

WEEKLY BRIEFING REPORT

Week ending 5 March 2023

Published 6 March 2023

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The numbers

I spent a few days last week in Amsterdam at the **International Ghost Kitchen Conference**. The attendees were enthusiastic, well informed, and exceedingly interested in the subject at hand.

In the breaks between plenary sessions, there was ample imaginative food on offer. Waiters and waitresses circulated with platters of enticing food. On one occasion, I was offered a selection of tapas and several glass bowls with something else. On asking what this 'something else' was, I was told 'Honestly, I don't know'. I took the tapas (and it was good) but I never found out about the 'something else'.

That evening I was dining in a restaurant. Among the main meals was 'Sandwich of the Day'. I asked the waiter what today's sandwich was, and somewhat uncertainly, he said 'pesto'. I was, to say the least, confused and none the wiser. I ordered the chicken satay.

Two separate occasions with the same stumbling block – I, the customer, had been confused by the lack of knowledge of the person serving me.

Now this is where I start making assumptions. I assume the staff concerned were new in their posts. And I also assume, in light of their answers to my questions, they had not been properly informed by their managers – and 'informed' in this context, I guess, is the same as 'trained'.

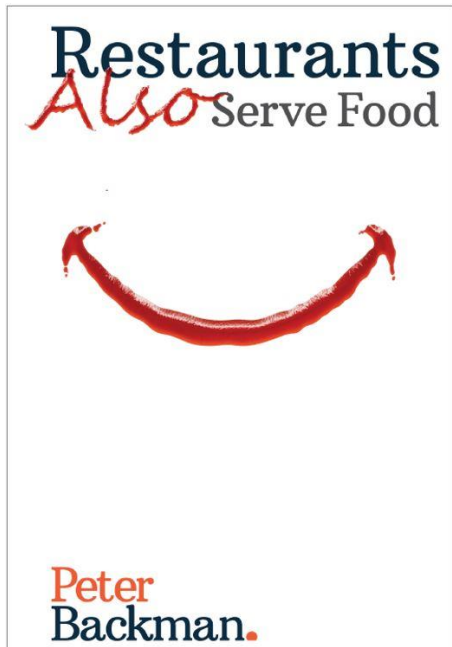
I also assume that the waiters I had questioned had been drafted into their posts quickly. The Dutch restaurant industry is suffering from a shortage of labour. In the last quarter of 2022, there were 64 vacancies for every 1,000 jobs in 'accommodation and food serving'. This compares with 47 vacancies in the economy as a whole. And the numbers of vacancies in 'accommodation and food serving', although falling from a high in the first quarter of 2022, were still 12% higher than a year earlier. So, my final assumption: untrained people are being recruited to fill the gaps.

Now, of course, this is not unique to the Netherlands, it's true in the UK, the US and in many other countries including most in Europe. But drafting untrained people into front-line roles requires extra vigilance from established managers, and additional, careful training to bring those people not used to the world of 'food serving' up to speed.

The need for training is not new. But it is especially needed at this testing time when helping the customer is a paramount requirement. Informing the customer what is in the sandwich of the day is just one of those requirements.

My insight

The revised edition of my book – **Restaurants Also Serve Food** – has now been published. It is addressed at suppliers, especially those who are proficient at selling to the retail sector but find selling to the foodservice sector is a challenge. I'm taking this opportunity to summarise just one of the arguments you'll find that I address in the book.



As I've frequently noted: the essence of foodservice is hospitality. And the essence of hospitality? It's making the customer feel valued and cared for.

Like everything in life, this comes at a cost. And in foodservice, the cost is high, because each customer is unique and has a multitude of needs and expectations. At any one time – say as the customer enters the restaurant or pub – there is no way of telling which of their needs and expectations will be paramount. Multiply this by the numbers of customers that come through the door in any single day and it's clear that many unknown requirements must be met.

It's the job of the front-of-house team to make sure reality matches expectations. With the right skills and approach on the part of the management, the customer at a burger outlet can be made to feel as pampered as if she has been offered a hot towel! The attempt to match reality and expectation carries on

throughout the so-called customer journey, from entering the venue to the point of departure. And hopefully, customers will be satisfied more often than disappointed.

The point of this is to underline that the unknown should always be expected in foodservice – and this means, for instance having too much back up resource 'just in case'. 'Just in case' can't be predicted; it is a built-in inefficiency, and inefficiency has costs. Operators, investors, and suppliers are all exposed to this inefficiency – and they have to confront the fact that they must face the costs of dealing with it.

Dealing with this inefficiency feeds up the supply chain so suppliers must have spare resources to deal with the inefficiencies; they must allow for unexpected costs; and they have to be patient in making the operator feel valued despite the chaos of dealing with the inefficiencies. For the supplier this is a fundamental difference from dealing with the retail sector where, although it is necessary to meet special and unexpected needs, their scale and frequency are unlike those in the foodservice sector.

Suppliers must have systems in place to manage urgent demands and changing minds, as well as understanding what timescale is acceptable in dealing with them – urgent to the operator might mean in the next hour, or the next week, or the next month. What might seem unreasonable to the supplier might be perfectly reasonable, and in line with everyday practice, to the operator.

Restaurants Also Serve Food provides solutions to this, and many more conundrums – you'll find more about my book and how to buy it [here](#).

The rest of this Weekly Briefing Report provides a summary of the news in the past week:

News in the past week

Financial & Legal

- Pubs, clubs and bars to stay open up to 01:00 on weekend of the coronation – 5-7 May

Pubs

- Brewhouse & Kitchen LfL sales rose 5.3% in the last three months of 2022
- Punch Pubs & Co sales rose 6.7% in the four months to early December 2022
- Oakman Inns sales rose 41.5% in the second half of 2022; LfL sales up 10.4% in December versus 2021

Suppliers

- AB InBev sales rose 11.2% in the final quarter of 2022 versus 2021

Around the World

- Melia Hotels sales rose 87.5% in calendar 2022 versus 2021
- Wendy's systemwide international sales rose 16.8% in the final quarter of 2022; US sales rose 7.2%
- Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group sales rose 43% in calendar 2022 versus 2021

Around the World Delivery

- Just Eat Takeaway sales rose 12.6% in calendar 2022

People have asked me about the stories I select for this section.

I scour many sources for stories that meet several criteria; for example:

- The story must be about the UK, or about companies that have a presence in the UK, or topics that have a bearing on the UK foodservice market
- The story must be about what has happened, not what might happen, nor are they concerned with plans that businesses might have
- The story must be capable of being summarised in no more than two lines (and that means, for instance, that I tend not to mention survey data because the context is generally impossible to summarise in two lines)
- I tend not to cover news related to delivery which is covered in the [Delivery.World](#) fortnightly newsletter
- Financial information must be related to a period ending in the last three months.

For topics that don't meet these criteria, especially the last one, you will have to read my Monthly Briefing Reports (available on subscription [here](#)) which have a considerably more extensive selection of 'News' stories.