

THE LAST WINE BAR

Opened in 1990 in a former shoe factory at the end of St George's Street in Norwich, The Last has become a Norwich institution. In a sector with a very high attrition rate, its remarkable longevity is down to many factors – but perhaps the most important is the strong loyalty it has built up from its clientele over the years.



“We never wanted to be fashionable, but instead we were aiming at being popular,” says James Sawrey-Cookson, who owns the restaurant along with his stepson Ecky Limon. “If you try to rise on the next big fad, you will fail as soon as it passes; consistent quality, and feeling of ownership amongst customers, is what keep people coming back.”



How's Business?

When The Last first opened, the far end of St George's Street was something of a desert. Gradually businesses started moving to the area, with PriceWaterhouse Coopers in The Atrium, Howes Percival and Norwich Union in Colegate, and marketing agency Fox Murphy in St George's Street.

Ten years ago, these businesses provided a thriving and consistent lunchtime trade; gradually they have disappeared, and while many of these firms still use The Last for entertaining, the regular, 'works canteen' lunch trade started to dry up.

Now, however, a new breed of business is moving into the area, led by the development of St George's Works and St Mary's Works. 'Norwich Over The Water' is again starting to thrive – but the type of businesses has changed, with start-ups, creative sector and tech firms dominating. What they want is different from the more traditional companies which used to dominate, and The Last has had to evolve its offer to stay relevant.

Evening trade is less dependent on corporate clients and has remained remarkably resilient through a succession of economic downturns during the 28 years that The Last has been trading.

The Challenges

There are a number of challenges facing the business, some common to all in the hospitality trade, and others more geographically distinct:

- The relentless march of chain restaurants – with deep corporate pockets and economies of scale – are a common threat to all independent restaurants, especially in the city centre.
- Brexit: the leisure sector is all about the ‘confidence to spend’, and uncertainty and the fear of the unknown has knocked that confidence. This factor is affecting independents and chain restaurants alike.
- Costs: soaring rents, rising business rates, and the collapse in the value of sterling (which has a particularly big effect on the cost of wine) have all put pressure on the sector, particularly at a time when consumer confidence is not high, meaning that there is more price sensitivity than there might be at other times.
- The nature of eating out: over the years eating out has become more normalised, and in many cases less of an occasion. Restaurants have had to adapt their offer and their ambience accordingly. The Last’s focus on building a feel of familiarity and belonging has been an important factor in facing this challenge.

The Outlook

The business remains optimistic, despite these challenges. A planned refurbishment of the more formal restaurant part of the building, creating a more relaxed atmosphere, shows a willingness to invest and a recognition of the need to keep evolving – although The Last is careful not to change too drastically and alienate its extremely loyal customer base.

The regeneration of the area, and the shifting of the centre of the city’s gravity north of the river, bodes well for the future. The business will continue to operate as a fiercely independent, family-run enterprise, resisting the temptation to chase the latest fashion, instead concentrating on the things which have given it its longevity: consistency, quality of food, hospitality, and the ability and foresight to evolve as the market changes.

How Can The BID Help?

- Potentially by developing a strategy regarding energy consumption – perhaps a combined/co-operative approach to help reduce energy costs
- Reviving a city-wide Restaurateurs Association
- Championing independent businesses within the hospitality and leisure sector, and helping to create a level playing field to help them compete with corporate chains with deeper pockets