

The big interview: Martin Webb

It's all in the detail

Martin Webb, reality show star and pub owner, has a simple formula for success. An obsession with quality and attentive management make all the difference, **Phil Mellows** discovers

Millionaire philanthropist, television celebrity... Martin Webb answers to neither of those, but he's come closer than most.

Outside Brighton, he's best known as the presenter of business trouble-shooting reality show *Risking It All*, and for a pub called the Robin Hood that donates all its profits to charity.

Right now, though, he's in one of his newest ventures, the Dyke Tavern in Brighton, the second in his upmarket Pub & Kitchen concept, doing what he really does, arguing with the chef about the menu. Not the food on the menu, but the menu itself. The bit of paper with the writing on it.

One thing Webb is particularly good at, and many licensees, arguably, need to get better at, is viewing his operations from the customers' side of the bar. But the chef takes some convincing that the way the menu is laid out might be confusing for the typical punter.

Another thing he's good at is attention to detail. It's an over-worked phrase, but when Webb says it he means it. And if you don't believe him, here he is, a man with a growing pub empire to worry about, attending to a small detail.

"There's nothing radical about what we do here, there's nothing new, we're just trying to be a quality operation, and whatever we do we want it to be as good as possible.

"It's attention to detail. Right down to the fonts on the menu. Nothing is done randomly, everything has a purpose. It's what sets us apart. They may be things the customer doesn't notice in themselves, but when they're added together it's the overall impression they create that's important."

“Nothing is done randomly, it all has a purpose. It's what sets us apart”

Webb is a bundle of entrepreneurial energy who has learned, through early failure, that you need more than a bright idea to succeed. It's tight discipline that counts.

"They say you need plenty of luck to make a business work, and I agree. But you have to make your own luck through meticulous planning, intelligent analysis of your market-place and loads and loads of plain hard work.

"Discipline is essential. If you're not going to be able to force yourself to do that VAT return on a sunny Sunday afternoon when your mates have asked you down the pub, then forget it."

It was tough talking like this that attracted the attention of television producers after Webb had proved he could turn his business philosophy into action in the shape of Brighton-based

pubco C-Side, which he ran with Simon Kirby, now MP for Brighton Kemptown.

"I did two series of *Risking It All*," he says. "It opened my eyes in terms of what drives people. They were genuinely risking all they had.

"It's only three years since I stopped doing that, but it seems like ancient history to me now. I've no idea what happened to those people I helped.

"I'm talking to people about another television project, though. I think it's a good thing to do. But I don't feel my career leading in that direction. I don't think I'm going to become a celebrity or anything."

If not quite a celebrity, thanks to the Robin Hood, Webb has been described as a philanthropist, another label he turns his nose up at.

"People's Pubs is a template for anyone else who wants to do it. We

have given a lot of money away, though, up to £30,000 a year, although it was only £15,000 last year because of the recession."

Webb comes across as a man easily bored, only getting his kicks when risking it. Or rather risking it and winning.

"There's nothing like the buzz of knowing a business plan is actually working. It's what gets me up in the morning. It's not the money that motivates me, it's the pure adrenaline rush of knowing that all the planning, all the worry and hard work are paying off.

"I'm also a strong believer in not just doing one thing," he adds. "I've got websites at the moment, one on game-playing, one on dogs. But pubs are more typical of what I do. They're my bread and butter."

After selling C-Side, Webb invested in another couple of pubs in Brighton, as well as the Robin Hood. But by his standards he's had a quiet few years. He stops for a moment to wonder what he was doing, before remembering the distractions of bringing up a five-year-old son.

And now the recession, along with the debt troubles of the major pubcos, is opening opportunities for a faster expansion, based on a leasehold pub market that's been turned upside down.

"Two or three years ago premiums were ridiculous. Now you can get no-premium leases, and rents are much cheaper, too. We built C-Side in a recession in 1993, and it's the same scenario. The pubs we got were premium-free then, too. It's the same situation."

The Dyke Tavern is a good example. A typical, large Victorian corner pub, allowed to run down in recent years, it has been revived in splendid fashion by a £170,000 refurbishment to which landlord Enterprise Inns has contributed half. (Simon Kirby's daughter, incidentally, works behind the bar.)

It's Webb's first experience of the pubco they love to hate, and he's impressed. "They've done a good

KEY DATES

1987
Martin Webb graduates from Brighton University and sets up an – unsuccessful – design company

1993
Joins Simon Kirby to form what would become C-Side

1998
C-Side features in *Sunday Times* Fast Track 100

1999
Founding director of Brighton radio station Surf 107

2000
Director of steering group for Brighton & Hove's successful city status bid

2001
Turnover at C-Side hits £20m. Webb and Kirby sell the company for £14m

2004
Buys Robin Hood and sets up People's Pubs

2005
Presents first series of *Risking It All*

2007
Publishes a book – *Make Your First Million*

2008
Writes on business for *The Daily Telegraph*

2009
Creates Pub & Kitchen concept – and becomes a special constable for Sussex Police

scheme here. I know what others say, but Enterprise Inns has been great with us."

He describes the Pub & Kitchen concept, which he has developed with fellow entrepreneur Warrick Armsby-Ward, as "a more mature approach to pubs".

"It has some similarities to an Italian trattoria. It's family friendly, but that doesn't mean plastic and bright colours. We have a kids' menu and toys, but it's an adult environ-

ment with excellent food, all made on the premises, real ale and no gimmicks.

"I wouldn't use the word gastropub. It's not pretentious, you get big helpings on big plates. We started with an all-Italian menu, Tuscan, rustic food, and we've added English dishes because that's what our customers want.

"It's a brand we'd like to take outside Brighton to Eastbourne and Chichester, perhaps, places where there are mature populations."

“We're a world away from old-school, Al Murray-style landlords”

Next up, though, is one of Webb's personal projects. The Stoneham, formerly known as the Portland Hotel, is in the street where he lives in Hove.

"I'm doing up my own local," he says. "It'll be the hub of the community, with a Sicilian pizza menu and 25 flavours of home-made ice cream."

Webb is positive about prospects for pubs – as long as it's the right sort of pub.

"I'm seeing a lot of refurb, people expanding. Good operators are doing all right. It's the smaller operators that are struggling. Old-fashioned pubs have had their day.

"Now it's about entertainment, music, making families welcome, having toilets that don't smell. It's attention to detail, listening to people and taking on board what they say. We're a world away from old school, Al Murray-style landlords.

"It has to be like that. People have got so many other choices now; they are more sophisticated. They expect good food, they're obsessed with *MasterChef* and Jamie Oliver."

Confident he's got the formula right, Webb hopes to open three or four more Pub & Kitchens, and he insists they're to keep, not to sell.

"It's a long-term business. We're doing it because we enjoy running them," he says.

"I'm a hands-on operator. I don't want to be in with the accountant, looking at reports. We can do everything ourselves, here, and that's the way I like it."



My kind of pub

"I like cosy, friendly pubs that have great food. Brighton has a lot of pubs like that, but I suppose the Robin Hood is my favourite."

"You can run into any number of characters there and it makes a real impact in the community."

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