

# How to avoid kitchen nightmares

EVEN AWARD-WINNING KITCHENS HAVE BAD DAYS, SAY WILL AND HUW

Everyone loved the food. Within a few months of opening we'd had lots of good reviews, we'd won a major award and a couple of minor ones and, most importantly, we'd attracted lots of paying customers. Everything was looking rosy and in large part that was down to the quality of the food we were serving. We loved our head chef, he was our favourite person in the world ever.

Meanwhile, over on the other side of town, we were about to open another place. Everything was going smoothly, we had a great head chef lined up and our recent success was making us feel confident. We knew that lots of bar operators were scared of food. But why? It's so easy.

And then suddenly everything went wrong...

Having heard good things about the one that had won plaudits and awards so quickly, one of the most influential reviewers in the country decided to pay it a visit. That night our super chef proved himself to be somewhat disorganised. He ran out of almost everything on the menu very early on and ready, steady, cooked a couple of dishes out of what he had to hand so that we had something to offer diners.

The reviewer in question was served by a new waitress who we discovered had something akin to a personality disorder that we hadn't picked up during



our recruitment process – she didn't seem to be able to say anything negative. Huw's Japanese wife says that some of her compatriots have a similar issue (there's no word for 'no' in Japanese).

So she didn't say "I'm afraid we don't have any lamb left today, but we do have...", and when the order was made she didn't say "sorry, I should have mentioned, but I'm afraid we don't have any of that left, but we do have..."

Instead she said: "Yes, no problem." So the reviewer placed an order and then waited. And waited. When another member of staff spotted the problem, the reviewer, at this point not in the best of moods, picked one of the chef's improvised dishes, which unfortunately wasn't up to his usual standards.

The result was a thoroughly deserved review from hell (one of the ones you see occasionally and think, thank God that's

not us on the receiving end, only this time it was).

Meanwhile, over on the other side of town, the day before our new place was set to open, the head chef took a (thankfully smallish) sub to pay for a few last-minute bits of kitchen kit, went shopping, and never returned.

In the space of a week or so we received a very public slating (double-page spread) and we were facing the prospect of opening a new restaurant with no head chef. That night, over a glass of wine or three we reminded ourselves that when we started out we swore that we wouldn't do food. Keep it simple, stick to drink.

We knew that food operations tended to be more complicated than wet-led operations: higher staff costs; higher set-up costs (kitchens are expensive things to fit out); often lower GP; tends to be more



Our experts Will Beckett and Huw Gott of the Underdog Group



➤ difficult to control the GP (wastage, portion control, seasonal price variations); quality control. So with our first place we started with almost no food, and then as we saw that it didn't even need that we gradually reduced down to nuts and olives. Nice and simple.

But then as we grew we started to do more and more food until we realised that we'd become as much a restaurant company as a bar company. We've had a few minor disasters along the way, but we've learnt a lot from all of them. So here are a few of our tips to avoid Food Hell:

- **Keep it simple.** Go for a short menu of things your kitchen are capable of churning out to a consistent standard day after day. Consistency is key. A good thing to do is focus on one thing and do it as well as you possibly can.
- **Work out how much food you want/need to do** before you spend money on design and equipment, it will be expensive to rejig things later (we know, we've had to do it).
- **Keep on top of the financials** – cost kitchen rotas before you open so you know what to expect and monitor food GPs and wages once you're open.
- **Hire carefully,** check references and get chefs to cook for you before you hire them. Watch them as they work (if you're unfamiliar with kitchens then try and get a chef friend involved in the hiring process). ■

**“A good thing to do is focus on one thing and do it as well as you can”**



### CASE STUDY:

#### The outsourced and out-of-control kitchen

When you're setting up, outsourcing your kitchen can be a tempting way to solve the food problem. And it does work sometimes, but be careful, it can go horribly wrong. We've never done it so we spoke to a couple of guys who have...

The Perritt brothers took over a run-down boozier in Kensal Green about a year ago and have gradually transformed it into a comfortable, elegantly refurbished pub with soul – the Regent. And they've had a few fun and games with their food offering along the way.

They inherited an outsourced Thai kitchen (a Thai family ran the kitchen and service and the pub got a 10 per cent cut of sales. However, they quickly noticed they were getting a 10 per cent cut of gross food sales and they were responsible for the VAT, so for every food sale they were paying out 17.5 per cent in VAT and receiving 10 per cent from the outsourced kitchen. Every food sale cost them money (no wonder the previous owners had been struggling). So if you do enter into an arrangement like this, check the maths.

They quickly knocked it on the head, but liked the idea of keeping a similar system. They knew that food wasn't one of their strengths and liked the idea of getting someone else to take it off their hands. They set up a similar arrangement with someone who already had a food business, but unfortunately it turned out to be "the worst decision we ever made: it was appealing because we thought the food would then be something that we wouldn't have to think about, but it was an important part of our business (30 per cent turnover) and we should have been thinking about it and we should have been controlling it." Instead, they lost control and the outsourced offering started to clash with the direction they were taking the pub. It was confusing for customers, standards slipped. Throw in a personality clash and a vague contract and everything got a bit messy. So again, make sure you have an easy get-out clause in case the arrangement doesn't work out.

In the end they took on the food offering: "It hasn't been a smooth ride, and it's been frustrating and stressful at times, but it was only when we started to give it the attention it deserved that the food side of things improved. Quality now is great, and importantly it fits with the rest of our business."

Go there (it's nice) and see what you think:

[www.theregentkensalgreen.com](http://www.theregentkensalgreen.com)



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