

Successful Senses: Mark Hix

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Ben Lobel

Having worked in and managed some of London's top restaurants, chef Mark Hix needs little introduction. He explains what he's learned about business.

I recognised the fun side of the restaurant business at an early age. Along with all the hard work, you need to have fun because then the customers have fun.

My first job in London was in the staff canteen at the Hilton Hotel in Park Lane, where I lasted six months; then I worked at Grosvenor House for a couple of years. After that, I went to the Dorchester and worked under Anton Mosimann.

When I was only 22 years old I went for the job of head chef at Mr Pontacs and got it. I gained quite a good reputation at the restaurant – I was my own boss and learned everything from purchasing to being creative with menus.

The head chef position at Le Caprice came up in 1990. I had a few gruelling interviews with Chris [Corbin] and Jeremy [King]. That was the start of 17 years working in the kitchens at Caprice Holdings. I worked there until 2007, when I felt it was time to do my own thing.

Ratnesh Bagdai is my business partner, and he was finance director at Caprice Holdings for about nine years. We started looking for a site and found the Oyster & Chop House in Smithfield. It had been fish restaurant Rudland & Stubbs.

That was our first project, and we completed it on a tight budget. We borrowed some money from the bank as well as investing our own.

Shortly after that, we opened Hix Oyster & Fish House in Lyme Regis, Dorset, so within a year we had two restaurants under our belt. Then a restaurant in Soho came on the market which was the bargain of the century.

I often have a sense, the minute I walk into a building, whether it will work. Straight away, I saw that the basement would make a great cocktail bar.

The previous owners had spent somewhere between £3 million and £4 million on it but it had closed down after six months. We spent another £350,000 on refurbishment and this became the restaurant HIX.

Last March, Ratnesh and I added HIX Restaurant and Champagne Bar at Selfridges to our portfolio. This time, I decided to cook European food instead of purely British food, so it's a slightly different style for me. Many chefs don't realise that we have very good produce on our doorstep.

People are still importing food that you can buy at the same quality in this country. We have some great producers in the UK – we just need to make better use of them.

About ten years ago, three partners and I opened a fish and chip shop in Maida Vale. Everyone loved the concept but we overspent and the location wasn't right. I personally lost £100,000. It was a bad decision but you learn from these things. We had to fold it up in the end so that's always in the back of my mind when I'm doing a project.

Once you're in the restaurant industry, I think you're in it for life. Some people decide to go into the business later as a career change thinking it's going to be easy, but it's not. I think the partnership is certainly crucial to the success of the business.

Ratnesh is from a financial background and I'm from a creative background, so we make a good couple. A lot of businesses fail because their finances aren't in order.

There are loads of potential restaurant sites but sometimes they're out of your reach financially. We tend to buy restaurants that are a bargain or a steal. When you're talking about millions of pounds for a restaurant, you then have to start bringing in backers and investors.

I'd rather that Ratnesh and I own the majority shareholding. I think the minute you start losing the business to investors and shareholders it doesn't necessarily work. People often take on investors who have no interest in the business and they can interfere. I would much rather be in a situation where I'm in control.

I feel it's important not to overstretch your finances. I prefer to fund businesses ourselves, borrow money from the bank when necessary and do projects that are within reach.



Restaurateur and chef Mark Hix

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