



Richard and Nikki Cooper

How do you like them **apples?**




The boom in UK cider sales, and in particular the popularity of cider with the all-important 18 to 30-year-old demographic, is all the more dramatic, given that at the dawn of the 21st century the category had been all but written off in some quarters after sales were demolished by the first wave of alcopops.

This new-found passion for one of Britain's most traditional drinks among customers who are forming the bar-calls habits of a lifetime clearly requires a response from the industry. Few can be said to have embraced the challenge with the enthusiasm demonstrated by the London-based brewer and pub operator Fuller Smith & Turner.

After Fuller's acquired the Cornish Orchards cider-making business last summer, this June it took its chequebook back to the West Country and announced the acquisition of a 51% share in The Stable, a six-site craft cider and gourmet

Venerable brewer falls in love with lively young start-up: John Porter looks at why and how Fuller's of London wooed the West Country cider-and-pizza operation The Stable

pizza restaurant business owned by Richard and Nikki Cooper. The £7.3m deal also saw Fuller's acquire the freehold of the 19-bedroom Bull Hotel in Bridport, Dorset also owned by the Coopers and adjacent to the original Stable site.

There were two basic responses to this news. Operators unfamiliar with life outside the M25 scratched their heads, while those familiar with Fuller's new acquisition hailed the logic of the deal. Among the latter was Ben Levick, director of operations at the managed pub and bar group TCG, which has outlets in both Weymouth in Dorset and Newquay in Cornwall, where The Stable also trades. Levick says of The Stable: "The pizzas are great, the cider range is amazing and it's where the coolest kids in town work, and hang out before they go out for the evening. It's a very interesting move for Fuller's." 

Roots

The Stables business has its roots in the Coopers' decision in 2006 to relocate their family away from the capital. Richard Cooper says: "We left London, and as a lot of people do, realised that there's not a lot of work out in the country. A career change was needed."

The Coppers had previously worked in the music industry, so "we had lots of experience of bars! We'd travelled around the world, so we knew that a lot of hotels at the time were missing a trick – informality. It's only eight years ago, but it was a very different market. Many hotels were stuffy, weren't very welcoming to children, and they just weren't very good. We wanted to create an environment that was a little bit more rock 'n' roll – relaxed and informal, but still great quality.

"We approached the owners of the Bull Hotel because it was such an amazing building. It was completely run down, and that kind of made the decision for us, we thought we could add our spin."

That "spin" proved a success, with the Bull championed by the Mr & Mrs Smith boutique hotel guide book almost from day one. The business forged links with artisan suppliers of meat, seafood, cheese and other West Country delicacies, and "we noticed that many hotel guests having a weekend stay would have one meal with us and then want to go somewhere else," Richard Cooper says. "We'd recommend different places, but they were coming back to us and saying they wanted to experience a bit of 'real' Dorset."

In 2009, the Coopers acquire the freehold of an old stable adjacent to the Bull, which historically had been part of the hotel. Working with Richard's stepbrother Andy Briggs, they came up with the concept of The Stable.

Heritage

"Andy had spent a lot of time in Australia, where they've taken the pizza to another level," Richard Cooper says. "They've ditched mama and papa's pepperoni in favour of something with more relevance to today's food culture. We wanted to deliver these fantastic artisan flavours in a simple, casual way, as well as something that was West Country, and the heritage of cider led into that. If we were going to turn heads, we needed to create a cathedral to cider."

In a market for which the term "fragmented" could well have been invented, sourcing the variety of farmhouse ciders needed to give the original Stable the required wow factor was no mean feat. "We were running around the countryside knocking on farm doors," Cooper says. "Wherever we went, we looked out for cider signs."

While The Stable is now established enough to have built links with many West Country cider producers, each new site still requires the same legwork. "It's very important for us to get the local ciders in, especially the farmhouse ciders, so we go on a little scouting mission. Finding a new cider is a real pleasure," Cooper says.

On the food side of the operation, freshly made pizzas featuring local produce, with dough and sauce all made on site, created a point of difference to the offer from established pizza operators. "The fact that we started in Dorset



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was quite strange, people weren't expecting it," Cooper says. "However, in 2009 I think we were early into that market, even compared to London. Because we had the international experience, both of Australia and when we'd travelled the West Coast of America, we knew what it was all about. Our customers warmed to it immediately and, of course, the pizzas were bloody good."

Inevitably, "the fact that people liked it so much raised the question of whether we should open another one." Cooper admits that part of the appeal of a second site was the chance to test The Stable concept "to make sure we hadn't just got lucky" However, opening a second Stable in Weymouth shortly before the town hosted the Olympic sailing events in 2012 was far from low profile.

That second site, two floors up in a warehouse, was very different to the first, although the common theme, working with the existing building to create a unique feel, has been carried through to subsequent sites. "Thankfully, it was a great success, and continues to be," Cooper says. Subsequent openings have been at Bristol, Bath, Poole and Fistol Bay, Newquay.

Asked to sum up the reasons for success of The Stable, Cooper says: "What we bring to the party is our approach. In the music business we had a very positive approach, and we try to bring that positive energy into the restaurant business. We're also very strong at marketing, which is my background. We've created an environment that people enjoy working in, and we've been very lucky to get the best staff and keep them."

That workforce is young, enthusiastic and – although it's a word used by others such as TCG's Levick rather than the Coopers – cool. "Young people like to travel, and we give our young managers the opportunity to move around between different sites," Richard Cooper says. ●

Experienced staff – nicknamed “the stablisers”, go into the new restaurants and “bring the culture of the Stable to them,” Cooper says. While some stay, others move on to the next site: “For example we’ve just opened at Fistral Bay. Some of our staff surf, and they’ve gone to work there. We can mix and match with our team.”

Although The Stable is still a very young business, “it’s already got heritage in the sense that it’s a real story, it hasn’t been fabricated,” Cooper says. “We started in a real stable at a mad Dorset hotel, and the cider and food speaks for itself. The key to success was embedding it in the South West, and it was always our intention to spread out from there.”

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However, having funded six sites from the family’s own resources, helped by some private investment from a friend, “we’d run out of money, we knew we had to make a decision.” The Stable had already attracted attention from both venture capital businesses, and potential private investors with a restaurant background. “The venture capitalists we found way too money oriented, way too focused on expansion and sales,” Cooper says. “We’re not overly corporate, we like the fact that we’re a family business. We didn’t like the venture capital proposition.”

Before Fuller’s Inns managing director, Jonathon Swaine, arranged a meeting in March, the Coopers were unaware that they had attracted the attention of the venerable family brewer. “Jonathon met up with us, expressed his interest, and explained that they’d bought Cornish Orchards, they had an obvious strategy to move into the world of cider, and they loved our concept,” Coper says

Swaine had been doing his homework. In 2012, Fuller’s had acquired three sites pub in Bath, “so I think we’ve been closer to what’s happening out in the West Country,” he says. “Strategically, we’ve been looking for things that we could add to our business that would be complementary, so it really was by word-of-mouth we heard of the Stable.

“I then took myself off for two days and I did all the sites twice. I ate lots of pizza, drank lots of cider and fell in love with the brand. It’s premium, serves fresh food, and has a proper draught bar as well as casual dining. I made copious notes and then phoned Richard and Nikki.”

Synergy

Along with the cider connection through Cornish Orchard, the celebration of local produce is a synergy between the two businesses. “Fuller’s is a fantastic family business with a great heritage,” Cooper says. In return, “they loved the wholesome nature of our business, the real story and the fantastic team – not just Nikki and I, but all our people. As personalities we really liked them, and after some negotiation we came up with a deal.”

Swaine says of the Coopers and the wider Stable team: “They have a different approach to marketing, to site selection and to the way they invest in sites, to site selection. Along with all the complementary elements, they bring a slightly different way of looking at things, and we can learn from them.”

Cooper concedes that the aspect of the deal which sees Fuller’s acquire the freehold of The Bull “is bittersweet in some senses, because we’ve spent eight years renovating and developing the hotel, and we love it. It’s very popular, and I still think it’s unique in its approach to hospitality.”

While the investment puts expansion of The Stable back on track, “what attracted us wasn’t only the money, it was about having access to expertise and knowledge that we don’t have, and that process has already started. We’re going to be opening up 12 more restaurants in the next three years, which obviously has its challenges – but those are mainly now finding the premises,” Cooper says.

Currently, The Stable is redeveloping the historic Custom House site on the quay in Falmouth, Cornwall, a project that has not been without its controversy in the town. “We love architecture, and we’ve got ourselves involved in some fantastic sites. Falmouth is a restoration project, which we probably wouldn’t do again,” Cooper says diplomatically. Target locations being actively scouted for sites include Exeter and St Ives, as well as Brighton, closer to Fuller’s heartland.

However, the Coopers are determined not to compromise on location. “I think a lot of developers are getting pretty fed up with the Carluccios, Wagamama, Zizzi et cetera offer ,which seems to be ubiquitous in leisure and shopping malls across the country,” Cooper says. “I think we offer something fresh and exciting, so we’ve been very well received. We’re looking for great locations, which can be waterside or town centre. But not leisure development sites, where you find yourself in a restaurant ghetto.”

Music from The Stable

Richard and Nikki Cooper draw on their background in the music business to suggest a top five playlist of track that sum up the spirit of The Stable:

🎵 Nick Drake
River Man

🎵 Laura Veirs
Salt Breakers

🎵 Spin Doctors
Little Miss Can’t Do Wrong

🎵 Joss Stone
Super Duper Love

🎵 Mumford and Son
I Will Wait