

Case study: Multiple pub operator

Andy Wilkinson, MD of Clover Taverns and the Cookhouse brand describes how he's cooked up a recipe for success with Pelican's help, and replicated it across their ten traditional pubs and inns ...



Andy Wilkinson is a man who knows what he wants. With a history of more than twenty years in the industry – from glass collector in his college days, to

Operations Director for GRS Inns – Wilkinson has brought his knowledge and experience to the forefront of operations as Managing Director of the group Clover Taverns.

One of the three shareholders of the company, Wilkinson began Clover Taverns in 2009 when he took on ten leased sites around the Midlands and North West. Subsequently he's conceived the Cookhouse brand which seven of the pubs trade under.

"A lot of our pubs are a part of the community where they're based, rather than being gastro pubs, but they still need a strong food offering," he says. Cookhouse was put together by Wilkinson in collaboration with several of his pub managers. "Much of the concept has been developed between myself and my managers who feedback from their experience," says Wilkinson. "We've signed and branded three of The Cookhouse pubs sites now; The Bell, The Woodside and The Fox. They follow a brand concept as you would expect from Brewers Fayre or any of the larger brands of that ilk.

"There's a misconception in the trade that when you say you do food, you have to either do food or do beer, and that isn't the case," he says. "We have a very strong wet trade driven by football, entertainment and quiz nights, but we also have a very strong food offer that complements that. We have a split of anything from 70/30 in favour of wet to 80/20, nevertheless the food is being sold in thousands of pounds a week rather than hundreds, because we have a very established trade in all of those outlets."

Wilkinson describes Cookhouse as one of the 'value food' pub brands, but was clear from the outset that he wanted them to be different from the others available.

"I was always of the mind that we wanted to follow mainstream activity and make sure that we had something that was competitive financially with the current market, but I felt we needed a few USPs to set us above the larger managed competitors. We needed a stamp of what we are at Cookhouse, and what we've had some success with the public - and sales accordingly - is some key featured dishes which are unique to the value food offer." So it's their sausages which set Cookhouse apart from the competition.

Each Cookhouse site has its own sausage machine and they make all their bangers to their own recipes, from scratch.

Testament to the quality of the sausages came via two silver and one bronze award from the BPEX British Pork awards. "We were the only pub to be awarded those," says Wilkinson, "everyone else was a butcher or meat supplier." The sausages have become a bit of a talking point, and during British Sausage Week the pubs invited local dignitaries to come and try their hand at sausage making, and to sample the recipes. They have even held sausage-making classes for customers.

But the menus Wilkinson designed are varied enough that all their patrons find something to whet their appetite, whether it's marinated chicken or home-made burgers. "It's unusual in the market place that we have these home-made recipes," he says, "and we offer some authentic, good quality dishes and a degree of uniqueness to our menu that a lot of the value food operators lack somewhat," he speculates.

More recently Wilkinson's success with the brand has seen him investigating the opportunity of franchising Cookhouse to other pubs, and he says it's something he wouldn't have felt confident exploring if it weren't for the service from Pelican and his suppliers. "People appear to want to replicate Cookhouse, and I think it is a testament to us that we've managed to spot an opportunity and have developed a successful



brand,” he nods. “It’s also that I have confidence that the suppliers I take with me are not going to let us down. My reputation for the brand would be diminished if they weren’t up to the task, because they are providing the key attributes to our successful menu.

I can only feel confident in going to the market and saying that I’m able to franchise my food, if all of my suppliers and business partners are able to deliver that and provide a good service, which they are. I can go to the market and be confident that if I’m offering a certain gross profit that you can achieve with our menus, that they’re going to be able to realise that and replicate it across the estate because of the benefits we’ve seen through Pelican.”

Wilkinson works closely with Pelican Purchasing Advisor Helen Mather who has recently helped him attain what he estimates to be an impressive £10k of savings across the company.

“Helen had mentioned that she had some very good deals with PHS [for hygiene services] but I said that unfortunately I’m tied into

contracts with another supplier,” says Wilkinson.

“But because she’d mentioned it, when I knew the contract was coming to an end I asked her to get me the quotes so I could benchmark it with what I’m paying at the moment. When she came back she’d found that switching to PHS will represent a saving on the current deal of about £5k per annum, so that’s quite substantial!

It’s a very good saving, so that was excellent. I expected it to be competitive but maybe not as competitive as that,” he smiles.

Helen has also gained Clover Taverns some great savings by switching their PDQ credit card machines. With these and Pelican deals on suppliers like M&J Seafood, and 3663 which Cookhouse relies on quite heavily for their menu, the value for Clover is significant.

“Helen has to work hard for her money with me!” laughs Wilkinson.

“I would pride myself as being an extremely savvy and tough negotiator, but Pelican have done

even better. I really feel that over the past year with Helen we’re really making it work for us,” he says. With his partnerships working well for the business, Wilkinson has his set firmly on the road ahead.

“I think it’s still a very tough market out there,” he nods, “and I’m not foolish enough to sit back here being conceited and thinking that everything’s fine and dandy, because unfortunately in this business you have to stay on your toes at all times or something else will come along.

I’m not saying I’ve done it, I’m there and I can claim the t-shirt, but we are looking at striving forward, rather than looking back and moaning about how it used to be.”

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