

ahead of the curve

A knack for spotting potential sites has helped Arc Inspiration's Martin Wolstencroft achieve an impressive track record in Leeds. Now he's set on Harrogate, says **Theodora Sutcliffe**

On a winter afternoon Harrogate is seemly and scenic. Warm Victorian brick emits a golden glow; mature shoppers amble towards Betty's Tea Rooms; well-heeled parents push large-wheeled prams along streets substantially untroubled by traffic. It's a great location for a spa – Harrogate is, like Bath, a spa town – yet an initially counter-intuitive location for a non-brand bar. Even one that sells what are possibly the country's cheapest Kobe beef burgers, made from famously succulent beef from Japan, at £14.95 a pop.

Anyway... here we are, in the warmly lit surroundings of Banyan, an all-day high street concept so well-executed that you vaguely feel you've been there before, chewing the fat and sipping Hacker Pschorr with Martin Wolstencroft of Arc Inspirations, whose sixth and very new venue this is – and his first outside Leeds. (In fact, so localised a business is Arc Inspirations that it took them three bars to expand out of the Headingley district.) ▶

Martin Wolstencroft earned his stripes in Leeds

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movers & shakers

'Our next opening is in Roundhay, north Leeds, but we're going to start looking at Leeds city centre and other city centres further down the line,' says Martin.

'There's not enough good bars in town and city centres, and not a lot of the big companies are doing them, so the time's ripe for smaller people like us, because we're quicker.' Martin knows what he's talking about. He cut his teeth managing the Skyrack in Headingley when it became Whitbread's first ever pub to take a million pounds in booze sales in a year. A stint as area manager of the brewery's 'community' pubs followed, which sounds, from the wandering axeman to the landlord rearing pitbulls in the cellar to the Alsatian which had to be known as 'Disco' on expenses, as though it was reliably rich in colour.

But Whitbread provided good training. As new concept development manager, further down the line, Martin spent months researching pubs and bars around the country on the brewery shekel, and weeks sussing out sites in the Headingley area, before going to a meeting at a site he was viewing for Whitbread, and making an offer on it himself. The owner, Chris Ure, MD of his family's property company, was unwilling to lease the place to someone untried. In the end, thanks to Martin's persistence, the two agreed to operate the site as a joint venture: Arc Inspirations, with Chris Ure as chairman and Martin as managing director.

It wasn't easy. 'To get to the equity stage I wanted to be at, I had to remortgage my house,' says Wolstencroft. 'I borrowed from my parents, I borrowed from my wife's mum and dad. All our savings went into it, and my mum and dad's pensions.'

Three months before opening, while he was working on the 8,000 sq. ft. site – not to mention training, negotiating supplier deals and project managing – his son Josef was born. 'It was a tough time at home, as well. The baby wasn't doing well,' says Martin. 'He wasn't developing right, he wasn't taking in food, he couldn't smile or move his facial muscles properly.' Josef has since been diagnosed with a muscle weakness disease, myasthenia gravis, which is so rare in children that many doctors simply do not recognise it. 'It's a terminal disease,' says his father, 'which means it's not going to go away, rather than he's going to die.'

Yet despite these family travails, the Arc was virtually an overnight success: the bar took sixty grand in its first week. Since then,

martin's day off

It's really important to have a balance of work and home life. I'm married with two wonderful children, who usually wake me up at about bloody half past six by jumping on me and asking for breakfast. So I make it, then my son's packed lunch and our breakfasts, then take my son to school or my daughter to nursery. I try and be involved in their school life, too. I did baking at my son's harvest festival, even though I'd never made bread before in my life. My perfect day off, of course, would be chilling in the sun aboard a luxury motor yacht in the Mediterranean.



Overnight success: the Arc took £60k in the first week

Arc Inspirations has opened sites at the rate of pretty much one a year. Oddly, for someone whose gut instincts are entrepreneurial he didn't plan to build an empire. Martin worked on a fruit and veg stall in Salford when he was 14, chose business studies as his degree and 'always fancied doing something by myself'. He adds: 'I've seen too many companies open a pub and say they'll have ten others by next year. Next thing you know, they're gone.'

One of Arc Inspirations' key strengths is the dark art of choosing sites. It's hard to imagine a better skills fit for that aspect of the business than Chris Ure's background in property management and Martin's national experience with a brewery – but they back it up with rigorous research, both into the local area and into national venues. (The Box was inspired by the Elbow Rooms; the rolled bar at Banyan is borrowed from the OXO Tower.)

Their second is their people – even if Robert 'Skippy' Jupp and Arc parted ways after launching the bar which continues to bear Skippy's name. Staff are incentivised with trips – each year, the highest-performing manager in the group wins a £3,000 holiday, while every six months, 15 employees of the site that performs the

martin wolstencroft's cv

- 1970 - Born in Saddleworth, Manchester
- 1988 - Studies Business Studies at Leeds Polytechnic
- 1991 - Works in New Jersey, loading and unloading ferries
- 1992 - Starts work at Skyrack, Headingley, Leeds – becomes Whitbread's youngest manager
- 1994 - Promoted to area manager for Whitbread's community pubs in Leeds, Sheffield and Hull
- 1996 - Marketing manager for Whitbread North East
- 1998 - High street area manager and new concept development manager for Whitbread
- 2000 - Sets up Arc Inspirations Ltd with Chris Ure and opens the Arc in Headingley, Leeds
- 2001 - Opens The Box, 300 yards from the Arc
- 2002 - Opens Trio Bar and Grill in Headingley
- 2003 - Opens Zed in Chapel Allerton, north Leeds
- 2004 - Opens Skippy's, above Trio, and the Hub in Chapel Allerton
- 2006 - Opens Banyan Bar & Kitchen in Harrogate

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best in mystery visit tests go on a group jolly abroad (one team went to the World Cup; others were helicoptered into Courchevel to go skiing). 'We like to keep all our people,' says Martin. 'And it makes business sense. A manager's trip costs us about what we'd pay a recruitment company for a search fee.'

They also rigorously monitor customer experience, soliciting comment cards from 300 people a year per venue (punters get a free drink), establishing a list of their customers' priorities and following up with the team. Which can have risible results.

Items top of the wish list of The Box's refreshingly honest clientele were fit staff and fit customers. 'When I sit down with my managers and have the status meeting, I actually have to ask them, "What progress are we making towards the goal of fit staff?'" says Martin (Arc's charming bar development director Declan McGurk featured in the CLASS Naked Calendar 2007).

Yet, frivolities aside, the focus for the future is substantially more of the same. 'I want to keep growing as we've been doing, at the rate of one or two sites a year, keep developing our people and keep promoting from within,' says Martin. 'And most importantly, I want to keep enjoying it. If you stop enjoying it, I think that's when it's time for a change.' ■

