

Creative force

An interview with Rolline Frewen, co-founder of The Admirable Crichton

One of the great charms of the Hospitality Industry is that it is made up of a full assortment of characters that all bring something different to the table. The common link is often a love of food and wine and the desire to create an "experience" that will inspire both the customer and themselves.

However, it is worth asking yourself the question - how many times have you truly been inspired by the standard of service, food and atmosphere that you have encountered at a party or event? I suspect that most will agree that it is rarer than we would wish.

One company that has built a reputation for excellence in this field is The Admirable Crichton.

I had heard many stories of The Admirable Crichton (or AC as it is sometimes referred to) but the first time I really experienced one of their functions, I was just so taken by their approach that it made them really stick in my memory. Why? Very simply the service levels and presentation of the staff were a step beyond any that I had ever experienced before. The staff were very attractive, immaculately groomed and possessed an aura of style and elegance. It wasn't just their appearance - the service too was exemplary. They appeared to want to go the extra mile to ensure that the client had a marvellous party, which I did. And this is not just my view. Over the years they have received many great reviews. The following is an editorial comment taken from Tatler that gives a feel for their skills.

"Johnny Roxburgh (one of the founders of Admirable Crichton) is to party giving what the SAS is to the Boy Scouts. We are not talking canapés on a silver platter we are talking Cecil B DeMille epics. Rolline (Rolline Frewen co owner and Food Director) is the foodmeister and Johnny is the ringmaster... The word 'impossible' does not exist in The Admirable Crichton lexicon. No theme or idea is too ambitious, and pushing the limits is the norm. (For the premiere of Rob Roy) The Admirable Crichton built three waterfalls, an entire forest and a trout stream stocked with 70 rainbow trout. Eight oxygenation units had to be installed to keep the trout alive, 27 tons of scaffolding were needed to reinforce the waterfalls, and 500 24-foot-high silver birches were felled at Wemyss Castle. Once this was in place The Admirable Crichton served dinner and dancing for 700 people."

Therefore, I was intrigued to meet one of the founders, Rolline Frewen. I wanted to hear the story of how the company had been founded and what base values and principles lay behind the creation of a business that has truly been a dominant force within their market for 25 years. The Admirable Crichton today has a business turnover of approximately £11m and manages not only events throughout the UK but abroad too. In 2006, they will be working on events in Italy, France, Switzerland, India, Russia and Austria. As I was speaking with

Rolline, she was planning the logistics of 28 separate events to be hosted throughout the UK over 5 days on behalf of one famous car manufacturer.

The story is impressive but how did it all start?

"I had just left my job running a restaurant in Swiss Cottage and was doing some work running catering for a designer show house," remembered Rolline. "My sister set me up on a blind date - a blind business date - with Johnny (Roxburgh - her business partner for the past 25 years). My sister said that we were both creative souls and should work together. It was true. We had much in common. We were both Scottish, both creative and it just seemed natural that we should work together. So we founded the business but we had no real idea of what we were doing. We really knew absolutely nothing."

Were you, I asked, a caterer by profession?

"No, not really. I had been to art college and Johnny was an accountant. He came from a family of professionals - lawyers and doctors - so it was natural that he would enter one of the professions."

When they started, Rolline worked full time and Johnny remained as an accountant for the first two years. Their first office was in a small coach house in Clapham. They had only one electric typewriter that would often breakdown, as the electrics were damp. Their first real premises were in The Oval and they moved to their present premises in 1990.

"I remember it well. We had to find larger premises as we had been asked to cater for Robert Maxwell's 65th Birthday party with a party of 700 friends on one day and for 700 colleagues the next. We needed to be ready!"



I wondered how they went about developing the business.

"We had no real structure to the business for the first 15 years. There was no clear vision, no planning. We just knew what we liked and the experience that we wanted to give to clients. I think that we were helped by the fact that there were not many other companies that offered what we did - there was Mustard and a couple of others. Overall, there was not that much competition. We held our first promotional event in a marquee at Chelsea College and 200 people turned up. It just happened naturally but perhaps we were in the right place at the right time. Our growth has been completely organic."

I commented that it is rarely that easy.

"Maybe not but I think that it was our creativity that made us stand out. We did the very first starlit ceiling. Can you imagine? It is now done all the time but at the time it was radical. We were first to serve food on slates. At the same time, it is worth saying that it would be much more difficult today and there is so much more competition and standards have really improved. There are some really good young companies today and they keep us moving forward."

Rolline makes it all sound deceptively easy but her eyes sparkle as she talks about AC. It displays her passion for the business. Rolline is a naturally modest character whose natural inclination is to play things down. I can imagine Rolline being a beacon of calm in a situation where chaos has taken hold, wondering what all the fuss was about.

It is clear that the foundation stone on which the business has been built is the relationship between Rolline and Johnny. I have no doubt that she is being entirely honest when she says that there was no real planning but what she does not say is her partnership with Johnny is one which works far more effectively than most. There is a statistic that most business partnerships break up within the first 5 years and that few last beyond 10 years. Their partnership has lasted for 25 years because they both bring something unique and different to the business, which make it stand out from the crowd. This is relatively unique. They clearly hold each other with the utmost regard. Rolline will naturally promote Johnny's skills.

"Johnny is one of those people who could sell ice to the Eskimos. He has this marvellous

ability to go into a room and imagine just how it could look and then be able to paint a vision. Last year, over one week in the summer, we managed one event every day for a client on a yacht, moored in the South of France. It was a nice yacht but the space was limited. Yet, each day the yacht had a different theme and look - that is Johnny."

I note that her business philosophy undermines most management theories, which is half-true. It is clear that Rolline and Johnny have created an entity that has built its own momentum through the fact they have outperformed the market. Both play very different roles within the organization. Johnny is the "front-man" and showman. Rolline is the foodie and creative spirit for what is served. Rolline has a team of 4 that work fulltime on menu creation alone. How many businesses invest so much in this area alone? They have truly invested in their infrastructure to ensure that they are constantly thinking, evolving and challenging the accepted norm of the moment.

Many factors interplay to make a business become successful. Expert business commentators will talk about the



Pictures: Joanne Aldridge

importance of a clear strategy, organisation and planning. AC has succeeded because they have been uncompromising in their desire to create a service level that is a firm market leader and to deliver excellence. When a business is so uncompromising in this objective it will either go bankrupt or create a very strong internal culture which builds a momentum that generates success beyond market norms.

As many will point out, the converse side of this strategy is that it will rely heavily upon the principals. It will be questioned as to whether the business could survive without Johnny and Rolline's input. Rolline will accept this point but notes that she spends much of her week based in Yorkshire and that Johnny is also often working away from the office. Yet the business functions as the internal culture is in place that naturally sets the day to day tone of the business. People know what is expected of them.

"The hard part of management is people and communications. To be successful, we need to make sure that everyone is on the same

wavelength and understand what is required. We try and set the tone early on. We will not let a chef or party planner out to meet a client on their own until they have been with us for six months and really show they understand our ethos. We hand pick everyone who works for us. People are the key to everything that we do and it has to be fun for them too. We rely on every member of the team - especially the porters who move the equipment around. If we did not have trust in each other, we would be lost. Everyone has to be proud of their role."

How about the hard times? When has AC been really tested?

"It is by those things that one cannot control. The recession in the early 90's was hellish. The first Iraq war happened and the world seemed to stop. That was an experience...and the bombings this July were pretty awful. Communications just stopped and we had events to manage, and staff to transport. All the events that day were cancelled but we still had to prepare for the luncheon at Buckingham Palace for the World War Two Veterans on the Sunday. We had no idea what to expect as no phone worked and the laundry was stuck. Fortunately, life returned to some

normality the next day. And the luncheon went very well indeed. Serving the Queen sets a whole set of new challenges. Everything has to run on time and to a very high standard. The Queen had to appear on the balcony at 2pm, which gave us 55 minutes to serve 2 courses and coffee. There is no option of running late. It must work like a Swiss clock. It was a great day."

So, I asked, is she able to relax at events?

"Honestly, when everything is organised, we have a superb time making sure that every party is just fabulous. We just have a marvellous time and I do love a good party. But it is a bit like the story about the famous cricketer who was asked how he made playing look so easy, to which he replied "practice, practice and more practice". It takes a lot of hard, dedicated work to create a memorable event but it is worth the effort for when it goes well, you are left feeling like you have accomplished something very special."