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# Cooking WITH Gas

After seeing a declining market share and fewer customers through the doors of its restaurants, La Tasca appointed Simon Wilkinson as CEO to turn around the business.

Images courtesy of La Tasca

**F**or more than 20 years, La Tasca restaurants have spread across the United Kingdom. The tapas equivalent to Pizza Express, they allowed customers to feel almost as if they were on holiday in Spain instead of stuck at home, for a reasonable price. By the late 2000s, however, the chain wasn't doing too well. After the company changed hands a couple of times, profits were down and the menu and the design of the restaurants hadn't changed since their inception. It was in 2011 that Simon Wilkinson was brought in to revitalise the company and make it competitive once again. Simon had a background in hospitality and knew the business, making him a good choice as CEO. His background, Simon says, gave him a good grounding in not only restaurant management but also gave him leadership skills too. "My

background is in hotel management and my experience is in hotels," Simon says.

"I did a graduate management training program and when I completed that course I was appointed at a hotel on Park Lane. I worked there for just under five years and then I went on to run a hotel overseas. I returned to the UK four years later and worked for a company running a chain of pubs and restaurants. I then worked as a managing director and CEO of a collection of restaurant brands and I have been CEO of La Tasca for the past four and a half years. I had one role where I worked for a couple of different CEOs in a very short period of time, and I learned a lot about how not to be a CEO. I have learned from them and tried to put in practice how I liked to be managed when I'm managing my team, incorporating what I've seen.

I've learned from both these good and bad experiences."

When Simon came to La Tasca, it was in a precarious situation. Profits had been declining for some years, and the company needed a major turnaround. "The business started 22 years ago, and grew through various different ownerships, up until around 2007, when it was sold to a large pub company called Laurel and in their four years of ownership it went through a very difficult time, in that it was way behind its competitors in terms of culture, food, experience, operation, and sales. It went through a liquidation and ownership changes where they didn't have the money to reinvest in the business."

What Simon did was essentially break the business to put it back together. They changed >





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- Simon Wilkinson

everything—the food, the restaurants, the systems—and relaunched them into something better; something that customers wanted. “Four years ago, we took apart the business and put it back together and started again. We took £1.6 million out of our head office overhead, we changed the food from 85 per cent frozen to 85 per cent fresh, direct from local suppliers in Spain. We changed the design of the business, we changed the logo, we changed the accounting systems, we changed the training systems, we changed the culture of the business, and we launched a whole new sales and marketing strategy .

“The first thing I did was bring in a new executive team, because there’s no point putting a strategy in place unless you’ve got the



right people. We then put in a plan to address the operation, the products and the service. We also got rid of some very poorly performing assets. We did a financial restructuring in December 2013, where we really cleaned up our balance sheet. We put in a whole new design and food offer. Now, we’ve had two years of consecutive sales and profit

growth and we’re now looking at new sites to grow the business.” One of the biggest changes from a consumer perspective was the food. Since the chain’s creation in the 1990s, food culture in Britain had changed. Customers were moving away from what they saw as pre-packaged fast food, and were becoming more discerning with their choices. As cooking

shows grew in popularity, so did the ‘foodie’ culture. Simon realised that La Tasca needed to move with the times. “There is the old perception that chain restaurants mean prepacked frozen food. And we’ve put a lot of effort into making the food on our plates very fresh. I think the challenge is getting that perception and that understanding out in the marketplace; changing people’s preconceived ideas. Reinventing the brand was an opportunity to change people’s preconceived conceptions about us. The overriding reason we did that was because our food wasn’t good enough; the food hadn’t really evolved since the brand started in the 1990s. The competitive landscape had changed, and other operators had gone way ahead of us, the previous ownership had dumbed down our product and it was considered the same as standard pub grub.

“We decided that in order for the brand to recover and then prosper it was a decision that had to happen. I do think the customers and the marketplace is more discerning. Now there’s cooking shows on every channel, everyone’s a foodie. We had to change and evolve but I didn’t want to put the cost of the product up, so that we were still good value. The project took around 18 months. We had to go out to Spain, we had to take the middlemen out, and we had to find local suppliers. We also had to train all of our teams and invest in new equipment in the kitchens. It was fundamentally key to the future of the business in my view.”

After reinventing the food, the attention turned to the staff. Simon wanted the food and the customer service to be of the best quality possible. To ensure this occurred, all staff were retrained and rewards and incentives offered to recognise hard work. “The other essential part to what we’ve done to the business is that we’ve changed our training system. We partnered with an online training company, and we also put our training into second languages, so we put it into Polish, for example, because we

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La Tasca Birmingham

have Polish people who work in our kitchens. I appointed a people director when I took over and gave him a mandate to ensure we have the happiest and most rewarded staff, and consequently the happiest guest experience in the industry. You have to tackle the people bit first—it’s about recruiting the right people, training the right people, developing them, rewarding them, recognising and retaining them. We have put in place initiatives to achieve that.”

There have been, and continue to be, challenges, however. The rising costs of rent in central London is worrying for Simon and his team, as is the increased competition in the market as companies try and take advantage of the foodie trend. “I think as an industry there are so many concepts opening that trying to find the right premises is a challenge,” Simon explains. “And what that has done is forced up rent, which is a challenge for the entire market. I think it would be very sad if central London became a playground for only the rich, and families with kids were priced out of eating out. There’s an increasing amount of legislation in the

industry, allergen labelling, calorie labelling, which are costs coming into the business. The competition in itself is incredibly challenging for all of us. There are so many concepts coming over from the United States and other parts of the world.”

Ultimately, Simon believes that now La Tasca has the right management and financial structures in place, alongside a fresh new menu and great staff, it can succeed. British people love Spanish food, he says, and enjoy La Tasca’s environment, especially for parties and birthdays. “Spain is still the biggest tourist destination for UK people to visit, so I think people are familiar with Spanish food. Al fresco dining is a big part of our business that people really enjoy, as well as small plates and sharing food, which is certainly a trend. People are more open now to sharing new flavours, new tastes. We do very well with groups and parties, because people can pay a set price or have a set menu and all the dishes come to share between the guests. We’re still relatively small, and different to the normal pasta, pizza, steak, and burger restaurants.”

“We have fostered a true partnership with La Tasca, across all levels of the business—whether at CEO or HR level. Our relationship is based on honesty and candidness, ensuring total end-to-end support and a willingness to invest for the future.” - George Vezza, Managing Director, Nestlé Professional

## Fostering meaningful partnerships that really work

The iced beverages market is now worth £244 million, and growing. In fact, it is set to rise to £561 million by 2018, and ice blended smoothies and frappes are leading the way.

Recognising the opportunity this presents, we are working in partnership with La Tasca to develop a tailor-made range of ice blended mocktails to tap into consumer demand.

Our successful partnership is based on honesty, candidness, and trust. From learning lunches with our staff to menu development sessions with our chefs, the partnership works across all levels of both businesses.

If you’re interested in Ice Blends by **NESTLÉ PROFESSIONAL**® in the UK or Europe, please call 0208 667 5777 or email [Katie.alexander@uk.nestle.com](mailto:Katie.alexander@uk.nestle.com)

