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## ACORN AWARDS 2021

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# ACORN AWARDS 2021

This year's Acorn Award winners, the industry's brightest 30 under 30, celebrated their triumphs over an adverse year at this year's winners' weekend event at South Lodge hotel. *Lisa Jenkins* reports



**F**reedom Day' was memorable to this year's Acorn Award winners for more than one reason – it was the day they collected their awards at Exclusive Collection's South Lodge hotel in Horsham, West Sussex.

The winners' weekend, in association with headline sponsor CH&Co and supporting sponsor Arla Pro, saw a team from *The Caterer* and the Acorns treated to a tour, lunch and wine tasting at the Ridgeview Wine Estate, as well as a masterclass with herbalist Michael Isted, founder of The Herball, a specialist in demonstrating the power of plants and their use in tinctures, cordials and beverages.

The abundance of wildflowers and herbs within the grounds of South Lodge provided the ingredients for six beverages created by the winners, with or without a dash of Ridgeview Wine's Bloomsbury sparkling wine – a necessity on the hottest weekend of the year.

The Spa at South Lodge houses Botanica, a Mediterranean-inspired restaurant where head chef Jonathan Spiers draws on the South Downs as a larder for fresh and seasonal ingredients. On the Sunday evening the winners, sponsors and guests enjoyed an alfresco feast, with dishes including mini 'Wasted' burgers; chargrilled tenderstem broccoli, Castello Blue cheese by Arla Pro with wild nettle pesto; finishing with a pumpkin brûlée with pumpkin seed brittle.

## Headline sponsor CH&Co

"Huge congratulations to the Acorn Awards class of 2021 from everyone at CH&Co. What an absolute honour it is for us to be part of the celebrations that recognise our industry's rising stars.

"Individually, the 30 incredibly worthy winners possess qualities, talents and inspirational stories of achievement that you cannot fail to be impressed by for people so early on in their careers. But together, they are so much more. They are our future leaders, and after the year hospitality has had, they are proof that the innovation, creativity, energy and aspiration that has always shaped our vibrant industry is alive and kicking.

"As we bounce back in a new hospitality landscape, we all need to adapt and think differently about how



we bring memorable food and service experiences and joy to our customers and how we engage and develop our people. We also need to work pragmatically and collaboratively as we recognise what wasn't perhaps so rosy before and take the positive learnings from the past year to create an even more dynamic, inclusive, progressive and attractive industry.

"Against this backdrop, one

fundamental strength of our industry that, in my opinion, remains unchanged is the incredible development and career opportunities and support it offers those with the right attitude, energy and determination. I've seen it within CH&Co and other businesses – the ability to progress from entry level through the ranks right up to board level and across different disciplines is a reality that's there for the taking.

"This is why it's so important to support and celebrate our emerging talent and it's with pure pleasure and intrigue that we will watch the Acorn Award winners navigate their incredibly bright futures and flourish alongside our wonderful industry."

**Allister Richards, chief operating officer, CH&Co**





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# CONGRATULATIONS TO THE 2021 ACORN AWARD WINNERS

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Monday morning started with a reviving breakfast in the Camellia restaurant followed by individual portrait shots and a group winners' photo call in the hotel's stunning gardens.

Following a lunch (*see menu*) prepared by executive chef Lewis Hamblet and delivered by conference and banqueting manager Liz Brooks and their teams, the winners heard from Simon Houston, director and founder of independent foodservice caterer Houston & Hawkes. Houston, who set up the company with business partner Dave Hawkes in 2019, spoke about his career and how he had mentors to guide him.

David Connell, general manager of South Lodge, said: "We were delighted to host this year's Acorn Awards winners' weekend. It has been a long time in the making, as we originally planned to be the host venue for last year's winners. Being able to play host this year, for the first in-person industry awards event, falling on 'Freedom Day', was extremely exciting and gave us the opportunity to bring together the future leaders of our incredible industry after such a long and difficult 18 months."

The theme to the awards this year was sustainability, and South Lodge presented a perfect backdrop with its wild pool, thermal springs and environmentally friendly spa building. The theme was mirrored in Arla's sustainable products, which were available in Botanica, the bamboo lanyards and welcome letters printed on sustainable paper. Finally, CH&Co presented each winner with a gift card embedded with flower seeds, notifying them that an oak tree had been planted in their honour.

## Ridgeview Wines



Ridgeview has been crafting traditional method sparkling wines since 1995, leading the way in the English sparkling wine revolution.

Established near the picturesque village of Ditchling in Sussex, this second-generation family business was crowned the globe's best in the International Wine & Spirit Competition in 2018 and named number 36 in the Top 50 Worlds' Best Vineyards in 2019.

The vineyard is situated in the beautiful South Downs National Park, where visitors can drink in the gorgeous view that gives Ridgeview its name and celebrate the family message written in the neck foil of every bottle that: 'Life is for celebrating'.

Ridgeview has been a partner with South Lodge and Exclusive Collection since 2017 and the relationship has gone from strength to strength. We are delighted to be partnering with South Lodge for the Acorn Awards.

## The menu and wines

### Menu

#### Starters

● Dorking asparagus with 36-month-aged Parmesan beignet, olive crumb

● Portland crab pikelet, brown crab mayonnaise, cucumber and dill

● Morel, shiitake and oyster mushroom pikelet, truffled mascarpone (V)

#### Mains

● Fillet and brisket of Sussex beef, roasted shallot, spring onion mash

● Braised artichoke and courgette, roasted shallot, spring onion mash, glazed carrot (V)

#### Dessert

Single origin Pump Street chocolate delicé, raspberry sorbet

● Coffee and sweet treats

### Wines

● Welcome drink: Pongrácz Brut NV, Méthode Cap Classique, South Africa

● Starter and fish course: Te Kairanga Riesling 2018, Martinborough, New Zealand

● Main course: Vivir Sin Dormir 2018, Bodegas Arraez, Jumilla, Spain

Matthew Clark

## Supporting sponsor Arla Pro

ARLA  
PRO.

"Firstly we would like to extend our huge congratulations to the winners of the Acorn Awards 2021. After what has been the toughest year our industry has ever faced, now really is the time for us to rally and celebrate the fantastic talent that UK hospitality has to offer – and what a talented group of people they are!"

"We're delighted to have sponsored the Acorn Awards for the first time this year and to help shine a spotlight on the people who make our industry what it is and whose resilience, fight and positivity will ensure that we will bounce back stronger than ever."

"People are at the heart of our industry and they're at the heart of what we do at Arla Pro too. As a farmer-owned business, we simply wouldn't be able to do what we do without brilliant people driving our business forward. Whether that's working tirelessly to produce the milk that goes into our products, developing technologies, optimising our supply chain, reducing our carbon footprint, or supporting our foodservice customers: we are a sum of parts."

"We're proud to be champions of this industry and the people who work so hard to make it what it is: a fantastic place not just to work, but to thrive. We can't wait to see what the future holds for the Acorn Award winners!"

Andy Bacon, senior global culinary lead, Arla Pro

## Acorns Alumni event – 35 years of Acorn Award winners

The Acorns Alumni event on 19 July celebrated 35 years of *The Caterer's* Acorn Awards. The event was organised by David Connell, general manager of South Lodge, and saw Acorn winners from the last 35 years join some of the 2021 Acorn winners for a barbecue, indulgent desserts and music from King Brasstards.

The event was supported by The Herball, Ridgeview Wines, Weber Barbecues and rare-breed pork and lamb supplier Hill House Farm.



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## South Lodge (Exclusive Collection)

South Lodge is situated in the heart of the West Sussex countryside with stunning views and walks on its doorstep, a place where guests can disconnect from the everyday and get some much-needed R&R.

Each room and suite is of beautiful bespoke design, with some featuring their own hot tub balconies, and others with private gardens – perfect for a break away with four-legged companions.

For food lovers, locally sourced dishes can be discovered in Camellia restaurant, as well as guest chef residencies in the Pass, and delicious afternoon teas to be enjoyed in one of the lounges or on the terraces soaking up the summer sun.

The icing on the South Lodge cake is the spa, where guests can hit the gym, enjoy rejuvenating treatments and an array of thermal experiences, as well as a choice of three pools to relax by.



# Supporting the future of hospitality



Helping the talent of tomorrow to thrive  
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At Arla Pro we're proud to be champions of our industry and we're delighted to be supporting the Acorn Awards 2021. We're passionate about the future of hospitality - and protecting our planet whose natural resources are central to this.

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## Christopher Bancroft, 29



**Front of house manager, the Newt in Somerset**

**Nominator** Andrew Foulkes, general manager, the Newt in Somerset

Christopher Bancroft's CV is a name-dropper's paradise. His first taste of hospitality was as a student, working at Northcote in Lancashire as a general assistant. After a brief flirtation with an architecture degree, he returned to hospitality and undertook the Ten Out Of Ten management trainee programme, during which he honed his skills across front and back of house departments at Chewton Glen, the Rick Stein group, the Vineyard, Lucknam Park and Calcot Manor.

He then returned to Lucknam Park, working up from assistant manager to assistant front office manager, and completed a Master Innholders Aspiring Leaders Diploma.

Promotion came quickly. Christopher started at the Newt in March 2019 as head of reception and was promoted to front of house manager two months later. His contribution is evident in the fact the hotel's average daily rate has grown from £250 to £330 in the 12 months since opening in September 2019, with £420 forecast for June.

Self-motivated and diligent, he embraced senior management duties during each of the national lockdowns and was instrumental in developing the hotel restaurant's new click-and-collect business. He now leads operational planning for the hotel's latest offering, the Farmyard at the Newt.

In the future he hopes to champion the Hoteliers' Charter, and recently he has been supporting future talent through the Newt's graduate programme.

### What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?

"The heart-breaking periods of closure have given us an opportunity to show how much we care about each other, with businesses engaging their teams through everything from virtual wine tastings and cook-along clubs to encouraging staff to engage with nature. I hope this will continue, as it has had such a positive effect on team morale and mental health."

## Rachel Banks, 28



**Assistant director of people and culture, the Dorchester and 45 Park Lane, London**

**Nominator** Emma Jayne, area director for people and culture, the Dorchester Collection

In a mere 10 years, Rachel Banks has risen from HR administrator at the Landmark London to her current role, in which she oversees a people and culture team that is responsible for 750 employees across the five-red-AA-star Dorchester and 45 Park Lane hotels.

It was a big move at the age of 26, but as one of the interviewers commented, talking to Banks was like "looking at the future". That turned out to be an accurate summary of her talent for always anticipating challenges and opportunities.

This agility kept her in good stead over the past year. Among other initiatives, she developed a 10-week leadership programme to guide fellow assistant division heads through the new issues thrown up by the pandemic, such as the importance of mental health, agile thinking, creativity and developing a coaching leadership style.

Prior to the pandemic, she was already making positive changes, having introduced a quarterly scheme of Team Talent Check Ups as a boost to the annual employee review process. As a result, staff turnover year-on-year has dropped by 20%.

Further proof of her employee engagement skills can be found in her own team, where last year she raised the "highly engaged" score from 93% to 97%.

Since she stepped into the role, the company has won several accolades, with both hotels being ranked in *The Caterer's* Best Places to Work in Hospitality in 2021.

### What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?

"The value of kindness and the care demonstrated to employees. Employers are now taking more of a "whole person" approach to their employees and are more dedicated to understanding the individual rather than the role they undertake in the organisation."

## Edward Bettley, 28



**Site director designate, Norton Canes motorway service area, Roadchef Motorways**

**Nominator** Jane Frost, head of talent and resourcing, Roadchef Motorways

The pandemic has enabled Edward Bettley to showcase his can-do attitude and support for the whole company – not least by standing in at short notice for site directors affected by Covid. It's also testament to the confidence senior management has in his capabilities.

Indeed, going above and beyond is the norm for Bettley, who has even rolled his sleeves up to fix bathroom issues at the on-site hotel to ensure good service for key worker guests.

He has worked at Roadchef since joining as a team member aged 16, and remained while studying for a degree in business and enterprise management. Since graduating in 2015, he has whistled up the ranks and into his current role at the flagship Norton Canes motorway service area, where he is responsible for a 145-strong team.

Norton Canes is also Roadchef's head office, so his ability to manage upwards has been a critical skill. He has learned to communicate effectively at all levels, making him a key member of the team, whether engaging with team members or the chief executive.

Under his leadership, the team delivered great results in Transport Focus' Motorway Services User Survey 2018 and 2019, in which it was named best motorway service area in the UK two years running.

He is always keen to champion Roadchef as a great employer and to help the next generation of site managers through mentoring, coaching and training. And his commitment to developing others is demonstrated by the fact he has always back-filled his own job.

### What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?

"The evolved communication methods will enhance people's work-life balance. Big changes include a huge increase in digital communication via social media platforms, virtual meetings and vlogs. This has aided a blended approach of working from home and the office."



**Alex Borley, 28****Account manager, BaxterStorey**

**Nominator** Joanna Davidson, digital communications content manager, BaxterStorey

Since he joined BaxterStorey's graduate programme in 2016, Alex Borley hasn't stood still. His first appointment was as an F&B manager, but in no time he was promoted to general manager at the Channel 4 contract, managing a team of 22 and a turnover in excess of £1m. Under his guidance, it soon became a BaxterStorey flagship, cementing him a place on the board level ESG committee as the youngest member.

Unsurprisingly, in 2019 he was headhunted for the role of account manager at Amazon London, with 6,000 clients across three sites, one of which represents BaxterStorey's single-building biggest occupancies.

Here, he achieved 8% sales growth between October 2019 and February 2020, through feedback schemes and implementing technology to improve service efficiency. His commercial acumen is further demonstrated in Amazon's recent financial performance, where his variance to budget saw a positive swing of £102,000 in 2020.

During furlough, staff wellbeing remained his priority. He arranged care packages for the team and led interactive virtual socials, including a guest chef virtual cook-along, with ingredients boxes sent to employees, and a chat on the importance of mental health. His subsequent support in helping managers return to work has been recognised in BaxterStorey's A Round of Applause, where he received 15 nominations.

Not one to rest on his laurels, Alex recently started a Level 5 business and management apprenticeship.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"With challenge comes opportunity. It's a great time for businesses to reset old working ways and put an emphasis on supporting employees in building lasting careers. Everyone now has a greater appreciation for what the hospitality industry brings to society."

**Jordan Charles, 29****General manager, Meldrum House Country Hotel & Golf Course, Oldmeldrum, Aberdeenshire**

**Nominator** Bob Edwards, director, Meldrum House Country Hotel & Golf Course

After qualifying as a lawyer, Jordan Charles followed his instincts and chose to carve out a career in hotels, where he had worked during his studies, quipping: "I thought I'd make a better hotelier than a lawyer."

He's definitely proved himself in the sector, working up through the ranks of Q Hotels and Redefine BDL in roles such as conference manager, F&B manager and operations manager, before taking his first general manager position at the privately owned Meldrum, aged just 27.

Under his stewardship the 51-bedroom hotel, which turns over £4m annually and has 122 employees, has won a string of awards, including the Scottish Thistle Award for Most Hospitable Hotel 2018/19.

He works constantly to move the business forward. Since 2018, he's launched three new dining concepts, opening the 1236 restaurant to provide an alternative venue to the two-red-AA-rossette restaurant – which he also repositioned, creating the more relaxed Pineapple Grill & Seafood restaurant.

And as the pandemic took hold last year, he launched four luxury outdoor dining domes, generating £80,000 of room hire revenue alone in the first six months, while F&B was also up 25%.

He has also thrown himself into supporting the industry in the region and holds several positions, including board of directors at Visit Aberdeenshire and board member of Developing Young Workforce for Grampian.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"The way everyone has looked after each other and adapted to our new business mix. Our events and reception departments have now merged and I believe the business has exited lockdown stronger than when we entered, thanks to the enthusiasm of our team."

**Jenni Clarke, 29****People and development manager, Bankside and St Ermin's hotel, London**

**Nominator** Douglas McHugh, general manager, St Ermin's hotel, the Autograph Collection

What stands out most about Jenni Clarke is that thanks to her broad operational experience she can tackle issues right across the business.

At 17, she started as a room attendant in a small country hotel and was soon managing housekeeping. Her commitment to self-development led to her being named HTP Apprentice of the Year and joining the opening team of Radisson Edwardian Guildford as assistant front office manager.

To flex her commercial acumen, she became a sales and events executive with Hand Picked Hotels. Her success in building strong customer relationships saw her promoted to regional sales manager, where she increased corporate and conference revenue by 10% year-on-year.

But her heart lay with HR, so in 2018 she joined as a people and development officer in the preopening team of London's Bankside hotel. In 2020 she was asked to support both Bankside and its sister Autograph Collection hotel, St Ermin's in Westminster, with their post-pandemic reopening plans, earning another promotion to her current role.

She is a mental health first-aider and also qualified as an emotional quotient therapist during the pandemic. Making mental health awareness a priority, she organised regular online Tea Times with the teams, just for a chat, to watch a film or to share learning advice. She also designed the weekly #WellbeingWednesday advice newsletter.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"Everyone in the industry has recognised that we don't just work with positions or titles: we work with people. Hospitality businesses are facing their responsibility to put people's mental health at the forefront of workforce culture and to take action to ensure they offer great places to work."



## Emily Coubrough, 29



**Guest experience and communications manager, the Savoy, London**

**Nominator** Alison Vernon, director of rooms, the Savoy

Emily Coubrough caught the hospitality bug aged 16 and after graduating from Oxford Brookes University with an international hospitality management degree she joined the Savoy London in 2015 as a receptionist.

From the start, she has shown dedication, drive and a desire to learn, working her way up through reception supervisor, assistant front office manager and front office manager.

Last September, a new position was created in response to the pandemic and Coubrough stepped into it, tasked with creating a co-ordination team. She now oversees 29 people who bring together a variety of roles – front office, in-room dining, housekeeping and concierge co-ordinators, plus switchboard and guest relations – into one effective, multi-tasking team responsible for all guest requests. This has streamlined communications throughout the hotel and elevated the guest experience.

Earlier this year, she also refreshed the hotel's colleague recognition committee to ensure a transparent process and to support the Savoy's aim of creating an inverted leadership pyramid culture. As a result, nominations are now driven solely by employees and a shortlist is drawn up by the committee, led by Coubrough, before being presented to the executive committee.

She was also a finalist in the Savoy Dragon's Den with her initiative to offer scratch cards as colleague rewards.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"The industry has had to adapt and I've been involved in creating a team of empowered colleagues who are turning their hand to multiple areas of the business, further developing their skills and careers."

## Jack Croft, 28



**Co-owner, Fallow restaurant, Mayfair, London**

**Nominator** James Robson, director, Robson Hospitality Partners

Here's a chef who demonstrates resilience and versatility in spades. Jack Croft started Fallow at 27 with two business partners – including co-chef and fellow Acorn Will Murray – and a limited budget. They opened 10 days before the first national lockdown and immediately had to adapt their business plan. The sustainability-focused pop-up restaurant was changed to a takeaway, a shop and then a casual restaurant, and they also produce and deliver meal kits.

A big blow was that furlough was not available to such a new company, so Croft's business agility was crucial to support the staff. Aside from securing funding grants for English tutoring for employees, he launched a virtual cooking class platform so that his chefs could earn money through teaching.

Croft's career journey has been solid since leaving school at 16 to pursue his dream of becoming a chef. A two-year apprenticeship was followed by a five-year stint at Calcot Manor hotel. He then moved to London, where he rose quickly through the ranks at two-Michelin-starred Dinner by Heston Blumenthal, where he stayed for six years.

His culinary skill is evident, with Fallow receiving a Michelin Bib Gourmand in 2021 as well as a five-star review from Fay Maschler in the *London Evening Standard*, among a string of other accolades.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"The atmosphere as lockdown eases is one of gratitude and appreciation – from our chefs, who are glad to again be working in an industry they love, and the guests, who can dine out again."

## Andrew Deans, 29



**General manager, Shaws Fine Meats, Lauder, Berwickshire**

**Nominator** Margaret McPherson, founder and director, Intelligent Office UK

Passionate about the industry from an early age, Andrew Deans managed to find time to manage marketing for Shaws alongside studying for a law degree, as well as starting his own food and restaurant review blog. By 2013, he was working full-time in the company, evolving to general manager, and has subsequently increased revenues from £600,000 to £5m (over 700% growth) and boosted staff numbers from 15 to 35.

He added an ecommerce arm to Shaws' wholesale business, which proved critical during the pandemic. By pivoting and building a direct-to-home service, he retained all staff and built a profitable revenue stream. The business's revenue pre-Covid was heavily weighted to hospitality (87%, compared to just 3% from home delivery), but during the pandemic this was almost evenly split between hospitality, retail and home delivery.

He also supported restaurant clients by co-branding products to keep their brand alive during closures. This, in turn, built loyalty as a trusted supply partner when they reopened.

Ever-astute, he is also successful outside Shaws. Among his enterprises, he opened a restaurant in Edinburgh in 2016 called Norn, which is led by 2017 Acorn winner Scott Smith. In 2017, Deans also launched Terroir, a wine supply business with revenues of £650,000 projected for 2021.

As a fair employer, he has introduced the real living wage and an apprenticeship scheme. He also supports numerous local charities and is a board member of the Borders Carers Trust.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"The quieter periods during lockdowns have afforded our sector time to put more emphasis on staff training and wellbeing, helping to spur on healthier, safer workplaces post-lockdown and into the future."



**Andy Durma, 27**

**General manager, Roomzzz Aparthotel Newcastle City**

**Nominator** Samantha Clamp, operations director, Roomzzz Aparthotels

Through sheer hard work and agility, Andy Durma went from being a casual housekeeper at Premier Inn to managing Roomzzz Aparthotel Newcastle City within just three years.

During his five years in the role, he has also played key roles in the opening of Roomzzz in London Stratford and Manchester Corn Exchange.

Perhaps his biggest challenge, however, has been overseeing the multimillion-pound investment that added 74 units to the Newcastle property during the pandemic. Unfazed, he came up with a new revenue stream by offering the local student community in Newcastle short-term rental accommodation. This proved so successful that he was made responsible for promoting the business in the same way across all other locations.

During the first lockdown, his hotel recorded enviable results by accommodating key workers. In March 2020, occupancy was 100% and average room rate was £57.76. Overall, his sales initiatives generated £32,000 profit.

Along the way, he has mentored an apprentice and kept his team close by offering regular one-to-one sessions, coaching and training to ensure they felt supported.

It's no surprise, then, that he is credited with a string of awards, including Highly Commended Serviced Apartment Rising Star of the Year 2018 at the ASAP Awards and Roomzzz Aparthotel Newcastle City being declared the Best UK Hotel Overall at the 2019 Boutique Hotel Guest Experience Awards.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"I've realised that in difficult times, the business model can be adjusted and still be successful, but only if every member of the team is commercially aware and believes in the product. This can only be achieved by continuous, open and honest communication."

**Philip Egan, 28**

**Executive assistant manager, Fairmont St Andrews**

**Nominator** Stephanie Reith, digital and communications manager, Fairmont St Andrews

Described by a colleague as "a very humble and thoughtful leader", Philip Egan's success since joining the five-AA-star resort reveals he is also ambitious.

Having studied hotel management at Shannon College in County Clare, Egan joined Fairmont's leadership development programme in 2014 and quickly showcased his understanding of leadership values, working his way up to assistant housekeeping manager by 2016.

His recent promotion sees him lead a team of 150 and report directly to the area general manager. He also sits on the executive committee as its youngest ever member.

His financial acumen is evident in his successful restructuring of the rooms division during the pandemic, including introducing lobby ambassadors to assist guests on arrival. The department subsequently overachieved its monthly upsell target and generated more than £14,500 in additional rooms revenue.

The development and mentorship of his team is clearly high on his agenda, too. When one team member was struggling on the nightshift last year, Egan dropped everything to join them and remind them of their value and ability. The team member has since earned promotion to supervisor due to Egan's continued mentorship.

He also finds time to support education, and is an associate member of staff at Dundee University as a mentor for Fairmont St Andrews' graduate apprenticeship programme.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"The mutual understanding of shared experiences has led to a greater connection between colleagues and guests. The sharing of our experiences is now a fundamental part of hospitality, as we begin our journey to what will be the future normality of the business we love."

**Katie Forrest, 26**

**People development manager, Dakota Manchester**

**Nominator** Lily Shepherd, group marketing manager, Dakota Hotels

Katie Forrest's work ethic and positive attitude has been integral to the success of three Dakota hotel openings across the country.

She joined Dakota Edinburgh on a university placement with the events team, which led to a job front of house. Challenges presented by hotel openings in Glasgow and Leeds saw her whip up the ladder, through reception manager and rooms division executive.

Most recently, she caught the attention of the board of directors, who identified her as having the best qualities to ensure the smooth opening of Dakota Manchester in 2019. Here, she has managed the recruitment and retention of 120 employees, and the implementation of a learning and development strategy.

She is active in providing mental health support for staff, and with her leadership, Dakota Manchester now has as many mental health first-aiders as physical first-aiders. She is also always striving to develop her own skills, including gaining a Level 3 Award in Education and Training (RQF) and beginning a CIPD Level 7 qualification.

Outside of her day-to-day responsibilities, Forrest champions the hospitality industry as a guest lecturer for Tameside College and Manchester Metropolitan University, where she also acts as a student mentor. And as branch secretary for the north-west region of Institute of Hospitality, she works to ensure that hospitality is seen as a career of value.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"Lockdown has encouraged people to talk. Mental health and wellness is at the forefront of the business unlike ever before. Our people are supporting one another and the shared experience of the pandemic has encouraged empathy and understanding."



## Lewis Greenwood, 29



**Co-founder and director, Fink Street Food, Newbury, Berkshire**

**Nominator** James Reid, co-founder and director, Fink Street Food

Lewis Greenwood has worked in hospitality for 15 years, starting out in BaxterStorey's graduate programme and progressing through management roles at the Genuine Dining Co (GDC).

His star quality earned recognition at GDC, where he project-managed a new payroll system and gained the Financial Performance of the Year award for delivering consistent profit for the first time for a £1m turnover site.

In 2019, he co-founded a social enterprise catering company, Fink Street Food. This events and street food company aims to use food to promote mental health awareness and tackle stigma through workplace pop-ups.

At Fink, he has introduced digital detox days, an evening work email and phone curfew, and ensured the business has enough resources to prevent any team members suffering burn-out. He has also undertaken mental health training to become an ambassador for the Burnt Chef Project.

Despite the pandemic, Greenwood and his co-director have grown Fink into a profitable business, transforming an initial £8,000 start-up investment into £100,000 of first-year revenue. Fink now employs four staff and is forecasting sales of £230,000 in year two.

The young company uses 50% of its profits to support mental health projects. Recognising that learning new skills is one of the NHS's 'five steps to mental wellbeing', Greenwood has been teaching cooking life-skills to young care leavers. During the pandemic, he and his co-director cooked 6,000 meals for the homeless.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"Customers have been keen to spend and support local businesses throughout, and that has been fantastic to witness. Street food and meal-creation kits have seen strong growth, with communities pulling together to support local independents that have a sustainable and ethical ethos."

## Amelia Harper, 29



**Director of communications, Rosewood London**

**Nominator** Mike Bonner, director of sales and marketing, Rosewood London

After finishing a business management and marketing degree in 2013, Amelia Harper's career journey has taken her through luxury establishments including Harrods and InterContinental hotels. She joined Rosewood London in 2017 and within two years was made area marketing manager for Europe, responsible for digital channel revenues of £12m across three properties, as well as revenues generated by rooms, F&B and the spas.

Her strategies saw the European hotels become the best-performing region for digital marketing within a year, with a 33% growth year-on-year in email marketing revenue attribution and a 10% growth year-on-year for digital ad campaign revenue.

In March 2020, Amelia took on maternity cover for the area director of communications. Since then, she has spearheaded the hotel's reopening plan, and secured £200,000 of brand partnerships to launch an alfresco dining pop-up and a home delivery service, which generate much-needed revenue after a long closure and involved a multichannel strategy across digital and social platforms. She has since been made director of communications.

Her ambition is unquestionable. At Rosewood, she has transformed marketing into a commercially driven department with impressive results: a 22% increase in website revenue, a 19% growth in email marketing revenue attribution; and a 92% increase in trigger campaign revenue, 2018 versus 2019.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"From my communications angle, it is the creativity and innovation our industry has shown to drive awareness and welcome guests back to their businesses. We've seen so many fun and inspiring initiatives, from terrace pop-ups to unique wellness offerings, finding new ways to tell stories and engage with our guests once again."

## Charlotte Jakubecz, 29



**Head of F&B partnerships, BaxterStorey**

**Nominator** Charlotte Rouse, head of mobilisations and supply chain, BaxterStorey

Charlotte Jakubecz joined BaxterStorey's graduate programme in 2015, and by 24, she had become retail manager at the prestigious Amazon contract, managing a team of 20. Here, she led a workplace dining culture change with the introduction of Pod Kitchens and a market hall-style service, earning herself a BaxterStorey Rising Star Award nomination in 2018.

Innovative ideas come easily to Jakubecz. She co-founded Fuel in 2019 after identifying a gap in the market for street food in the workplace. A success from the start, Fuel went into contracts such as Goldman Sachs and Amazon and helped the London region achieve a 100% client-retention rate in 2019. It also scooped Innovation of the Year at the 2020 BaxterStorey Awards.

Fuel has pumped over £100,000 back into small businesses during this tough year, with traders such as the Cheese Bar and Cyprus Kitchen saying they have relied on the income from Fuel to survive.

During her spell on furlough in May 2020, she devised BaxterStorey At Home (BS@H) to support struggling suppliers. BS@H launched in November with 15 partners and now has over 4,500 customers, 50 partners and year-to-date revenue of £180,200.

Always keen to share her knowledge, she mentored a sous chef at Amazon to enter the 2020 StrEATfood Awards.

She has also found time in the past year to volunteer at the Trussell Trust food bank.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"A stronger focus on employee wellbeing. The introduction of flexible and remote working makes achieving a work-life balance easier and should, in turn, create a happier, more productive workforce. Also, the openness around discussing mental health and wellbeing can only be good for our industry."



**Joshua Jay-Bates, 29**

**Hotel operations manager, the Headland hotel, Fistral Beach, Cornwall**

**Nominator** Veryan Palmer, director, the Headland hotel

Joshua Jay-Bates started his career as a waiter in 2013, rising to catering manager in a three-star hotel by 2016. A year later, he joined the Headland hotel as a duty manager.

In the past four years he has moved from a role in reception leading a team of 15, to becoming operations manager, overseeing 85 employees and an £11m turnover operation, including hotel, cottages, spa and Aqua Club.

During summer 2020, in the absence of a general manager, Jay-Bates reopened the hotel, compliant with the new regulations, which led the business to record a profits result of 59%.

He was also instrumental in helping the hotel achieve a five-AA-star rating in 2019. In 2018, he worked with Newquay.co.uk to reposition the town as a family holiday destination, rather than a stag and hen haven, by helping local businesses with their marketing.

His career progression is a model for younger team members. He has mentored junior employees, with one becoming front office manager and another joining the hotel's placement scheme. In 2019, he worked with Truro College to offer front of house placements for people with learning difficulties, including soft skills training. One placement now has a permanent position at the hotel.

When not busy with his day job, he has completed an APM project management qualification so he can manage renovations at the hotel, as well as achieving a Master Innholders Aspiring Leaders Diploma.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"That hybrid working patterns will remain in place and department heads can manage administration from home. Productivity increases when there are fewer distractions, and with remote systems such as Microsoft Teams, staff are still on-hand for communication and engagement."

**Jack Jolly, 26**

**National campaign and PR manager, New World Trading Company (NWTC), Manchester**

**Nominator** Stephanie Lloyd, sales and marketing director, NWTC

Over the past five years, Jack Jolly has helped NWTC to grow from nine to 30 sites and spearheaded numerous campaigns. He joined as an assistant brand manager in 2016, promptly establishing himself as an innovator and solution finder within the marketing team. After 12 months, he was handed the full portfolio of seven brands, which includes the Florist, the Botanist and the Oast House.

With a remit to improve like-for-like sales, generate PR and improve brand awareness, Jolly never disappoints. His early adoption of influencers and access to channels such as LadBible helped the company earn hundreds of thousands of pounds in free marketing.

During the pandemic, he worked with drinks suppliers to drive social media growth through masterclasses and competitions. One post alone recorded 15,000 likes, 13,000 comments and an additional 15,000 followers in one weekend. Altogether, he has earned media coverage in excess of £500,000 (AVE) in the past 18 months.

Understanding the importance of partnerships, he hosted an Aperol spritz pop-up in 2019, generating record sales of £180,000 in one day and increasing Aperol sales by 283.33% over six months.

Looking to the next generation, he gives talks at his former university and school to showcase hospitality as a career path.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"A stronger collaborative approach between marketing teams – sharing knowledge and contacts as well as opportunities. There is also a shift in working smarter, leading to a better work-life balance. And we've had more time to be strategic and focus budget and energy on a selection of marketing ideas."

**Iona Macleod, 26**

**Front office manager, Kimpton Blythswood Square, Glasgow**

**Nominator** Gillian Mylles, hotel manager, Kimpton Blythswood Square

Iona Macleod started as a graduate manager at Blythswood Square in 2017 and two years later, aged 24, was offered the role of housekeeping manager. Despite inheriting a fragmented team and having no housekeeping experience, she helped complete the rebrand from Principal to Kimpton Blythswood Square, which included a soft refurbishment and a million-pound refurbishment of the penthouse.

It was certainly a challenging first management role. She was the seventh manager in nine years and the 50-strong team were unengaged. However, through hard work she built a culture of trust and was not only commended by the director of people for the group but nominated by her team as Manager of the Year 2019.

The numbers say it all. There was a positive improvement in the guest satisfaction metric from 15% in January 2019 to 100% by March 2019. And by improving standards, she increased audit scores from 92% during an AA audit to 100% for the Visit Scotland audit.

Macleod has developed resilience and strong people management skills, making her an obvious choice to take the front office role following a restructure. Her remit is to stabilise and engage the team, improve guest satisfaction metrics and take the opportunity to become more commercially focused.

She won a place on the HIT Art of Leadership scholarship in Lausanne and is completing the HIT Talent development management course. She has also mentored five apprentices.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"I've noticed a need for and an appreciation of heartfelt human connections. The kindness across all sectors post-restrictions is second to none. The desire to work as one and the focus on mental health and achieving a good work-life balance have also been encouraging." ►



## Spencer Metzger, 28



**Head chef, the Ritz London**

**Nominator** Katrina Brandt, learning and development manager, the Ritz London

Spencer Metzger is an excellent example of what can be achieved through apprenticeships. He realised he wanted to be a chef when he was 15, after completing a two-week work experience at the Ritz London under John Williams. Soon afterwards, he joined as a commis chef apprentice, where his strong work ethic and skill laid the groundwork for his career to flourish.

Having worked his way through the kitchen, he became sous chef in 2015 and, following a brief stint in 2017 as chef de partie at two-Michelin-starred L'Enclume in Cumbria, he returned to the Ritz London as premier sous chef, overseeing a brigade of 75. He is now credited as being a key player in maintaining the restaurant's Michelin star and has recently been promoted to head chef.

Early on, Metzger displayed a rare talent for both managing food costs and using quality ingredients with flair. He has used this knowledge to train his team, resulting in a higher understanding of food waste and a reduction in food cost.

Among his many attributes, he has a thirst for learning, and in 2019 he was awarded the coveted Roux Scholarship. He uses his story and experience to coach new apprentices and manages their progression and wellbeing.

As an ambassador for the profession, he is also active on social media, using his platform to engage with industry professionals and charities and to elevate the craft of hospitality.

### **What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"People have taken a step back and looked after themselves both physically and mentally during lockdown. It's great to see people putting their wellbeing first and incorporating that into their daily lives once returning to work."

## Koula Michaelides, 28



**F&B manager, the Ritz London**

**Nominator** Katrina Brandt, learning and development manager, the Ritz London

Koula Michaelides' love of learning has seen her develop every role she has had far beyond what was originally planned for it. She joined the Ritz London as a hostess in 2012, but her innate leadership qualities and ability to deliver impeccable service saw her promoted to restaurant co-ordinator in no time.

She has continued to develop herself both through formal learning, such as gaining a Master Innholders Aspiring Leaders Diploma, and on-the-job learning, showing a particular strength for developing her team and planning. These skills have led to a string of promotions, from F&B co-ordinator in 2015 through to her current role as F&B manager in 2019. She now oversees the entire F&B business front of house, plus room service, the staff restaurant, private dining and events.

Among her achievements, Michaelides helped to design bespoke on-boarding for the department, leading to increased productivity and a significant reduction in staff attrition of 18.5%.

Throughout the pandemic, she has gone the extra mile to safeguard the mental health and wellbeing of the team. Notably, when a colleague left hospital after a severe case of coronavirus, she ensured that his home was clean and his fridge was stocked, and she collected messages of support from the team so that he felt valued.

### **What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"There's been a positive change in how we communicate with one another at work, as well as how much care and attention we give to people's wellbeing, both physical and mental. There's been a substantial increase in mental health awareness in the industry and I foresee it remaining."

## Katie Moran, 28



**F&B lead, Voco Grand Central Glasgow**

**Nominator** Verity Bremner, cluster HR adviser, Voco Grand Central Glasgow

Katie Moran fell in love with hospitality at the age of 17 while working as a bartender at 29 Glasgow, a private members' club. She embraced the world of fast-paced, upscale service with enthusiasm and continued to work even while studying for a degree in events management and tourism.

Hard work saw her progress to F&B manager within three years, and in 2018, she joined the then Grand Central hotel as manager of the Champagne bar, with a team of 28. Last September, she was promoted to F&B lead, managing three outlets with a revenue pre-Covid of £6m. She has also helped to launch the hotel under IHG's new brand Voco this year.

Since joining, she has proved to be an essential part of the leadership team. Not least, she has established the Champagne bar as not just a resident's bar, but a destination bar, leading to an increase in turnover from £1.2m in 2018 to £2m in 2019.

She treats everyone with respect and her fair leadership style saw her score 80% in the hotel's colleague survey in April 2019, increasing to 88% in the November.

Her pursuit of self-development and willingness to share knowledge also make her an inspirational leader. She gained a Train the Trainer certificate, resulting in high staff retention rates, and has enrolled on a mental health first-aid course.

### **What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"Colleagues have become even more like family. It has been such a pleasure to work here – everyone has come together to create a great working environment."



**Bethany Morgan-Jones, 28**

**General manager, All's Well, Hackney, London**

**Nominator** Chantelle Nicholson, chef-owner, Tredwells and All's Well, London

Bethany Morgan-Jones is a perfect example of how commitment and talent can carve out a varied, exciting hospitality career. Having started at Tredwells in 2015 as a demi chef de partie, she moved swiftly through the kitchen and into marketing. By 2018, she was promoted to guest relations manager and the following year she was overseeing the overall strategy of the restaurant. From there, she slipped effortlessly into her role of general manager to choreograph the opening of sister outlet All's Well in Hackney in October 2020.

The past year has been a test of everyone's mettle, and Morgan-Jones has certainly shown hers. In March 2020, she launched the group's at-home delivery scheme, generating more than £10,000 revenue. She also helped pivot All's Well into a takeaway during the last two national lockdowns, stimulating much-needed cashflow.

She has remained proactive throughout the pandemic and invited Kelly's Cause Foundation to hold their mental health first-aid training in the restaurant's surplus space. She also arranged for a quarter of the team to be trained as mental health first-aiders and is signing the business up to Hospitality Action's employee assistance programme.

She has also completed an MBA specialising in leadership, management, strategy and entrepreneurship, as well as a level 3 WSET certification.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"The opportunity to reassess how we manage the business, and looking at everything through a fairer lens. We've changed the old way of managing the team, and we're now focusing on mental health and development to create a welcoming and nurturing environment."

**Freya Morton, 29**

**House manager, the Pig at Bridge Place, Canterbury, Kent**

**Nominator** Darryl Harris, F&B manager, the Pig at Bridge Place

Since joining Home Grown Hotels in 2016 as part of its Budding Entrepreneur scheme, Freya Morton has gained skills as a restaurant supervisor, receptionist, bartender and sommelier.

All this rich experience makes her a well-rounded member of staff and culminated in her promotion to opening house manager for the Pig at Bridge Place in 2019. Here, she manages a team of six and the running of the house, bedrooms, housekeeping and maintenance, reservations and duty manager shifts.

The hotel's average occupancy is usually 96%, which she has maximised through waitlist management and guest communications. She also oversees staff training and can boast staff retention of 88%, which heavily contributed to the hotel being listed in *The Caterer's* Best Places to Work in Hospitality in 2021.

Under her guidance, several junior receptionists have progressed to management positions in the company. Ever-ambitious, she also seeks opportunities for self-growth and, in 2018, took a placement at the Stafford London's American Bar, where she learned mixology skills and a different service style that she brought back to the Pig.

During lockdown, she helped create a self-contained accommodation action plan and converted existing bookings to the new package, which represented £42,000 revenue. Her dedication to the industry is underlined by the fact she helped to set up the Seat at the Table campaign to lobby government for a minister for hospitality.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"The current recruitment crisis has highlighted the importance of nourishing our homegrown talent by identifying strong individuals in the organisation and developing them."

**Will Murray, 28**

**Co-owner, Fallow restaurant, Mayfair, London**

**Nominator** James Robson, director, Robson Hospitality Partners

It's been non-stop for Will Murray since he gave up his job as a baker at the Peak Edge hotel in Derbyshire to move to London. Between 2015 and 2020 he worked his way through the kitchen at Dinner by Heston Blumenthal, spending holidays on stages at Michelin-starred restaurants such as Royal Hospital Road, Core by Clare Smyth, the Fat Duck, the Clove Club, Pétrus and the Harwood Arms.

The skills he accrued gave him the confidence to start a business with two partners – including co-chef and fellow Acorn Jack Croft – and they launched the 40-seat Fallow pop-up on a limited budget.

To say he's had to overcome unforeseen challenges is an understatement. The sustainability-focused restaurant opened 10 days before the first national lockdown, so the business plan had to be immediately adapted. In the past year Fallow has been a takeaway, a shop and a casual-dining restaurant, as well as providing meal kits.

Testament to Murray's cooking prowess, Fallow has received a string of accolades, including a Gold award from SquareMeal and a Michelin Bib Gourmand in 2021. He has also launched a fermented hot sauce brand, which is being considered for a Great Taste Award.

He's also hands-on in terms of staff welfare, creating an online platform so that those who didn't qualify for furlough could earn money through teaching cooking classes.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"Our Fallow concept grew during lockdown. The values of being creative problem-solvers, tirelessly positive and doggedly determined have been ingrained in our team – and everyone in hospitality. This has shown in our triumphant return post-lockdown."



## Lydia Rigby, 28



**Restaurant manager, the Pig in the South Downs, West Sussex**

**Nominator** Darryl Harris, F&B manager, the Pig at Bridge Place, Canterbury, Kent

The Pig hotels have a reputation for good, intuitive service, so the appointment of Lydia Rigby as restaurant manager for the newest piglet provides an idea of her talents.

Rigby joined Home Grown Hotels as a part-time waitress and stayed to gain experience as a bartender, supervisor, bar manager and receptionist. In 2020, she was given the role of assistant restaurant manager, overseeing a team of 20 in a busy 90-cover restaurant.

Her talent lies in motivating her team through informative briefings and tastings (pre-Covid), and her energy inspires junior employees to emulate her style and improve their skillsets.

As the Pig in the South Downs has a vineyard, her diligence has led her to boost her wine knowledge by self-funding a WSET Level 3 diploma while working. Ever-industrious, she used lockdown as an opportunity to rewrite the F&B training manual and before the April reopening, she could be found leading roleplay training sessions, menu knowledge quizzes and tray-carrying races to prepare and engage staff. She also somehow found time to help the reception team in their mammoth rebooking task.

Her dedication to the industry is tangible. Rigby is one of the co-founders of Seat at the Table, a digital campaign calling for the appointment of a minister for hospitality in government.

### What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?

"There is now greater recognition of the industry. Hospitality is a dynamic and hugely rewarding career path for young people; I hope that a change in public perception and support from government bodies will ensure we are able to motivate and develop talent moving through the sector."

## Callum Roberts, 27



**Estate sous chef, Gleneagles, Auchterarder, Perthshire**

**Nominator** Ian Syme, executive sous chef, Gleneagles

As his job title suggests, Callum Roberts is at the sharp end of a huge culinary operation, managing a 100-strong brigade across six outlets, plus room service for 232 bedrooms and 150,000 private dining covers annually across 10 event spaces.

In 2010, after completing his VRQ level 1-3, Roberts joined the five-red-AA-star hotel's informal Deseo restaurant, working his way up from commis chef to chef de partie, before being appointed sous chef in the hotel's Strathearn restaurant, where he helped maintain its two AA rosettes. He also worked temporarily in the late Andrew Fairlie's two-Michelin-starred kitchen during the 2014 Ryder Cup.

It's been a rigorous training ground and he's held his current position since early 2020, playing a pivotal role in the much-anticipated relaunch of the Strathearn, which included delivering high-profile media events.

Roberts is passionate about sharing knowledge and has given his free time to support junior staff entering competitions, such as the Andrew Fairlie Scholarship, and supported the junior assistant restaurant manager on her way to winning the Gold Service Scholarship in 2020.

Roberts supports HIT Scotland's events and has also established an internship programme that attracts culinary students to Gleneagles on placements from as far afield as North America.

### What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?

"Lockdown forced everyone, including chefs, to slow down a gear and brought mental health awareness to the forefront. Worldwide, chefs have often had a "just get on with it" approach to work, and the pandemic has helped to shift that attitude and create a culture where it's OK to ask for help. At Gleneagles there was a fantastic programme of support to encourage us to stay connected, healthy and happy."

## Rachael Stevens, 27



**Front of house manager, Pennyhill Park, Bagshot, Surrey**

**Nominator** David Connell, South Lodge hotel, Horsham, West Sussex

After earning a first-class degree in international hospitality management, Rachael Stevens was snapped up by Elite Hotels in 2016 as a management trainee. She trained across 14 roles before becoming assistant guest services manager at South Lodge hotel in 2018. A mere six months later she was made guest services manager, leading a team of 14.

In May this year, she earned further promotion to front of house manager at Pennyhill Park, with the vision to soon be stepping up to rooms division manager as part of the senior leadership team of the 124-bedroom resort.

Her achievements to date include the highest guest service score (92.6%) across the portfolio of six hotels in 2018-19. She also devised revenue-generating initiatives such as personalised welcome letters, courtesy call upsells and increased communications via in-room tablets. An 'extend your stay' initiative affected overall total revpar with positive year-on-year movement of 48% (2018-19 versus 2019-20) and occupancy rates increasing by 10.3%.

Stevens' competitive mindset drives her professional development. Outside her working day she has completed a leadership development programme and achieved ILM level 3 and WSET Level 2 (with merit) among others.

She also helps to promote the hospitality industry as a profession of choice, by creating content for CareerScope webinars and becoming a branch chair at the Institute of Hospitality.

### What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?

"That we are not just an industry, but a family. We've supported one another, we've supported those at the frontline, like the NHS, and we've shown the world how kind we are. We've recognised that looking after our people is more important than ever. Our operations will change to accommodate this realisation, and that will help to realign hospitality as a career of choice."



**Clémence Vermes, 29**

**Assistant director of finance, JW Marriott Grosvenor House London**

**Nominator** Stuart Bowery, multi-property general manager, JW Marriott Grosvenor House London

Clémence Vermes' job is not for the fainthearted. Since March 2019, she has been managing the financial goals of the five-AA-star, 496-bedroom hotel, which has 23 banquet rooms – one with capacity for 2,000 guests – and 800-plus employees, five subtenants and revenue of £87m (2019).

Her 20-strong team includes IT and purchasing. Under her leadership and through effective cost-control and payroll management, the team increased gross operating profit by £1.2m versus the 2019 budget.

Many of the hotel's game-changing new systems have been piloted by Vermes. She has just led the development and implementation of an online income audit tool, which has led to a reduction in working hours as well as a timelier and more in-depth analysis of hotel transactions, promptly highlighting potential fraud or control issues. She also implemented an automated cash and credit card reconciliation system, removing repetitive non-value-adding tasks.

Vermes joined the Grosvenor from the St Pancras Renaissance London where she spent a year in a similar role. Many of the lessons she has learned in financial reporting and benchmarking were honed during her time as operations analyst at Marriott Hotel Holding in Frankfurt in 2017.

As well as mentoring two finance graduates, she recently supported a recruitment drive for the Marriott graduate programme, inspiring 13 graduates to accept positions with Marriott.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"For many people there has been a long break from work, so associates, managers and directors are more open to doing things differently. Post-restrictions, people have been generally less resistant to change."

**Sean Wrest, 29**

**Head chef, Roots York**

**Nominator** Victoria Chandler, head of marketing and communications, Roots York

Sean Wrest's swift career progression is testament to the fact he is not just a talented chef, but also a natural leader. He started as a kitchen porter in 2006, but took a chef de partie role at Yorebridge House in 2013, rising to sous chef in just 12 months. By 2015 he was at the Black Swan Oldstead, where he progressed to executive sous chef in just over two years and helped secure four AA rosettes – honing his skills along the way with placements at the Fat Duck and Maaemo in Oslo.

In 2019, he joined Roots York as head chef, where his determination to excel saw him lead the 11-strong kitchen brigade to win a Michelin star in 2021 – a first for both the restaurant and York.

Under his guidance, Roots has moved away from sharing plates to a tasting menu, which has increased footfall and revenue. And to help his brigade achieve their potential, he encourages them all to be innovative and work on dish development for the evolving menu.

He has also been determined to generate conversation around mental health in the kitchen, and by being open about his own struggles he promotes a healthy work environment.

To encourage future talent, he set up a stagiaire system to allow students and chefs to learn from the Roots team. He has also worked in college restaurants to give students an experience of working in a fine-dining kitchen.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"Lockdown has shown how resilient we are as an industry and how we can support each other to make our people feel looked after and appreciated. Hopefully, this will continue, resulting in a better work ethic, thereby attracting more people to the industry and improving staff retention."

**Danny Young, 27**

**Head chef, Northcote, Langho, Lancashire**

**Nominator** Craig Bancroft, managing director, Northcote

Driven by a passion to cook, Danny Young kickstarted his career aged 16 by signing on for a four-year apprenticeship at the Michelin-starred Northcote in Lancashire. He's earned steady promotion ever since.

As well as moving around the company's then-owned Ribbles Valley Inns sites, he gained experience of high-volume delivery at the offsite operation at Blackburn Rovers, and at events such as former football manager Alex Ferguson's testimonial, which had 1,000 guests.

His commitment didn't go unnoticed and in 2015 he was made chef de partie, reaching the position of sous chef by 2016. Senior sous followed in 2019 and he became heavily involved in menu development, menu costings, stock control, margin management and delivering consistent profitability.

In April 2021, after demonstrating impressive leadership throughout the pandemic, Danny was promoted to head chef. Notably, he was instrumental in the development of Northcote at Home, despite a tight budget and small team. The launch resulted in sales of £1m and stellar write-ups in the national press, including *The Observer's* Jay Rayner citing the excellent flavour combinations.

His many achievements include scooping Young National Chef of the Year 2018.

However, far from resting on his laurels, he regularly takes time out of work to mentor young students for competitions such as Springboard Future Chef, with his latest mentee, Matthew Marriott, becoming a regional winner in 2020.

**What is the most positive people change you see for your sector post-restrictions?**

"This experience has given us an opportunity to explore other avenues of working, some of which have resulted in an improvement in employees' work-life balance and a recognition of its importance to mental health. This has had a positive impact, not just on employee morale but on the business itself."



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