

The big interview: Gavin George

In Brighton we trust

Gavin George is not your normal, run-of-the-mill pub entrepreneur. As **Phil Mellows** discovers, he is an eco-aware culture vulture obsessed with his adopted seaside city

Just forget for a minute what you thought you knew about the British pub industry and its movers and shakers. You're in Brighton now, and this is Gavin George.

Brighton is different, and so is the

boss of the company that, over the past 15 years, has done more than any other to shape the city's unique pub culture – and is now its dominant force.

InnBrighton operates 43 pubs in Brighton and Hove, the latest addi-

tion being the Mesmerist on the site of what used to be an Old Orleans bar-restaurant. It's a big space and its two floors cost £350,000 to refit.

"It takes some filling," sighs George, looking worried. Or at least pensive. Quiet, publicity-shy and

modest to a fault, he's not your usual pub entrepreneur.

Like so many others, he came to Brighton as a student and fell in love with the place. His skills were in marketing, but he was swiftly disillusioned when he landed a job as marketing director for a London plc.

"I'd always seen marketing as creative, but everything we did was scrutinised by the City and looked at purely in terms of the impact it would have on the share price. It took the creativity out of it. I stuck it for a year."

By then, George was already a sleeping partner in a friend's pub business, Zelgrain. It had the lease for the Mash Tun, a Brighton legend and the model for a new kind of pub that would come to characterise the city's vibrant trade.

The partner, Peter Bennett, a hospitality specialist with a talent for design, remains as InnBrighton's estates director.

"I met Peter in a pub in my lunch-break. We got talking and we were both interested in the idea of turning something traditional into something contemporary.

"We were lambasted by the local LVA and the press, but the Mash Tun was successful as soon as we opened the doors."

The business grew to eight houses, and in 1999 it took over a pubco twice its size, Original Pub Holdings, which had also grown on the back of discarded brewery pubs. George joined full-time as MD and the expansion continued. Attempts to take the Zelgrain model to other towns along the coast, though, invariably failed.

Brighton's unique. It's cosmopolitan, bohemian. It's the creativity of the people

Key dates

1992

Gavin George leaves Brighton Polytechnic with a degree in business management and spends seven years in various senior marketing roles in the IT industry

1996

Invests in pubco start-up Zelgrain with friend Peter Bennett, acquiring the lease on the Mash Tun

1999

Zelgrain buys Original Pub Holdings and trebles in size to 24 pubs. George becomes managing director

2002

Wins Sussex Business Award for Environmental Awareness for reducing and compensating the company's carbon footprint

2005

Acquires eight sites from C-Side

2007

Backed by Graphite Capital, Zelgrain and C-Side merge to create InnBrighton. George becomes chief executive

2009

Buy freeholds of its four Punch pubs

2010

Buy Old Orleans unit in Brighton's Lanes district and launches Brighton Best, a cask ale exclusive to the estate, brewed by WJ King



"It's possible that what we do will work only in Brighton. Certainly I don't think we would have been as successful elsewhere. Brighton is unique, I think. It's the creativity of the people who live here. It's cosmopolitan, bohemian."

Three years ago Zelgrain merged with the remnants of what had been its main competitor, C-Side, to form InnBrighton. Two C-Siders joined the board, chairman Gary Pettet, ex-Slug & Lettuce and PoNaNa, and finance director Martin Swindon.

"I didn't really know the market outside of Brighton before that," George admits. "I've learnt a lot from them."

Last year InnBrighton bought the four pubs it leased from Punch, and two-thirds of the estate is now freehold, the remainder leased from Enterprise.

The danger in having so many pubs in such a tight geographical area, of course, is cannibalisation, but InnBrighton has come up with a solution.

"We started by telling pubs what we wanted, but as we grew we couldn't do that without homogenisation. Now we engage 40-plus contractors to individually manage the pubs. They are all limited companies that have to build sales to succeed. They have to be very creative and stay one step ahead of the competition.

"We did it out of necessity. You can't dictate the feel of a place. We set some standards, but the magic comes from them. And I'm pleased to say they're fantastic, they've really taken ownership of their sites.

"With the right people I believe you can make anything work. Every location in Brighton is a good one and there are a lot of inventive people here."

It sounds like fun, but George is aware of the risks. "Legislation and the chance of losing your licence could easily take the edge off a manager's creativity. So we employ someone to audit compliance quarterly, to

My kind of pub

"I like creative, quirky, cool places, the bars around Shoreditch for instance. And there has to be a sense of community, friendliness and fun."

"My local is the Stand Up Inn at Lindfield, near Haywards Heath, a Dark Star Brewing Co pub. That's all about the beer, but Dark Star has a similar ethos to us, I think."



take some of that responsibility off their shoulders."

There are also certain principles that hold the group together, the three Cs – climate, community and culture.

"We've had the same three objectives since the word go," says George. "We've carbon-balanced our sites by planting trees in Uganda since before carbon-balancing was well-known. It was something I wanted to do.

"Pubs should be the centre of their communities so they should support good causes – though we don't trumpet it.

"And culture. This is such a great city, for eating and drinking, for ideas and creativity. Two of our pubs have theatres, we have live music, gallery spaces and comedy spaces.

"It's not a commercial thing for us. We've continued to run sites at huge losses because they're important to the culture of the city and we didn't want them turned into residential sites or restaurants."

What sets George and InnBrighton apart is this genuine commitment to the locality and an acute understanding of the wider impact an operator of its size it can have.

For instance, the C-Side merger

We're not recession-proof, but the culture here is different to anywhere I've been

meant the company was operating clubs for the first time. It was a great boost that came with added responsibility.

"Having the clubs on the seafront means we have about 1,000 covers on terraces outside, so when we get a good summer the footfall is phenomenal.

"What we did, though, was to make them more Zelgrain, to integrate them culturally with the rest of Brighton and turn them into multi-purpose venues with comedy, live music and films.

"It's worked really well. It's changed the feel of the seafront. It's more bohemian, more linked with the rest of the city. It's safer, too, a more pleasant place. There's a lower number of incidents now."

And an appreciation of the interdependence of Brighton and its pubs works in both directions, it seems.

"The council recognises the licensed trade is integrated with the economy and culture of the city. It realises that if licensing policy becomes too draconian it would have an impact on the entire city."

He's worried, though, about the Government's proposed licensing reforms.

"I'm someone who likes to keep my head down but the current re-balancing is a bigger threat than anything that's happened before. There are so many angles to it, it could prove so costly, and it gives substantial new powers to local councils. We rely on their goodwill, so I just have to hope the relationship will continue."

Meanwhile, "business is very robust and we're trading well," George reports.

"There are parts of Brighton and Hove we're still not represented in and we have the support of banks to buy freeholds. Or we could do more like the Mesmerist, which is a sale and leaseback with an investor.

"I'm older now and I rely on younger people to create what's right for their generation. But Peter Bennett still does all the refits, and I do the positioning statement for the pub – the people, the feel, the products."

After leading a modernist revolution, he now detects "a swing back to real ale and tradition". InnBrighton's pubs have become a showcase for Sussex-brewed cask beers, and the group now has its own exclusive brand, Brighton Best, from micro-brewer WJ King.

"It's worrying that the cuts might have an impact on people's propensity to spend, but Brighton is a party town and pubs have always been a big part of the culture," George concludes. "People still like to go out and they like to be challenged by their surroundings.

"We're not recession-proof, but the culture here is different to anywhere I've been, and I'm hopeful we'll ride it out."

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