

Community service

Chef-turned-restaurateur Malcolm John is one of the few independent group operators to mine the capital's outer reaches successfully

On Tuesday, 9th of August Malcolm John boarded up the frontages of his two Croydon restaurants and crossed his fingers. The previous evening he'd observed gangs of hooded youths roaming the streets and – in the interest of staff and customer safety – closed early. The units would remain closed for another two days as much of Croydon was razed to the ground.

The next two months weren't much better. Miraculously, neither site was attacked, but trade was decimated with like-for-likes down in the region of 90% through the rest of August and most of September. "Financially it was a disaster, but it was painful for me on an emotional level too," says John, who also operates restaurants in the London suburbs of Chiswick, Sutton and Putney.

"It's an area that I love. I've brought up my family here and it's particularly sad that a lot of local youngsters have, by extension, been stigmatised by the riots and now can't find work," he continues. This rather harrowing anecdote demonstrates both the robustness of the business overall – few five-strong restaurant groups could withstand the loss of cash flow associated with such a dramatic and sustained drop in trade – and this chef turned restaurateur's attachment to his home borough, a location that doesn't get great press at the best of times.

While many would have moped or considered setting up shop elsewhere, John has thrown himself into altruistic community activities. He's never shirked from civic duties – prior to the riots he sat on the boards of The Turnaround Centre (an organisation to help keep Croydon youngsters out of trouble) and a recently introduced mentoring scheme to help stop knife crime and other violence in South London – but as a direct response, the Malcolm John Phoenix Initiative has been launched, which offers apprenticeships to unemployed Croydon youths within John's restaurants.

"A lot of these kids don't yet have the capacity to debate," he explains. "They lack confidence and

Words
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Photographs
Mat Quake

don't know how to interact positively with people outside their social circle. The hospitality industry is a great place for them to be because it brings them into contact with different cultures and different ages. They'll develop a new set of skills."

This can-do DIY attitude permeates the business. John is a driven and highly practical owner-operator: considering the volume of the five-strong estate, it's run on a remarkably low-key basis with just an operations manager, group executive chef and a PA on the external management payroll. Until fairly recently, Malcolm did all the management himself.

All the chef's restaurants are primarily aimed at their local markets. His inaugural restaurant Le

Vacherin opened in Chiswick in 2004 to considerable critical acclaim. This was followed by two restaurants in Croydon, Le Cassoulet and Fish & Grill, opening in 2008 and 2009 respectively, along with Sutton's Le Cassoulet in 2009.

As the names might give away, all the restaurants offer top-notch French cooking in a comparatively casual environment. The offering across the group can be broadly described as French bistro bourgeois, but the exact proposition varies across the estate (see panel, overleaf).

The business has expanded with the backing of RBS, his only other financial partner being his wife who, for reasons of marital harmony, has nothing to do with the day-to-day running of the business.

Perhaps the most notable thing about the estate is the choice of location. Sutton and Croydon are areas almost entirely neglected by independent operators with pedigree. But with low-rents, high-availability of sites and minimal competition the right operator can clean up.

"I'm at a loss as to why these locations are overlooked," says John. "There are very wealthy areas in these boroughs and the transport links are excellent. People who can't afford to buy in Clapham see Croydon as a second option, which results in a significant demographic of affluent commuters who go to top restaurants in central London. When they go out closer to home they want comparable quality, but without the price tag, and that's exactly what we offer."

Scalable potential

The group's latest acquisition was a badly performing Café Rouge unit just off Putney's main drag, which John obtained for a "minimal" premium earlier this year. The second iteration of the Fish & Grill brand has been a hit with Putney's well-heeled locals and is set to become the group's highest grossing unit, aided by a downstairs jazz bar that officially opens this month.

Fish & Grill's success where Café Rouge failed highlights both the manoeuvrability of smaller

Continues over

CV

- >1962: Born St Vincent
- >1980: Attends catering college in Coventry
- >1984-1989: Moves to London to work at Knightsbridge's Berkeley Hotel
- >1990: Moves to Italy to take a position at Sirenous Hotel, Positano
- >1995-1997: Executive sous chef at the Café Royal alongside Herbert Berger
- >1997-1999: Head Chef at St Quentin, Knightsbridge
- >1999-2003: Head chef at Terence Conran's Bluebird private members' club
- >2004: Opens Le Vacherin, Chiswick
- >2008: Opens Le Cassoulet and Fish & Grill in Croydon
- >2009: Opens Brasserie Vacherin in Sutton
- >2011: Opens Fish & Grill in Putney

