

So you want to set up your own bar?

A NEW *THEME* GUIDE TO THE PRACTICALITIES OF OPENING YOUR FIRST BAR BY HUW GOTT AND WILL BECKETT OF THE UNDERDOG GROUP



Huw Gott and Will Beckett

"DON'T DO IT! DON'T DO IT! YOU'LL HAVE A FEW MONTHS OF PAIN AND MISERY, MAYBE A YEAR, AND THEN YOU'LL GO BUST!"

That was the verdict of someone we spoke to before we set up our first bar, someone who'd done exactly that (but with a divorce and an enthusiastic new drinking habit thrown in).

And when we told our friends and families our plans the response was equally pessimistic. One of our dads conducted a concerted campaign, detailing very clearly why we shouldn't do this, reeling off all the usual killer stats. Our mums worried a lot, they both had experience of the hospitality industry and knew how hard it could be, and one grandma was so disappointed she even shed a tear – she wanted her grandson to do something she could be proud of announcing at her bridge club, a lawyer or a doctor, not a bar owner (isn't that a euphemism for gangster?) in London's seedy East End.

But with the arrogance of ignorance we ploughed on with our plans to convert a run down, grease-smearred Bengal Fried Chicken into a nice neighbourhood bar. And we soon realised that the pessimists had a point as it was a lot harder (and more expensive) than we thought it was going to be. We had to wade through a whole lot of pain and misery, but somehow we got it open.

Once it was open it almost went under. Because of all the mistakes we made, we only just survived our first year. We were disorganised front of house and back of house, and at times really struggled to keep everything going. It wasn't until quite recently that we realised it all could have been so much easier, that a lot of

OPEN YOUR BAR

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the problems we encountered were avoidable and that if we’d known then what we know now we could have saved ourselves a lot of time, stress and money.

We definitely don’t want to scare anyone off from setting up their own place, we just want to try and help smooth the path a bit. All in, we’ve enjoyed doing what we’ve done immensely and have no regrets. Neither of us can remember many more euphoric moments than when on hectic nights we managed to catch our breath between making Mojitos, sweeping up broken glass and trying to sort out the blocked toilet, and seeing a crowd of people enjoying the drinks we’d selected, designed and made, dancing to a DJ we’d picked and generally having a great time in our place.

The early days were a rollercoaster. High highs, low lows. We found that we were good at some things, but rubbish at others. Although some things came instinctively we had no idea how to deal with certain situations, resorting inevitably to trial and error – and mostly error.

In retrospect, we should have thought carefully before we started, asked ourselves what we needed help with and then gone about trying to get that help. We got some advice from a couple of

friendly bar owners and they gave us some contacts and pointers, but because they were focusing on their own thing, the bits here and there never really amounted to much. Sometimes they were even counterproductive. With some proper guidance it would all have been so much easier.

Our mission through this column is to try and give some of that help, to make life a little bit easier for anyone planning to set up their own place. Opening your first place is never going to be completely plain sailing, but hopefully we’ll be able to make some suggestions that will help minimise the misery bit as much as possible.

Each month we’ll focus on a different aspect of setting up and running your own bar – from developing the germ of an idea into a business plan to getting a place running as profitably as possible and then thinking about setting up bar number two.

We will be completely open and honest about the many mistakes we’ve made at all these stages, and the lessons we learnt from them, as well as the things that, sometimes by accident, we ended up getting right first time. And where appropriate we will recommend specialists who might be able to help further on specific issues. ■

“We’ve learnt everything the hard way. In this column we’ll help you avoid making the mistakes yourself”



WHO ARE WE?

We own and operate four very different venues in London and doing the fourth was a whole lot easier than doing the first, so along the way we’ve learnt some things that hopefully we’ll be able to pass on. Through our consultancy we’ve also just helped set up a fifth, The Hideaway, a late-night bar with good pizza and good drinks in the wastelands of Archway, North London.

Our places, in order of conception, are:

- **The Redchurch** – a great little Shoreditch bar that’s never won any awards and never will, but it’s packed week in week out by people having a good time
- **Green & Red** – a Mexican restaurant and tequila bar we set up along with Henry Besant and Dre Masso of Worldwide Cocktail Club fame, the current *Evening Standard* Bar of the Year
- **The Marquess Tavern** – an old fashioned English pub focusing on good quality British food and beer glorious beer, the current *Time Out* Gastropub of the Year
- **Hawkmoor** – a steakhouse and cocktail bar which recently won *Theme’s* Best Drinks Selection award and which, according to Jay Rayner from *the Observer*, serves the best steak in this country.

WE’VE MESSED UP SO YOU DON’T HAVE TO

We set up a consultancy to help first-time – but also more established – bar owners when we realised how much we messed up during our first year or so in business, and how much easier (and cheaper) it would have been if we’d known then what we know now. We wanted to open a consultancy that would fill in the gap for first-time operators or people who were experiencing problems.

We could have saved ourselves tens of thousands of pounds and a whole lot of time and stress – Will had a full head of hair when we started out... The list of mistakes we made is almost endless. We overspent on the fit-out, took on awful contractors, got our pricing wrong, didn’t get very good deals from suppliers, didn’t have our payroll or any other back-office systems up and running quickly enough, hired some completely inappropriate staff and didn’t know how to manage them. But it was a very forgiving site (small, low rent, simple offering, easy-going customers) and we got away with it. Just.

Basically we’ve learnt everything the hard way – by making mistakes that, with a bit of extra knowledge and more experience, were easily avoidable. In this column we’ll go through as many of these mistakes as we can fit in and will hopefully help some of you avoid making them yourselves. ■

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO GET IN TOUCH WITH UNDERDOG YOU CAN FIND THEM ONLINE AT WWW.UNDERDOG-GROUP.COM OR EMAIL INFO@UNDERDOG-GROUP.COM