



Into The Bull Pen

Toni Bartholdi tells Andrew Don how he has turned The Bull Pen restaurant at Battlers Green Farm shopping village in Hertfordshire into a profitable venture

Battlers Green Farm shopping village is a one-off and not what you would expect to find within a short drive of both Watford and Wembley.

Turn off the A41 shortly after J4 of the M1 into Dagger Lane and you find yourself instantly transported from urban jungle to rural idyll.

Follow single-track road out of Letchmore Heath and you find yourself at Battlers Green Farm – a quirky destination that has gradually expanded to achieve its present complement of 20 individual specialist retailers spread around an open courtyard.

What started with a single farm shop in 1960, catering for local residents, today boasts Classic Framing, Cyclezone, Radlett Fruiterers, Weston's Fishmonger, Wine and the Vine, Brimarks Butchers and a host of other independent names.

The Bull Pen, a 90-cover, seven-day-a-week restaurant that was, originally, a pen

with real bulls, anchors the site.

The bulls are long gone and diners can enjoy rib eye steak with horseradish, and home-cooked salt beef with mustard and gherkins from a menu that is extensive and varied.

It includes breakfast dishes, grilled rarebits and toasties, grilled paninis, bagels, jacket potatoes, toasted sandwiches, tea sandwiches that range from smoked salmon and cream cheese to sardines, cucumber and balsamic, toasted tea breads, salads, including several "lighter options", cakes and patisserie, scones, cream tea, fish dishes, a children's menu and a range of soft and alcoholic drinks.

The Bull Pen is heaving when Garden Centre and Farm Shop Catering visits and the temperature tops 30°C. "That's not heaving," Bartholdi remonstrates. "That's quite busy. Heaving, they'd be queuing all the way down the sloping path."

Heaving apparently happens on bank holidays and weekends when customers wait up to an hour for a table.

"We have a very good system for getting their names on a list and we encourage customers to walk around the other shops and we ring them when their table looks like it will be ready in five minutes."

Bartholdi, hailed in as general manager by Battlers Green Farm owner Paul Haworth three years ago, presides over a slick operation that combines service and variety with tough business disciplines.

Turnover has increased 10% each year since the food industry veteran shook things up and incremental profit has been even higher, although Bartholdi will not say how much.

It was not always such a happy story. The Bull Pen opened in 1993 as a "casual kind of tea room run by ladies who had spare time to cook", Bartholdi says.

Haworth and wife Gillian took over the hands-on running of the café themselves seven years ago after deciding they wanted it to open in the evening as a fine-dining restaurant in combination with daytime service – a mix that did not work. Why not? "How long have you got?" asks Bartholdi.

To summarise, the restaurant was busy during the day as a casual simple food restaurant and the switch to fine dining in the evening required different crockery, cutlery, menu and chefs.

"The different management and the facilities back of house just weren't big enough to cope," he says. "It was a bit like World War III because the evening crew arrived at 1pm and the daytime crew didn't finish until 6.30pm."

The kitchen could barely squeeze in three chefs and the facilities back of house were not big enough to cope.

Bartholdi and Haworth were old friends and Bartholdi, who has his own cookery school and used to own an eponymous family-run food production company for major catering events, was the person Haworth turned to for help.

Bartholdi advised Haworth the best thing to do was to lose the evening restaurant and concentrate on the daytime operations because the two could not work in tandem.

Within three months, The Bull Pen started to make a profit.



He set about improving hygiene and the scores on the door was enhanced from three to a maximum five-rating.

"Not to make a healthy profit was

ridiculous so the focus was on establishing proper recipes, portion control costing, putting systems in place and staff motivation.

"Unfortunately they were all quite downtrodden because they were used to lots of different people telling them to do things and then clearing off and also

not knowing what they were doing really," Bartholdi explains.

"I had to show the staff how to get to the right standard and I had to convince them that once we got to the right standard they

would be the ones to benefit."

That is exactly what happened: the quality improved, portions were controlled and the staff could see the changes happening and the restaurant becoming profitable.

The owners agreed to buy kitchen equipment when needed – much of it had to be replaced because it was "very tired" and, in some cases, the incorrect kit.

"It needed someone who knew what they were talking about and somebody whose eyes were everywhere. You can't go into the catering industry and think things will happen by luck. You have to have your wits about you," says Bartholdi.

"When I first came in here it was difficult to find a recipe so the first thing I did was write recipes for everything and cost it and print new menu cards. We asked the staff, the head chef and the manager which lines sold well and which didn't. I got rid of some lines and added others."

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The business bought a new till system and mobile credit card machines – “making it a slick operation”. Processes were made more efficient.

Bartholdi looks at everything on a regular basis “with a fresh pair of eyes” and assesses what can be improved. “It’s amazing how many things we find that we can do quicker.”

He relies heavily on customer feedback – “customers are very vocal so we know that if we are doing something they don’t like they let us know quickly.”

It is all about efficiency in the kitchen, he says, with an operation that serves a maximum of 600 covers a day from 8.30am until 5.30pm seven days a week. A slow day will be 230 covers and a normal weekend or bank holiday 450-500.

The kitchen is minute for the size of operation so it has to be highly efficient. The building is listed and, as such, the option for alterations is limited.

“Paul is very happy to spend the money because he knows...the net result of that is we become more efficient and that reflects in the profit.”

The restaurant has an £8,000 Rational oven, refrigeration from Foster and Williams, a £5,000 Merrychef combi oven and blast freezing and chilling kit. Proton supplies the dishwasher; the till system comes from Bleep.

It also sources equipment from Nisbets and it buys coffee from The Drury Tea Coffee Co. All kitchen tables and workbenches were replaced with bespoke manufactured equipment, and extraction systems and air conditioning were replaced.

Bread is sourced from Victoria Bakery in

nearby Barnet. “Everything we buy we try to go for the best quality.”

The Bull Pen is changing over to fresh vine tomatoes and Piccolino tomatoes, for example. “We are going to pay more for them but every single time we’ve increased the quality of what we buy, we sell more, even if after a while the customer has to pay more.”

It used to buy in kosher precooked salt beef. It now buys kosher salt beef and cooks it onsite “as any decent cook would,” he says.

Cakes are made by “two local ladies” although the team plans to make increasingly more of them itself. The Bull Pen bakes its own scones every day and everything else is made from scratch. “If we have vegetable panini we make it from scratch, if you have red pesto, we make it from scratch – all the fillings from raw.”

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Sausages are free-range, as are eggs, and made by Brimark, the on-site butcher’s shop. The farm shop is used as an emergency top-up.

The Bull Pen, which has 15 permanent staff and about seven part-time, attracts everyone from late teens having breakfast



with friends to mums with children and families treating grandparents.

“It is amazing how many people eat here three to five times a week. They almost treat it like a home kitchen,” Bartholdi says.

The average bill per head is £10 – “we focus on providing simple food cooked well.”

Devonshire cream tea costs £6.10, pear, Roquefort, walnuts, iceberg lettuce & fig salad with a crème fraiche and mint dressing, £9.25 and a substantial vegetarian breakfast £8.65.

A new separate healthy eating menu is imminent to contrast with the core menu, which is all about indulgence.

Bartholdi is particularly proud of staff’s ability to get poached eggs perfect virtually 100% of the time.

A farmer’s market is held once a month which boosts business and an occasional Music on The Farm event is held, along with a champagne bar and canapes.

It’s gruelling work, and Bartholdi should be enjoying retirement. “I’m not quite ready for the deckchair,” he says.