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SERVING THE RESTAURANT BUSINESS

A LOOK AT THE
CHEFS GROWING
THEIR OWN

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A modern manor house hotel, originally built as a family residence in 1690, now provides casual luxury in a stylish rural Buckinghamshire retreat set in Capability Brown designed grounds. *Les Leonard* visited to find out the modern day approach of its owners



The imposing Queen Anne style frontage of Stoke Place

Stoke Place in Stoke Poges built in Queen Anne's reign, has been extended over the years and in its latest re-launch six years ago became a luxury hotel and restaurant, retaining the warmth of a family home with an emphasis on service and comfort.

Traditional rules are bent to reinvent the classic English country manor, ensuring that the hotel, just half an hour from London, "whispers style without ostentation, luxury without fuss".

General manager Laurence Wall, who joined the hotel team 18 months ago, outlines the latest project – the conversion and extension of an old Victorian cottage in the walled gardens to establish 10 extra rooms, bringing the total to 40 with 12 suites.

"We have benefited by investing in maintaining our rooms to a high standard and majoring on quality service. This has paid off through the economic downturn when many in the hotel trade have been suffering.

"Our room occupancy on good months is 70%," says the 31 year-old manager adding that the Dhillon Group owners allow the hotel to operate independently in many areas making its own decisions.

"We are constantly evolving our presentation and tweaking the food and beverage operations, while ensuring we have top class staff to serve our wide range of guests.

"We are sited in a region where many blue chip, multi-national companies are based



Laurence Wall headed up the hotel team 18 months ago

and we can host their corporation meetings – a market

recovering slightly with a better

calibre of many European and American conglomerates using Stoke Place

"On weekends we get a lot of people coming out of London. We are located in the south east which is still in a bubble as far as disposable income and trading is concerned, and seem to be faring well at present."

And this formula does indeed appear to be operating successfully as Stoke Place generates an

annual turnover of £3 million.

The latest addition giving added value for guests has been the conversion of the mansion's old stables into a modern gym with a treatment room supported by modern facilities.

"As far as new developments are concerned, although we are sited in a conservation area, it is made easier when we tell the planning authorities that we are creating new jobs – our staff now numbers between 25 and 30. And with all our services we are ensuring quality rather than quantity," says Wall.

Stoke Park caters for weddings but has moved away from what was a volume business. "We are trying to give couples getting married more quality

“We are constantly evolving our presentation and tweaking the food and beverage operations, while ensuring we have top class staff to serve our wide range of guests.”

South African Craig heads kitchen team

Food plays a vital role in Stoke Place's success and the man in charge is head chef Craig van der Meer creating dishes with distinct modern flourishes for the Garden Room restaurant.

His food is modern British, inventive and seasonal with locally sourced produce. "Most chefs are trained in the classic French style which is still the foundation for many dishes that we create," says Craig.

His take on the traditional menu is served with an artful twist, developing cuisine with bold, molecular-inspired versions of country house fare delivering a fashionable, casual alternative to formal menus.

Classic dishes are reworked and combine immaculately cooked seasonal ingredients arranged into dairy mouthfuis, trickles, sprigs, foams and cubes.

Inspiration is taken from radical innovations created by two of Craig's food heroes - past



Craig van de Meer creating dishes with distinct modern flourishes

World Number One restaurateurs, Ferran Adria and Heston Blumenthal.

The 32-year-old chef's cooking is far from simple, although never overdone or confusing. A starting plate might show off some of the chef's culinary tricks to create Oyster Mushroom Tortellini; Langoustine and Chicken Wing; or Rabbit Loin with Kohirabi Remoulade.

Main choices include Confit Pork Neck; Monkfish and Mussels to pan seared Fillet of Beef with Tongue, or 'Tongue in Cheek,' as Craig describes it. Desserts range from Chocolate Terrine to Strawberry Bruine and Tonka Bean Parfait to Licorice Panna Cotta.

His kitchen brigade includes a fellow South African, Cameron Weyers, a Finnish pastry chef, an Italian, German and other Europeans, but at the beginning of the summer there were no British members.

"Cameron and I worked together for the Starwood Hotels Luxury Collection in Cape Town.

"Now at Stoke Place we still look to our chefs for inspiration.

Their technique and what they do is interesting and we try to complement our dishes with their ideas, while not getting over-complicated with just a few elements."

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“ We are trying to give couples getting married more quality and style and instead of organising around 100 a year, we now cater for 60. ”

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Come summer, the laid-back vibe extends outdoors where guests can opt for a game of croquet or chess on the board in the gardens. A lake provides fishing while there are traditional pursuits such as clay pigeon shooting.

As part of the modern school of country house retreats, Stoke Place boasts multiple entertainment, lounge and meeting spaces.

Four function rooms regularly host

conferences, boardroom meetings, exhibitions and high profile private parties with meeting rooms offering views of the estate's sweeping lawns and lake

The house can be rented as a private hire venue and is home to the quarterly White



Blackbird parties. The Vyse Room can hold up to 80 guests while The Ballroom has a capacity of 200 and The Fly Fishing Room is suited for “brainstorming sessions or private dining”. ●



Stoke Place was the first of the historical country properties acquired and upgraded into fashionable urban retreats by the Dhillon Group. It was followed by The Olde Bell in Hurlley, Berkshire and The Crown in Amersham, Bucks.

When planning the re-design of Stoke Place, the remit hinged on creating comfortable, informal splendour with quirky but stylish reworks of the traditional country house.

The group says that its overriding objective was to establish a “rural retreat that was luxurious yet affordable, stylish but groovy”.

They continue: “Guests approaching Stoke Place from the sweeping gravel driveway would be forgiven for mistaking it for a fussy, traditional country hotel. It is anything but.

“Inside it's an eclectic mix of old and new, elegant Victorian rooms have been given a 21st century makeover

Dhillon's First Venture

with contemporary furnishings, colour and detail. Hip design touches and rural glamour abound, cutting through any daunting aristocratic grandness.

“The hotel boasts a unique and colourful labyrinth of rooms and lounge spaces that are ideal for meetings and celebrations, stylish afternoon teas or cocktail hour.

“The Garden Room, our fittingly current restaurant is no exception to Stoke Place's eclectic rule. The garden has been brought into the light-filled dining space with large eye level windows overlooking the gardens, ornamental lake and parklands.”

The Dhillon Group is an independent hotel enterprise, owned and run by husband and wife team Tej and Sarina Dhillon. Their collection of five unique properties including the two country inns and urban retreats, also has a collection spanning across establishments offering everything from affordable comfort to rural luxury.

“In each property we employ dedicated staff, perfectly suited to the place: From flamboyant hosts to welcoming inn keepers, every member of staff adds something special to the hotels and the service it provides. With a small team of fewer than 15 people in head office, we feel that the Dhillon Group is a dynamic and young operation, staying faithful to the brands it has created while remaining innovative and offering a

bespoke service to all of our customers.

The group owns two hotels, the 250-bed Paragon in Birmingham, built at the turn of the 20th Century for Irish immigrant workers and the Liongate, a traditional 18th century town house, opposite Hampton Court, being refurbished under the coaching brand, making it the company's third inn.

Another division within the group, Alchemy Hotels was launched out of the realisation that to run a successful property its management must understand the operational intricacies and also have the expertise to effectively liaise with large financial operators and investors.

The Dhillons, as managing partners, have combined their collective years of experience to offer bespoke advice, training and hands-on management to hotel teams in varying financial and operational situations.

Alchemy Hotels currently has between 400 and 450 employees. The group, with 10 properties and a total turnover of between £15 and £20 million in 2008, works in collaboration with Savills, Clydesdale, PWC and Clyde & Co.

