse society of professionals, financiers and low-spending

tourists who exist side by side in the city. We knew that the Scottish Parliament would soon be opening – if someone could just control the shocking building overspend of public money and long delays – and that would mean a fucking big boost to the local restaurant trade.

But when Chris got back, he was not optimistic. He told me how the beautiful Princes Street was now a ruin, and asked what the fuck had happened there. It's true: it's like there's been a hideous signage competition, with the world's worst performers strung out in a line, and nobody seems to notice it. It's plain fucking wicked that this has been allowed to happen. Is this the price of commerce? Business doesn't mean instant shit in the face like this. Whoever was in charge must have been blind or an idiot. What a sad, fucking shame.

Chris looked at a hundred different menus, checked the pricing and talked to bored waiting staff. A picture began to emerge, and he already knew that Edinburgh was not for us. Edinburgh makes money and keeps it. They spend it carefully and primly on school fees at Fettes or antique fireguards. There is no joy here, nothing that drives people out to get rat-arsed on a Friday in an Armani suit with a midnight call to the wife to hand supper to the dog.

There was a lovely story while Chris was up there. That evening, he got a cab over to Leith to try out Martin Wishart, who was making a name for himself in his restaurant by the quayside. As always, Chris was dressed in a suit, and having sat down, he

went through the card and managed a bottle of decent claret. Having finished, he asked if he could have a look in the tiny kitchen, and Martin obliged. The following morning, Martin was on the phone to me to say that, without any doubt, he had been visited by a Michelin inspector the previous night. I was really happy for him until I asked what the inspector had drunk, and, on hearing that a bottle of claret had been downed, I questioned Martin a bit closer. There is no way that a Michelin inspector would ever do that, and neither of us was any the wiser until Chris returned and mentioned what a great dinner he had had in Leith.

It's a different story in Glasgow, however. Everyone knows how to have a good time there, and it's not thought irreligious to spend a few quid on proper wine. It's a more frenetic city, full of people who have no ambition other than to live life.

Just as we were discussing all this, the phone rang from Glasgow. Someone wanted to sell a big restaurant right in the heart of the city. We both went to look, and suddenly the old excitement resurfaced. Nothing thrills like the thought of a restaurant full of good food, good service and the musical whirr of the credit card machine. A million makeover versions swamped our minds. Everyone was writing their versions of the menu, sketching designs with seating plans on the back of used envelopes. The big question was: how far was the Rangers ground from there? How would it figure on a match day? I was dreaming, and already, in my stupid eagerness, I lost the plot.

Still, before I had time to think, the whole project had sprouted

wings and suddenly there were surveyors, lawyers, electricians and rodent catchers, all present to put this together and submit fancy bills for their endeavours. I was getting a bit uneasy with the people who were selling the restaurant to us. They were keen – too keen – to impress me with the size of their other operations, and then suddenly they started to talk about the crappy abstract artwork in the restaurant. They pointed out that these early works of infants at school were not included in the sale, but could be made available as a side purchase.

Here we go again, I thought. However big someone is, Rule Number One is this: if there is cash, they want it, and these greedy arseholes were about to lose a deal because they wanted a few readies on top of a shedload of money for their restaurant.

Chris and I talked about it. We were both totally pissed off that, having talked through the heads of terms, some dickhead started to murmur about a few pictures so they could screw some more money out of us. We don't do side deals. So the deal turned stone cold, and Chris told them why. It no longer matters now, but they were totally mystified.

Then the phone rang. It was Glasgow again, and this time, One Devonshire Gardens, Glasgow's chic West End boutique hotel. Now this was a boner, and I was up there with Chris, as keen as a setter on the scent.

The place looked right immediately: three houses joined together and filled with browns, tweeds and long, elegant drapes, and with rooms the size of snooker halls. There was a smooth

life going on here, but the one thing that they didn't have was a restaurant. Fuck me! We can arrange that. And, in doing so, fine dining would come to my home town. The more I saw of this fantastic establishment, the more I fell in love with it, and any numerical doubts faded away, along with my sense of judgement.

We went back to London, and the whole process of negotiation, lawyers and contracts started all over again. We found Scottish lawyers, who are a different bunch to our beloved Joelson Wilson & Co., but Scotland is Scotland, and they play by a whole different set of laws. Soon we had a deal, and it was only a matter of time before wet ink was scrawled across a ten-year lease and an accompanying operating agreement.

The first base in this home run, as always, was a chef, and I already knew who was going to head north to run the kitchen. This remote outpost would also need a general manager, and I had just the person in mind. From then on, there was a long succession of trips to One Devonshire Gardens by our human resources manager, our operations staff and the kitchen designers. Gradually, a shape was evolving, and although the English press was pretty low-key about this adventure, the Scottish papers were lining up their sharpened pencils.

Amaryllis opened to a Scottish fanfare. We had a launch party that rocked late into the night, which was all very well, but the following day, we were open for business. The opening weeks went well. Nobody could believe that this restaurant was attracting forty covers for lunch and sixty-five in the evening.

I did more television interviews and talked to more journalists than ever before. The critics moved in. Their reviews made good reading, and I knew we were already on the way to a Michelin star.

At what stage did I realize that things were going wrong and that the paste that held up the wallpaper was just too thin? Well, if the truth were known, it was not so far too long.

But it was soon clear that the pressure from Glasgow on our London operation was beginning to grow. The northern kitchen brigade was rowing, absenteeism was at a level not known to us in the south. On top of all this, the owners of the hotel had just run into trouble.

It is always traumatic for everyone involved when there have to be changes in senior management. The finger of blame can only point to myself and Chris, and if we get an appointment wrong, then it will certainly be us who end up paying the price.

All you can do when you appoint someone is interview them and check out their reputation. But reputations are leaked, spread, smeared or openly published, and are often the stuff of crap and nonsense. I know how I can exaggerate and pass on stories about them as if I witnessed the whole thing myself – when, actually, I've never met them. As for the interview, well, that can be a trip to Disneyland. Nobody ever goes to an interview with a long list of their weaknesses. They save them for later, and drip-feed them when you least expect it.

So, a new appointment is made, and off we go into the woods,

axes in hand, ready to build a tree house. All is sweet to begin with, and slowly, almost imperceptibly, ominous signs begin to appear. They may not have forgotten the axe, exactly, but, at some stage, it will need sharpening and the stone was left at home. The idea is that senior managers have to think things out for themselves. They have to plan, budget, foresee everything and make things happen. If you're building a tree house, you need drawings, materials, a compliant workforce, safety procedures to stop Bob the Builder from falling off the tree holding his chain-saw, and the house needs to face the right direction to catch the sun. In fact, someone must be experienced enough to see the whole thing through.

If that doesn't happen, you know you've got a problem. When a bend in the road appears, you get a choice. You can either steer around the corner or you can fail to notice it, ignore it, and crash. That's when you have the odious task of saying goodbye and having to look for someone else, and you know in your heart of hearts that it is not so much a senior management failure, but your own fucking fault – or Chris's fault, if I'm feeling that evil.

We were, as they say nowadays, ring-fenced from the hotel operation, which was now in the hands of receivers. In practice, that meant it was run by accountants whose only aim in life was to cream every penny out of this financial flop for the creditors, and that was never going to result in a well-run, happy hostelry with residents queuing up to sample my menu.

Still, we paid countless visits to *Amaryllis*. Chris and I would

leave London at 4 a.m. and race up the motorway to be there by 8.30 a.m. When we got there, we would talk to staff, listen to their catalogue of woes, and then do the motivational bit, sure that – this time, finally – everything would change. I would gather all the poor, wee lost souls in the main dining room with the high ceiling and slight mustiness in the air, and I would talk gently. ‘Guys,’ I would say, ‘we have some issues here that we need to sort out. We need to do this together, you and me, so that we can learn from our mistakes and make this so successful that the queue for dinner stretches right down to Sauchiehall Street. So tell me what you think might be wrong at present.’

Nothing is forthcoming, so I move it up a gear. I look for the face that shows that its owner wants to hide behind the drapes – those long, grey, funereal drapes that are looking more and more apt by the day – and I try and draw him out.

‘Harry?’ I ask. He’s the barman who has personally ordered fifty-seven varieties of Scotch in the mistaken belief that he will entice most of Scotland into his bar. ‘How are you with all of this? Do you feel that we can work this out as a team? What about you, Cynthia? How can we improve our daily reservations?’

And so I go on, asking and listening carefully. In their replies, the real answer is hidden. I need to hear the tone, the timbre and the inflection to see if they really think that this can work and to see – most importantly – if they *want* it to work.

I tell them that they are only here because they are good, and were chosen because of this attribute. I explain that London is not

that far away, and that everyone in the office really wants them to succeed. Then I ask them if they can help me get the show on the road. And, bit by bit, I can see hope. They want this to work, and they know that I want it to do so as well. We can do it. We have the best fucking ingredients in the world on our doorstep. We need to spoil our guests with smiles and recognition. We need to deal with problems immediately, and always in favour of the customers. Are we together on this? The room tells me yes, and although it might be some way short of Billy Graham's call to Jesus, I really believe that I've encouraged them.

The trouble was that it never did change and, as this became apparent, we felt less like going up to *Amaryllis*, knowing that the love affair was over.

London was having its own problems by then. *Pétrus* had moved to The Berkeley and we had kept on 33 St James's. It had seemed simple enough to give the restaurant a new name, make some changes to the menu, drop the prices fractionally, and wait for the same old crowd to keep coming. Only they didn't. Turnover plummeted, and we were suddenly no longer making £40,000 a month.

So Marcus Wareing and I were 'invited' to Chris's office for a chat. It was a bit like attending the funeral of the family pet. There, on his desk, he had sheets of paper with the past six months' profit and loss figures. We ploughed through them, starting with *Royal Hospital Road*, then on to *Pétrus* and the other restaurants we were beginning to open in London. They

were bringing in total profits at the rate of around £250,000 each month, which was great.

‘What was wrong with that?’ we wondered, until Chris launched into a rundown on the two failing restaurants.

Marcus and I had a pocketful of reasons and excuses for this state of ruination, and, above all, we had the determination to fix it. There was a pause, and Chris said that he thought that we should shut the two restaurants the next day.

‘Had he gone mad?’ we asked.

Closing would be like admitting defeat, and, most importantly of all, how would it sound to the press?

There was another cold, stony pause from Chris before he delivered the well-aimed kick in the bollocks. ‘You can continue on one condition,’ he said, ‘and that is that the two of you personally pay over to the company a total of £41,000 each month until you have everything under control and the restaurants are no longer bleeding the group dry.’

He went on to explain that both cases were past redemption and that, unless we were happy to carry these losses personally, say for the next six months at a cost of £366,000, he suggested that we spend the rest of the meeting planning the two closures.

It was really strange, but this was suddenly a moment of great clarity, and I felt a huge relief. Of course it was heartbreaking, but both Marcus and I, dumbasses that we were, knew that the game was up and we would no longer have to dread the monthly figures. We would just hear about profit without the big minus

pulling at the rear.

Why didn't I see it before? It had to be vanity, and vanity – as I discovered – could be fucking expensive. But I had learned about the antidote: a bucket of cold reality and serious action if you want to avoid bleeding to death.

The only thing that I had to deal with was a loss of face in the Scottish press and a distant whisper about a small failure in London, but I was beginning to learn how to do that. Because, back in London, the biggest opportunity so far was about to fall into our laps.

CHAPTER FIVE

CLARIDGE'S

When you find a winner, groom it daily. Protect it with your life.

WHILE WE WERE battling with the problems in Glasgow, two things happened that suddenly shifted us into another gear. In January 2001, *Royal Hospital Road* received its third Michelin star. It was what I had been working my bollocks off for since I started in my first kitchen, and it broadcast to the world what we were about. It was also to bring the most important opportunity so far, as I was about to learn how to take on a major business challenge, rebuild it detail by detail, and then deal with success on a scale previously unknown to me.

Claridge's is one of the very few old-style, glamorous places that are the real thing. It has been open since before the Battle of Waterloo, and it was among the first establishments to introduce French cooking to Regency London. The Prince Regent had a permanent suite there. And it was from Claridge's, out of the blue, that we received another one of those phone calls with an invitation to talks about running its restaurant.

Ironically, Claridge's new owners, Blackstone Private Equity, had been the very people who had delayed the launch of *Royal Hospital Road*. I had no idea back then, of course, that they would come to be such an important part of my life.

From the moment I first heard of the idea, I knew that *Gordon*

Ramsay at Claridge's was going to take us into a different league. The deal had everything and, in particular, a new word for me: 'synergy', the coming together of two bodies whose combined force would be greater than the sum of their parts. Claridge's from the history books, and me from a council house. Who would ever have thought it? I learned the significance of this little number rapidly.

The first hurdle was to get the new owners into believing that we could handle this operation. The man whom we negotiated with was John Ceriale, a name that would become iconic within Gordon Ramsay Holdings for years to come. I thought of him as a Bronx bruiser with an uncanny vision when it came to bringing old-fashioned, down-at-heel hotels into the twenty-first century. At this point in time, he had only been with Blackstone Private Equity for a year as their hotel real estate manager and had yet to make his name.

Chris got on particularly well with Ceriale. I think Ceriale saw me as the name above the door, whereas with Chris, he could see someone who could put in place a structure that would carry the whole operation. Their first meeting started with the question, 'Would Gordon be happy to do breakfast in his restaurant?' Chris is seated there with Ceriale and at least six of his 'advisors' and the senior management from Claridge's. The answer to the question was about to launch a relationship that, in the fullness of time, would provide Gordon Ramsay Holdings with an incredible billion pounds' worth of turnover in

the coming years. A BILLION pounds. No firm in the world would turn that down, and we certainly weren't planning on stalling over a simple matter like breakfast.

Fortunately, Chris got the answer right. Without a second's hesitation, he said that that would be no problem and that Gordon would certainly be up for that, knowing full well that chefs just don't do breakfast. This had been the stumbling block for all previous contenders. How the fuck Chris imagined he was going to smooth this with me became the funniest thing he ever said. He just looked at me and said that, if it was going to be a problem for me, he would cook the breakfasts himself. Chris can't cook a breadcrumb.

The early days were difficult. It took an age before we finally got the nod, having been made acutely aware that I was probably the last in the line of those chefs whom Ceriale had invited to talks. Perhaps, understandably, he realized my reputation might not sit comfortably with Claridge's rearguard. There were certainly plenty of people who were ready to confirm that, and although they liked their eggs boiled, they didn't like the idea of them being 'fucking' boiled. I think what worked in our favour was that Ceriale was clearly a maverick and liked me. He had already realized that the rebirth of Claridge's was not a move to pander to the hotel's established clientele. What would happen when they were all dead and gone? What he had in mind was a rebirth of this old lady to accommodate the new money of a younger, wealthier generation. He sought to bring glamour by

the bucketful, and he did so with top American designers and investment funds that no one had ever dreamed about.

Ceriale made it clear that, before we went any further, he wanted to meet me. He was one of those operators who was guided by his feelings about people. All his consultants were people he liked, and if we were going to secure Claridge's, he and I would have to connect. I guess that I am a bit like that myself. It is not easy to work with people you don't like, and it just so happens that I tend to like people who are good at their jobs. I think that it's also linked to the search for loyalty. You want to feel that someone is with you for a bigger reason than just a pay packet.

It was arranged for Chris to take John and the general manager of Claridge's to *Royal Hospital Road* for lunch, and afterwards, I would come into the dining room and meet them. It gave us a chance to show John what we were about. Impress him, maybe.

Lunch was a hard slog for Chris. The general manager, let's just call him GM as in General Motors – was clearly not on our side. He couldn't understand change, and yet was swept along by the energy and vision of his new boss. As Chris said, he had reached the pinnacle of hotel management and was now extending a very tentative toe into hotel realignment. But a step, perhaps, too far for him.

So these two pumped Chris for all he was worth during lunch, asking him all the questions and expressing their doubts about how I would appear as the spearhead for the new restaurant. Both

Chris and I knew that I was, without doubt, the right choice, but, for the new owners, there were big bucks riding on the correct decision, so nothing was going to be decided there and then.

As I entered the dining room, I saw the three of them sitting in the corner. Chris did not look happy, and I was thinking that maybe things were not moving in the right direction. We all shook hands, and I could see at once why Chris was so impressed with John Ceriale. He is not tall, he is thinning on top to the point of balding, and he is straight out of the Mafia's family album. He was dressed immaculately, with blue suit, cufflinks on double cuffs, and a quiet tie. I wondered if I should be kissing his hand. 'Hey, Gordon, nice ta meet ya.' He told me that he enjoyed lunch and that he was hoping we might do some stuff together with Claridge's. He was definitely twitchy, and I saw his eye land on a waiter who had joined the company only a week before. 'Haven't I seen him before?' he asked. My heart sank, as I knew that we had snatched this boy from Claridge's. 'Have you been stealing my fuckin' staff, Gordon? Is this what you do over here? Is this how you operate?' The man was all over me, and I saw Chris shifting from one foot to the other like he was trying to run through a trough of honey. GM was also uncomfortable with the way the conversation was going. More like a good slapping than a conversation, I was thinking. GM was chewing his top lip like there was a sticky wart on it.

'If you don't like me, Gordon, I'm outta here. Do you want me to fuck off out of the restaurant?'

Jesus! What have I done here? I looked at him and it just came out. ‘Yes, he came over from Claridge’s,’ – GM was looking on stonily – ‘and he tells me that the staff have a picture of the new owners on their dartboard. He says that your head has the most holes in it. Why is that, John?’

He looked at me, and the whole of *Royal Hospital Road* had a frozen moment. ‘Hey, is that so? They stick more darts in me than any other fella? Fucking brilliant.’ And with that, he laughed aloud, grabbed my hand and shook it like we’d been the best of buddies for years. I wondered afterwards what prompted me to say that. It was pretty dangerous stuff, and I can only think that either I was getting angry with this man for talking to me in my restaurant as though I was a criminal, or I just wanted to show him that we could toss in the occasional Molotov as well.

Somehow, although I was not sure as they left immediately afterwards, I thought we had made progress.

Our deal was eventually struck, and we got control of the dining room and kitchen. Blackstone paid for the design and refit in return for 11 per cent of our turnover by way of rent. Maybe a high rent, but just look at what we were getting: a beautiful dining room in the heart of Mayfair with all the glitz that was about to come shimmering through the door. Even the kitchen fit-out was paid for, although we had to wade in and replan the whole area after what we considered was a muddled first attempt. In later deals, this became our area of expertise, but that’s another story.

Within the old kitchen, there was a drink dispense area just

opposite the main stoves where countless cocktails had been served to the waiting staff to take through to the dining room. It had been in my mind to look for a space to put in a chef's table, and this looked perfect. A chef's table was originally just a table in the kitchen for friends of the chef or visiting chefs who would sit down and taste the kitchen's offerings. This simple concept developed so that guests of the restaurant could also eat in the kitchen and learn more about what they were eating, about the ingredients and how they are cooked. Chris will always maintain that it was his idea, but the idea went up to the Claridge's management for their approval. They thought the concept hilarious, particularly the GM, and asked what we imagined the turnover generated by such a table of six would be. 'Probably around £440,000 a year,' Chris replied. They continued to laugh, but we got our way, and a year after opening it, had turned over £500,000 – probably more than Claridge's Royal Suite took in.

The Chef's Table became a trademark of our operation, and is a feature in nearly all of our restaurants. It makes great commercial sense. For years, guests never dreamed of coming near a commercial kitchen. Suddenly, everyone is interested – not just in food, but how it is put together, and its production has become theatre. The chefs love it when they see guests interested in what they do. Very often, they will invite the guests to the stove to help stir a pot or dice a shallot. The table is a great revenue source, and, occasionally, tips are exceptional

– as once witnessed when the three ladies of a particularly lively Chef's Table stood up and bared their tits in gratitude. The brigade cheered and the evening became buried in folklore. Unfortunately, it was my day off.

The Chef's Table is also the guarantee of total hygiene. Everyone working in the kitchen knows that clean is not enough. It has to look as it did on the day it opened. Shine, polish, burnish, sparkle – the whole nine yards. No fucking excuses.

The opening of *Gordon Ramsay at Claridge's* was delayed by three months. It would have been inconceivable originally, but the combined noise of drilling and the preciousness expressed by hotel guests made the original opening date of July an impossibility. This had an unexpected benefit.

The taking over of Claridge's restaurant had brought to my attention the concept of TUPE, the Transfer of an Undertaking Protection of Employment. In essence, this meant that anyone employed by a going concern, company or business was automatically transferred as an employee to the new owners or employers, irrespective of how the transfer of the business took place. Sounds reasonable in the first instance – until you realize that you may be taking on employment liabilities relating to people with thirty years' service. In the case of Claridge's, there were something like eighty such employees, and this was a real concern. Not only had they been around this establishment for years, but during that time, they had taken on personas that would in no way suit the operation that we had in mind.

What I didn't realize was that they were as nervous about coming on board as I was about their existence. The easy life of serving twenty or so guests at lunch or dinner was about to come to an end. We were already working on 120 guests for lunch and 150 in the evenings, and word was out on what we expected from our staff. With this in mind, forty of the transferees had already tendered their notices and were on their way to pastures new or, perhaps, just out to pasture. With the announcement of a September opening, the others threw in the towel, every single one of them, and we were free to start afresh. Thank you, God.

For John Ceriale, there were always three fundamental components in opening a successful restaurant: the location, the chef and the design. Well, we certainly had the location, and the kitchen was never going to be a problem. The design – or, rather, the designer – was the ace up John Ceriale's sleeve. Tucked away in an old converted cold store in New York's Tribeca was Thierry Despont, who was given the commission to not only bring Claridge's foyer into the new age of old elegance, but was also charged with the design of my new restaurant.

Claridge's restaurant had been on the ground floor on the west side of the hotel for 100 years and had probably never turned a profit. It was a mausoleum – a huge, high-ceilinged cathedral where tail-coated waiters had pranced between the tables, dispensing arrogance and superciliousness while serving plates of grown-up school dinners. The task facing any designer would be daunting. It was easy to throw out the aspidistras and

Victorian bric-à-brac, but all that was left was an echoing cave large enough to hangar a jumbo jet.

One winter's day, we found ourselves in Tribeca about to meet the man who was going to change all that. His cold store had been transformed into an amazing five floors of sample rooms, drawing desks and Apple Macs. He was a tall, nasal Frenchman with a confidence and arrogance that I liked. Moreover, he was someone who listened to us when we started on the long list of considerations that he would have to take on board. He presented a three-dimensional concept of what he had in mind. Fucking breathtaking, as we sat and watched. This was the guy who spruced up the Statue of Liberty on its 200th birthday, and now he was about to design my new restaurant.

You may remember that, earlier on, I thought that the Claridge's challenge was about to launch us into a different league and, in doing so, it would introduce me to a whole new world of international travel and an involvement with people who think in global terms. You know that I am already beginning to understand that this will become the template for the years to come, and I am shitting myself with excitement.

The deal to take this over was as simple as ABC. The owners were to pay all the big bills. The megabucks that were needed to make it happen came from them. All I had to do was find the money to supply the china, the silver, glassware, the 'tabletops', the staff uniforms, the kitchen equipment and a little working capital. I say 'a little working capital' because, of course, when

the restaurant opened, money started to come in on the first night, even before the last table was crumbed down. That meant we had thirty days before we had to pay the staff and sixty days of income before having to pay a supplier. Chris, who had come from a thirty-year career in printing, reminded me that he had to wait between sixty and 120 days for his money in his previous life. The only thing that spoilt this positive cash flow arrangement was having to pay three months' rent in advance, provide a minimum of £100,000 in authorized and paid-up capital, and arrange a letter of credit from the bank to cover a quarter's rent in case of default. In addition, we paid 11 per cent of our net takings to Blackstone by way of rent. As I said, easy as ABC.

The negotiations over the drafting of the lease and the operating agreement went on forever. Chris spent hours in meetings with marked-up drafts going backwards and forwards. What we didn't realize then was that the format was to become a way of life for the two parties, and was to be used for a further twelve restaurants at the time of writing this. And that's simply because we got it right at the beginning.

The restaurant build seemed to take forever. It did, however, give us time to recruit the right staff, train them and make sure that everything was in place, ready for the big opening. It was time to acquaint ourselves with systems and procedures, which, in the coming two years, grew into Gordon Ramsay Holdings and set the stage for three new openings a year for the following five years.

The opening night was a glitzy affair – a real ball for all. The restaurant was cleared of tables and chairs so that over 500 guests could enter through the magnificent foyer of Claridge's to see the fabulous transformation of the mausoleum. Outside along the kerb were half a dozen nineteenth-century hackney carriages, each with a pair of horses with their noses in their feedbags – right back to when Claridge's first threw its doors open to the public. The press boys were everywhere, and even then, on that very first night, before the till had even rung up once, I knew that we had just broken through rock and found a vein of gold. John Cerialle, a shy man when it comes to the public, was there to see the launch of his baby with a grin the size of the Brooklyn Bridge.

That is not to say that *Gordon Ramsay at Claridge's* proceeded without a hitch. In the first year, we bottom-lined at £600,000. The second year was much the same. But in the third, we closed the year off at £1.65 million and then went on to reach close to £2 million in each successive year, and that must tell a tale.

The first year was hard. We were soon receiving, on average, sixteen letters of complaint a week, and something had to be done about it. The weekly operations meeting was born, which was no more than a meeting of the restaurant director, his managers, the head chef and his lieutenants, the head receptionist, the HQ heads of department from HR, training and private dining, and either Chris or myself to chair the meeting. They were often merciless meetings in our search for perfection. I recall one week when there were eighteen people all sitting

in a large circle without a table to hide behind, and one of the receptionists, a fat, self-contented moose, smirked after admitting that she had lashed up on a booking. The smirk drained away as it was pointed out that, as she had risked jeopardizing the GR name with her recklessness, she could now leave the room, leave the company, and never be heard of again. And that is exactly what happened. Amazing, after that, how we had everyone's undivided attention.

So, what happened during the first two years that added a million pounds to the bottom line? Why did that not happen from the beginning? Surely there was a simple enough formula here of booking guests in from an apparently endless list of reservations requests, offering the same menu each day and washing the dirty plates at the end of each service. Most restaurants would have given their eye teeth to make £600,000 a year, but we knew that there was an opportunity to fine-tune every area of the operation, leading to bigger bucks and true longevity for the restaurant.

The single most effective step was to introduce profit and loss numbers to the kitchen management. Chefs are not normally numbers people, but I saw how they sat up when Chris alluded to the information that the office could pick up from the kitchen's activities just from the food margins, the primary indicator of how much was spent on ingredients, compared to the amount of food sales. If the chef carried on buying Welsh lamb when the prices went up without increasing the menu price or switching to Pyrenean lamb, his monthly food margin would drop a couple

of points, and the office knew there was a fuck-up somewhere. The menu stayed more or less the same and, therefore, the food margins did not falter.

As the kitchens began to understand the importance of buying intelligently, turning stock and charging in accordance with market costs, a bonus system was introduced in accordance with performance. As such, it represented financial rewards for doing the job right. Commission or bonuses are nearly always associated with sales or deal making, and it just seemed right that safeguarding aspects of the bottom line also deserved reward and motivation to keep going along that track. This had to be carefully watched, as the last thing I wanted was overkill when margins rose at the expense of quality. That was not the idea. It's just that, when I think back to *Royal Hospital Road*, it was always our boast that we never bought on price, just quality and timely delivery.

The other essential indicator was salary costs as a percentage of sales. There had to be sufficient staffing, but not over-staffing. Also added into the formula had to be the training and retention of staff. When commis enlisted and then left in less than six months, we came up with a bonus system, whereby those staying for a year earned a one-off payment at the end of the term. This immediately had anyone thinking twice before throwing in the towel.

The art of upselling is a sensitive but necessary subject. There is nothing more irritating than when a table is approached half a

dozen times and asked if they want water. Once is fine, and the question has to be asked. After that, it is vital that an indicator is left on the table so that any further approach is avoided. Either remove the water glasses if it was 'No,' or place a bottle coaster on the table to indicate that a bottle is already on the way. So simple.

Successful and intelligent upselling is bringing to the guests' attention something that they want, but just hadn't thought about. Sit a party down at the table and ask them what they may like to drink, and there will be total confusion. Particularly if the guests don't know each other. Suggest the champagne trolley, and you're home and dry. It cuts across the whole problem for a guest who doesn't want to be the first to choose. And, in the meantime, you kick off with six glasses of pink champagne on the bill at £9.50 a glass, with six happy guests who are beginning to realize that they are going to enjoy themselves.

Statistics on the *Gordon Ramsay at Claridge's* scale did my head in at the beginning. At Claridge's, we agreed to put £1 on every bill in the months of November and December for a London charity called StreetSmart. The proceeds were to go to London's down-and-outs, and we, in fact, decided to extend this to six of the restaurants. So, how much did £1 a table produce in those two months for six little restaurants? Something in the region of £23,000. That means that we served 23,000 tables – not guests – in sixty-one days. Extend this to the number of feet belonging to all the guests (allowing an average of two feet per

guest) that make up these tables, and you begin to understand why we need a twenty-four-hour maintenance team, why we need to replace the fucking carpets every three years, and why, unless you do this, the place will wilt like a lettuce leaf at Ascot.

What do guests look for more than anything when entering a restaurant? What they want is attention. They want to see a smile, an acknowledgement, a welcome the moment they enter, and the average restaurant is fucking crap at this simple courtesy. Either you are completely ignored and staff at the reception desk carry on talking among themselves, or someone challenges you with 'Name?' And on giving your name, they repeat it like a fucking automaton, without so much as a 'Mr' or 'Mrs'. Their attention then flicks down the reservations list, and they proceed to highlight the name in Day-Glo green or rub it out like a gleeful schoolgirl, fresh from a shoplifting spree at Office World.

People in a restaurant see it as their chance for recognition. Give them a warm, welcoming smile. Get their name right with the appropriate title, and make it sound like you are really pleased to see them. They are already flushed pink that they are recognized and have your undivided attention. A good restaurant manager understands this, and ensures that his staff are drilled to follow these simple rules. For Christ's sake, the guests' satisfaction is what your job is all about. Get it wrong and you will hear no more because there won't be any guests left.

Once past the desk, the guest is now looking out for two things: which table he's going to get and whether any of the other guests

are looking and thinking, ‘a regular’ or ‘Who is this git who’s getting the special stroking?’ All part of the service, and still not a menu in sight.

So, in the early days of *Gordon Ramsay at Claridge’s*, we decided to do something about the smile factor. I guess it stemmed from a remark that Chris made when he was asked what qualifications he had to run restaurants. He just looked up and said, ‘I eat in them.’ You see, what was going around in his maze of a brain was that chefs and waiters only see what they do from their own positions. They come through college, tiny kitchens and bistros, and never get to see the wider picture. I think it’s called one-dimensional. So what I decided to do was invite our own staff to experience their own restaurant. Get done up, bring their nearest and dearest, and have a good time. They’ll soon get pissed off if they are kept waiting for the main course or they have to pour their own wine or they have to try and understand what Zolga, the waitress from Latvia, is trying to say about the menu. It’s an advanced education so that they actually know what it feels like when things go wrong. Why don’t air crews get nervous when the wings on their planes flap hysterically in turbulence halfway across the Atlantic? They stay calm because they have been shown that the plane is built to survive, even when concrete blocks are dropped on it.

And that’s what knowledge and understanding in *Gordon Ramsay at Claridge’s* brought me. What we achieved as a team became an amazing success story. Ultimately, it depended on

the little things like the smile people get when they come into our restaurants and the understanding of our guests' expectations gained first-hand by our staff. As ever, it is the detail that counts.

CHAPTER SIX

FOREIGN FIELDS

Control from afar will bring its own problems, and shouting from a thousand miles away becomes but a whisper.

BY THE END of 2000, my two London restaurants were running well. Mark Askew was looking after *Royal Hospital Road* in his usual brilliant and protective way, and Marcus Wareing was steering *Pétrus* into its second year of trading. It was a time for me to get bored or to look for something else – or somewhere else. I felt that somewhere there was a greater pulse to life, but I couldn't quite see how to grasp it.

What I was about to learn were the basic, underlying secrets of how to expand globally, with restaurants that were thousands of miles away. Same standards of cuisine, same standards of service, but with lines the length of which we had to extend control.

Then, just before Christmas that year, we had a call from Hilton asking if we might be interested in opening a restaurant in their new hotel in Dubai. It sounded a bit exotic, and both Chris and I were immediately all ears. This could be our first venture outside the UK, and, at the time, there were bucketfuls of hype about duty-free shopping malls and the unrelenting, bronzing sunshine of Dubai.

After a blitz of initial e-mails, we both agreed to go to Dubai straight after Christmas.

I have to say that, in those days, I never really got the hang of what Dubai was all about. Maybe you had to see it as a holiday resort where you just went and broiled yourself in the sun, but there seemed so little to do. Still, all we were doing was checking it out as a possible site to spread our wings.

We arrived on a Thursday in January 2001. This, actually, was treated in the Muslim world as a Saturday, and Friday became Sunday. Different culture, different calendar. I could cope with that, so what's next? Well, no stand-alone restaurants. All restaurants had to be in a hotel. Hmmm. OK.

We were picked up at the airport and taken to the Hilton Dubai Jumeirah, immediately learning Lesson One, that there were two lived-in parts of Dubai: the city itself and the resort area, with forty-five minutes of motorway between them. Our itinerary was full-on, even if Hilton hadn't quite got the hang of how to spell my name or, for that matter, the word 'itinery'. It was filled with presentations of the project, visits to half a dozen restaurants and a dazzling venture into the desert, riding a four-wheel wagon along the ridges of the dunes in the early evening and then stopping to watch the breathtaking sunset.

We were taken for lunch in a submarine to the seafood restaurant within the Burj Al Arab and then shown around this towering monument to the future of Dubai. The submarine, of course, didn't move, and when I went into the restaurant, with its wrap-around fish tank, I began to realize that I had entered a Disneyland for crustaceans. I can't even remember what the

food tasted like, and I guess that most people left with the same experience.

The hotel was just a building site in the city next to the Dubai Creek. It was also the first building I had ever been in while it was being built. It is so difficult to visualize a bar area or the entrance to your restaurant when all you see in front of you is raw concrete and piles of sand, tiles and hard hats. But I couldn't help being impressed. It was to become a beautiful steel and glass boutique hotel, probably not in the best position for the Dubai tourist, but graceful and upmarket.

But when we went on an early morning visit to the fish market it was a different story – and a frightening experience for the prospect of doing business there. The heat was fucking incessant, and there was all this fish lying around in the least hygienic environment imaginable. Great slabs of tuna weighing 200 pounds were left for an hour on the tarmac of the access road while someone went off to get the truck. The place was a fucking shambles, and I was glad to move out of the smelly, dirty sales halls. The thought of coming down to market in the early morning to buy the day's fish supplies for the hotel didn't give me a rush of confidence. Here, for sure, was a clash of the old Arab culture and today's new hotel culture, with all its Western expectations.

Nor was the welcome from the owners exactly overwhelming. This was going to be a three-way deal between them, Hilton as the operators, and us for the food and beverage consultancy. So,

I guess, in the owners' minds, we were just a Western name that had to be imported. They would have little control over us, so we were an irritating necessity that had to be tolerated.

It struck me then, as it has many times since, that hotel operators around the developing world have to adapt themselves to a million different cultures. I have met one or two senior hotel people who do nothing but act as diplomats, easing the relationships between operators and owners. I always think of it as a hard way to earn money.

After all that, the trip was a success. We left Dubai agreeing to move forward, and the deal was relatively simple. We would license the name of Gordon Ramsay to Hilton for its use in anything to do with promoting food and drinks in the hotel. We would also supply ten senior staff members and the menus, and be consultants about food and drink. All that was left was for Hilton to come over to London, with the owners' representatives, so that we could show them we were the right choice.

But there was an immediate problem. We could hardly sail into our shoebox office in the Fulham Road with our guests and announce that this was our headquarters. Not much commercial cred there. So, Chris's sitting room in Mayfair, with its enormous oak table, had to become our central office. Miraculously, it worked. By the time they had been to the restaurants and listened to Chris's spiel, we were in, and they were happy to start the legal process. Looking back now, it was probably the last time we had to puff out our cheeks to make ourselves look bigger than we

were.

In the following months, we did everything necessary to get the the hotel ready for its opening. We had already decided on Angela Hartnett to lead the team in Dubai. She would leave our employment and join Hilton for a two-year tour. This was an inspired choice because Angela was so much more than just a chef. She could organize and motivate people and still remain the beautiful survivor of the *Aubergine* days. No one could resist her charming manner, and I always knew that our name in Dubai would be safe.

Towards the autumn, the hotel began to open. I say 'began' because that's how it was. First, the foyer and a few floors were open to the public. Then the food and beverage operation kicked in, and, gradually, the show hit the road. That is, until the fateful date of 11 September 2001. This was to guarantee an almost empty hotel for weeks to come. Suddenly, nobody wanted to go near the Middle East.

It was a bit like John West tinned salmon and Perrier water. They both collided with commercial reality, but memories faded a little bit with each dawn. It just needed the rawness of what happened to blur a little, and then things began to return to how they were – or in our case, how they were meant to be.

The one thing that we, as restaurateurs, hadn't yet experienced was the difficulty of dealing with problems so far away. If something flares up in Mayfair or St James's, we can be there in ten minutes. Not so when your restaurant is thousands of miles

away, in a different time zone and, for that matter, on different days of the week. What's more, we were already dealing with the beginnings of *Gordon Ramsay at Claridge's* and the end of our first Scottish adventure. Somehow we had to hold it together, and deal with Dubai at a distance.

The early problems were about hiring and keeping staff when they were far more used to our salary scales than the budget-driven rates of Hilton employees. That was when we started to do something really stupid. To keep our people there to protect our name and promote all things Gordon Ramsay, we started to pay them a supplement from London. Apart from our signing-on fee, all we got was a flat percentage of the monthly food and beverage turnover. After 9/11, this revenue stream was so thin that our staff supplements were gobbling up the whole lot.

Worse, our main restaurant – which we called *Verre* – was short of most of the elements that go into a restaurant for fine dining. Chris went over a number of times and would leave pages of notes on how to turn this around. Most of all, he begged for a carpet. It was perfectly clear that the wooden floor, glass wall and absence of any drapes or soft furnishings needed a rethink. Quite apart from anything else, the quietest conversation would echo around the room. A carpet would have been a good start, but a year passed ... and still no carpet.

It was so difficult for Hilton to persuade the owners to respond that I began to think that this wasn't about running a decent restaurant or hotel, but some private battle of wills. Or maybe

the owners just decided to do it in their own time. For some bizarre reason, we were never allowed to contact the owners directly. This was their rule, not Hilton's, and it was the one and only agreement we ever had where we never got to speak to our partners.

I'll say one thing for Hilton. They were always tied to their budgets and hotel culture, but they were sometimes capable of thinking outside the box. Chris explained that, if they insisted on giving tiny rooms to the Gordon Ramsay inmates and salaries to match, there would soon be no staff worth having. They agreed to tear up the agreement – or, at least, rewrite the relevant clauses. At last, we were able to drop our salary supplements. Even a new carpet threatened to happen, and solutions to all the changes that we had whinged about. Finally, and it was an enormous fucking relief, *Gordon Ramsay at the Hilton Dubai Creek* began to take off. Both parties had acted like grown-ups and, at last, we were marching on together.

We have never made much money in Dubai. There have been regular revenues fed over to us and paid in what must be the world's weakest currency, the US dollar. But the one message that came loud and clear was that a lot of the guests who came to our London restaurants also visited *Verre* in Dubai. They go there, I think, because they feel that they can rely on the quality and the standard. It repeatedly won *Time Out Dubai's* Restaurant of the Year, and was clearly rated as the pinnacle of cuisine in the city.

Angela came through her two years like a shining star. Her rapport and loyalty with the staff were legendary, and she was able to keep her head in a crisis. Sometimes, the crises were extreme. After one successful Christmas, she organized an evening on a barge in the creek with a buffet and dance for all the staff. As she sat next to her senior sous-chef at the stern of the rusting tub, the handrail gave way, and both plunged into the black waters. By the time they were fished out, the sous-chef was dead. This was like the loss of a family member, and yet, the following morning, Angela was back in her kitchen and there for her staff when they needed her.

By then, things were happening in London, and we were putting together ideas for *The Connaught*. Angela was brought back to take charge of this. She had proved her worth many times over, and now it was time to reward her work with a new operation and a small stake in the equity. She had also brought on her Dubai successor in the person of Jason Atherton, who, in time, would cut his teeth there and return to London to open *maze*, a groundbreaking new restaurant that was to bring him to the forefront of the rising stars.

If running top restaurants around the world simultaneously was the problem, this was our solution, and it was the exact opposite of my press caricature as an uncontrollable boss, shouting and swearing at the staff. It was all about finding the best people and making sure we kept them. Everything we do depends on loyal staff on whom we can rely.

Finding great talent, looking after staff and nurturing their talent is what we learned to do well. Losing good people is symptomatic of only one thing: truly crap, appalling and abysmal management.

It also meant that I didn't have to be there in person so much. My visits to Dubai were supposed to take place four times a year. This was no great problem in the early days, but it gradually decreased to two visits, as the pressure on my diary grew elsewhere. In the meantime, the city of Dubai was also growing like a fucking monster. I remember, on my first visit, how someone had pointed along a road where there were three hotels and told me that eighteen more were being built there. Five years later, there were close to 100 hotels going up. No wonder I kept hearing that 27 per cent of the world's cranes were there, swinging around a million building sites.

Once we had sorted the initial problems, all our staff who went out for a two-year tour enjoyed life there. It's tax-free, of course, and there is plenty of free time to improve your golf handicap. Jason Atherton not only got his down to scratch, but also found the time to acquire himself a beautiful wife.

That is jumping ahead in the story. By the time Dubai was beginning to run smoothly, we had made the leap – in little more than a year – from being a very successful operator of two small London restaurants to being a global group. That brought challenges of its own and, for me, an urgent lesson that was absolutely fucking vital. I had to learn what to do when we got

complaints – and the hidden benefits of people complaining.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WE WRITE TO TELL YOU HOW DISAPPOINTED WE WERE

You are never always right, and in your customer's view, you are probably wrong. Sometimes it's best to give them the benefit of the doubt.

IN THE AUBERGINE days, I had become an arrogant little fucker, and whenever a letter of complaint arrived, it went straight in the bin as an appropriate testimony to the writer's credentials. When we started at *Royal Hospital Road*, this tradition carried on. It seemed normal enough, until one day Chris found out and came storming into the restaurant to point out a couple of home truths. Fuck! He can rant when so moved. And what pissed me off, of course, was that he was bang on the button.

He went on about binning the most valuable management tool in the chest, not to mention a page from the guest services' bible. I always grit my teeth when Chris's face starts to turn puce. You know you're in for a bollocking and a lecture, but you just fear the bastard is going to have a heart attack before he delivers the point. On this occasion, he went on about how one stone thrown in the pond causes ripples from the centre to the edges and you can't stop them, and how important words like humility, feedback, reputation and word of mouth are if we want to be serious restaurateurs. A guest has gone to *Gordon Ramsay* and

has, of course, told friends, family and half of fucking Islington that he (or she) is going. So, the next time he sees everyone, they ask what it was like. If the reply comes back 'Crap,' the ripples have reached the edge of the pond. Time to launch the lifeboat. So spake Chris. He cooled down, and we then changed our policy.

The letter of complaint is the one chance to do two things. I now know this.

The first move is to read it and work out what sort of letter we have here. Has this guest who has bothered to write got a genuine point, or is he just whingeing? Was he kept waiting for forty minutes for the menu? Did the sommelier sound sniffy when asked for table water? Was someone ironing a tablecloth in view at 4.30 p.m., ready for the evening service? Or is this letter so vitriolic about every aspect of dinner that you might begin to suspect that this is an arsehole looking for a freebie?

What we need to know is whether or not we did something really stupid, and can we improve ourselves? Is there some blemish that has gone unnoticed until now? It is important for us to take a step back and look at the complaint with objectivity. Although it is vital to redeem our name with a guest when things go wrong, it is also of paramount importance that we analyse what went wrong and learn from it. You cannot do that if you are being sniffy and precious about the complaint.

The second move is to deal with the complaint. If a scarf has been lost because we gave it away to someone else, then it's our

fault. We mustn't concern ourselves that there is now someone waddling around with a shatouche scarf around his neck that he knows isn't his. Take it on the chin and write a cheque. If the waiter got muddled and refilled a still water glass with sparkling water, then apologize and make it perfectly clear that, on their next visit, the guest's table will be welcomed with a glass of champagne. We tripped up on our own shoelace, and this is the cost.

The big complaint, where clearly everything went tits-up, is different altogether. Not only do we start by apologizing without proffering any kind of excuse, but we make it clear that we are already in debt to the guest for bothering to write and tell us about whatever ghastly fuck-up took place. An apology removes the wasp's sting and prepares the wound for suitable medical attention. Start giving reasons for why it went wrong, and you are challenging the guest. This is not the time, believe me. The ruffled feathers need stroking back into some semblance of order.

Once we are into the fourth paragraph of apologies, self-flagellation and the Opus Dei treatment, we deliver the *coup de grâce*. We invite the table back as guests of *Gordon Ramsay*, which will give us the opportunity to redeem ourselves. The only slight brake on kissing the wasp's sting better is the phrase 'with wines chosen by our sommelier'. We are happy to gild the lily, but we are not turning it into a pot of gold.

So, back to the pond. The guests return and have a swell time.

The front of house performs miracle surgery, and the guests who arrive with a certain apprehension suddenly realize that we are serious about this act of redemption. The wasp's sting heals, and before you know it, a letter arrives saying, 'Fuck me, that's better.' And guess what? The fifty people they told previously about the crap time are now hearing that it was all put right. A happy ending and a result that was never anticipated. It is, believe me, the one and only way to deal with a serious complaint.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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