

h&f BUSINESS

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Birth of café was a baptism of fire

- ▶ Opening of popular Brook Green eatery was a case of from here to maternity
- ▶ Uni pals' success leads to plans to set up a second deli

KATE YOUDE

IT IS fair to say that life at Brook's Counter and Table started with a bump – a rather large one.

Leanda Fauset was 36 weeks pregnant when the Brook Green café opened its doors. Her business partner Jo Cooke had only recently given birth to her first child, Matilda, now two.

"I was head chef with my big bulge and Jo ran upstairs and she had her three-month-old baby strapped to her front," said Leanda, 34, who moved to the area when she was 14, attended St Paul's Girls' School and now lives in Sulgrave Road, nearby in Shepherds Bush.

"We opened at 8 o'clock on May 4, 2007. It was a Saturday morning. For the first half an hour it was totally quiet and then suddenly all these tickets kept arriving down.

"It was the most incredible experience, going from 'I have never cooked in a professional kitchen before' to suddenly having to get eight breakfasts out in one go. It did feel like an episode of *The Apprentice!*

"When we closed the doors at the end of the day and you realise your business is up and running it is really satisfying. There's nothing like a baptism of fire to make you understand your business."

As the eatery gears up to celebrate its second anniversary next month, I suspect even Sir Alan Sugar



A SLICE OF LIFE: Leanda Fauset offers a plateful of homemade quiche and salad at Brook's Counter and Table in Brook Green. PICTURE BY LEIGH QUINNELL



There aren't many places where you can bring your buggies and settle down

might approve. The pair, who met while studying at Oxford University and swapped corporate careers in advertising and law to open the food store, have turned an 'unloved' business into a popular, relaxed deli and café, tripling the turnover.

Diners tuck into food freshly prepared on site every day, with menu favourites including paella (the café boasts a Spanish chef).

Deli shoppers take their pick from a mouth-watering array of meats, cheese and 'accoutrements to cooking'. On May 2, the café also plans to launch an outside stall at weekends selling artisan bread from Notting Hill baker Sally Clarke.

A picnic box service is in the pipeline, while a weekly kids' tea (see panel, below right) offers families a refreshing 'change of scene'.

"There aren't many places where you can bring your buggies and settle down and it doesn't matter how long it takes to feed your children and also to know there's freshly made home-cooked food for them," said Leanda, mum of 21-month-old Darcey who, along with Jo's daughters Matilda and eight-month-old Frankie are, she jokes, 'soon to become deli slaves'.

Although the business has come a long way, the journey has not been plain sailing. Just two months after opening, the café suffered a catastrophic flood that forced its owners to shut up shop for three months.

But two months after reopening in October 2007, a makeover saw the introduction of the meat and cheese counters and a fridge stocking take-home meals. Another spring clean refurbishment is scheduled after the May bank holiday, and Leanda and Jo hope to open a second café in the future.

● Brook's Counter and Table, 140 Shepherds Bush Road, Brook Green. Click on www.counterandtable.com or call 020 7602 0664.

HOME: Innocent occupies more than half the units at Goldhawk Road industrial estate in Shepherds Bush

Coke makes smoothie mixers lose Innocence

THERE'S been an uncharacteristically awkward silence at 'Fruit Towers' this week, where the makers of Innocent smoothies have proved rather elusive after selling part of the company to that other Hammersmith-based drinks giant, Coca-Cola.

"Unfortunately, as you can imagine, things are very busy here, and it will not be possible to arrange an interview," was the emailed reply from company spokeswoman Annika Lewis when *h&f news* requested a brief chat. A follow-up email went unanswered.

Coca-Cola has bought a stake of around 20 per cent in Innocent, which occupies a goodly chunk of Goldhawk Industrial Estate in Shepherds Bush.

It paid the founders of the pureed fruit drinks with the halo above the name £30million, prompting a flurry of accusations that a company which prides itself on taking a strong ethical line and being generally right-on has simply sold out.

"At best this is misguided," ran the text of one indignant emailed customer response on Innocent's website. "You'll be a fig leaf for Coke's unethical corporate machine. At worst it is a greed-driven betrayal of values and customers."

The deal has already been compared to Pret a Manger selling part of its business to McDonald's, Ben & Jerry's being bought by Unilever, and organic chocolate maker Green & Black's being sold to Cadbury.

Each case involved niche companies with carefully crafted images of wholesomeness – firms which had encouraged customers to imagine ethical 'Davids' battling corporate 'Goliaths' in the war of values.

Officially, cash raised from the sale of a stake to Coca-Cola, whose vast headquarters in the middle of the Hammersmith gyratory system symbolises its world position as a soft drinks giant, will push the Innocent brand into Europe, according to a website explanation by Innocent. Sadly we may never know the full story as Innocent was so busy.

Tim Harrison

SIP, SIP, HOORAY!

Brook's Counter and Table has weekly kids' teas every Thursday, 4-6pm. Young diners can tuck into a main course, pud and drink for £4, with paper and crayons providing entertainment between mouthfuls. Food on offer includes lasagne, moussaka, macaroni cheese and steamed vegetables. No need to book.

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