

EXPERT OPINION

The Phoenixes Are Rising

These Are Tough Times For Leisure Sector But Innovative Responses Prove the Future is Bright



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Our sector is full of creative people, innovators and entrepreneurs. We already knew that pre-pandemic, but the successive lockdowns have brought out the best in a sector hit the hardest of all in the UK.

From the rapid expansion into deliveries and home cooking kits, to online classes, Q&As and demonstrations, across the country the sector has worked relentlessly, born out of a necessity to keep as many heads above water as possible, to find ways to earn some cash. And the results have been spectacular, with consumers across the country experiencing a far more diverse range of food options to enjoy at home than ever before.



Sadly for some though, even that effort was not enough, with reports last week that 800 branded restaurants have closed as a result of the pandemic. The numerous CVAs and administrations in the F&B space have removed many well-known brands from our high streets and shopping centres. But it has also marked the end of some less well-loved brands, with the impact of the lockdowns accelerating the demise of operators that had lost their way, lacked investment, or had simply fallen out of favour with our fast-paced consumers.

As tough as that is on their employees, investors and landlords, the demise of so many is creating an opportunity for a new breed of creatives, innovators and entrepreneurs to emerge.

From the ashes is rising a flock of fledgling phoenixes. Forced time away from “the office” on lockdown and other operating restrictions have given the creatives time to create. Ideas for a new business that had been put to one side due to time constraints have suddenly received the attention they deserved. For others, the extreme circumstances have created unexpected opportunities. Either way, the development of many new concepts is underway as the industry swings into a lateral thinking overdrive.

We have already had enquiries from a successful brand in Italy looking to London as a place of interest for growth, along with a pub operator seeing a gap in the market for his favourite sports bar based in the US that he feels will do well here when restrictions are relaxed. Elsewhere, the former bosses of Liberation Group and Revolution Bar Group are reportedly on the hunt for backers to help build a new pub business.

And this is just the beginning.

There are requirements from leisure users looking to fill empty department stores and retail space. Gravity, for example, began the year announcing the creation of an 80,000 sq ft new concept in the former Debenhams at Southside shopping centre in Wandsworth. Brandon Stephens is fundraising for his Soho House-style concept, and there are some exciting new tech-driven competitive socialising concepts on the drawing board.

While not quite endless, the list is extensive and growing, which is very encouraging in what is without doubt the toughest phase of the country’s fight against coronavirus.

It may be a very bleak mid-winter, but future looks much brighter. So, out with the old and in with the new as the next generation of innovators takes wing. Expect innovation, excitement, and an over-riding sense of renewal.

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