

Call this agent

Thinking of opening a restaurant? Read on.

In the make-up of restaurants across the UK, Europe, the US, the Middle East and Asia, restaurant agents play a vital role. Yet it is one that receives very little publicity.

They earn their income working on behalf of landlords and developers on the one hand and restaurateurs on the other. And if they are good, which the vast majority are, they hold the keys and the information that will make any prospective deal work.

As a restaurant consultant I have worked with numerous agents over the past 30 years with great pleasure. With Neil Mitchenall, Peter Courtney and Theo Fordham at Lunson Mitchenall as we transformed the South Bank Centre; with Matt Ashman of Cushman & Wakefield; David Bannister at Nash Bond; with Matt Hyland at Hanover Green on the renaissance of King's Cross; and alongside Tracey Pollard of Bruce Gillingham Pollard on the Bloomberg Building in the City of London. I have developed friendships with many and in particular with Richard Wassell of Twentyretail during this period.

Their restaurant specialism sprang out of their retail knowledge. But as hospitality began to take on increasing importance in the make-up of new buildings and new developments, a process that began in the 2000s, these agencies have added predominantly young men and women who have a great enthusiasm for food and drink. On top of these there are other agencies, such as Davis Coffey Lyons and [Shelley Sandzer](#), who tend to specialise exclusively in hospitality. (For a full range of their knowledge, contacts and why, if you are thinking of opening a restaurant, my advice would be not to do so without one, see www.rpas.org.uk).

But to discover more about the life and opinions of restaurant agents, I invited Ted Schama, the MD of Shelley Sandzer, to lunch at Maison

François in St James's. I have known Ted for the past 15 years but I have never actually done any business with him (although I interviewed his mentor and former MD, the late Trevor Shelley, for an *FT* article published on 19 July 2008).

Like all the agents I have mentioned, Ted also has a very good sense of humour, as well as a particular characteristic of not letting on quite how clued up he really is. He is quite definitely Jewish, as am I, and he has a distinctive dress sense. He arrived for our lunch under grey skies wearing a light trilby, which stayed by his side throughout our encounter, and a white T-shirt under a light brown jacket. He is 47, happily married with two small daughters, and a smile rarely left his face throughout our time together.

Schama began his career aged 17 when he answered an advertisement in the *Jewish Chronicle* for a 'gofer'. He has been with the company for 30 years. His role is quite simple in his words. 'My job is to connect the right people to the right places. It is all about the people. The rest, the business plans, the promises – that is all noise. It is all about the passion of the individuals', he maintains.

He cited the example of his role in letting the restaurant area on the 39th floor of Heron Tower to SushiSamba, the Brazilian-Peruvian-Japanese restaurant. It was back in 2010 when large spaces devoted to hospitality were rare in the City but the developer was Gerald Ronson himself. Schama was responsible for encouraging offers from restaurateurs but it was a comment from Ronson at the time when it came to making a decision that Schama has not forgotten. 'I don't believe Simon Bakovza, the Israeli-born founder of SushiSamba, will let himself down.' And with that, SushiSamba got the opportunity.

'That is how it should be', Schama continued. 'Any agent is only as good as the client he is representing. There is a two-way tension involved in the negotiations when both sides have to live up to what they have promised. Any negotiation is a marathon and there isn't a single deal that can be done in a fortnight.'

To strengthen this point, Schama cites the enthusiasm of Joe Grossman, the founder of Patty & Bun, the group of hamburger restaurants. 'Before he had opened his first restaurant I was asked to meet Grossman, and his passion was so obvious. You couldn't help but back anything this guy wanted to do and I am proud of the fact that we have been involved with him since the beginning.'

The restaurant market has changed in two significant ways since the pandemic, in Schama's view. 'First of all we have finally seen the end of certain properties being marketed with large premiums. These have not disappeared entirely but they have significantly come down which is a benefit for anybody looking to open a restaurant in the future. And I believe that landlords have finally become more understanding of any restaurateur's needs so their opening terms are less onerous.'

While UK demand is picking up outside the capital – he was particularly enthusiastic about Leeds – the lure of London for overseas restaurateurs seems recently to be as strong as it has always been. 'We are very pleased to have secured a site in Horse & Dolphin Yard in London's Chinatown for David Thompson, who will bring over a branch of Long Chim, his Thai restaurant that has been so successful in his native Australia. And I continue to receive numerous enquiries from Middle Eastern restaurateurs, particularly those based in Dubai. Last week we had a visit from a restaurateur based in Florence and next month we have a visit from another Italian, this time one based in Milan.'

I asked him whether having a good appetite was a prerequisite for a career as a restaurant agent. 'I don't believe so', was his reply. And how would he have fared as a restaurateur? 'I do believe that I and most of my colleagues would have been good as part of any front-of-house team. We would have the enthusiasm, the passion to look after the customers.' And would he countenance a career in the hospitality business for either of his children, I wondered? 'If either of them showed the slightest interest, then definitely I would encourage it. What is there not to love about the hospitality business?'

Although I had asked Schama out for lunch and had asked for the bill, he beat me with his credit card. As we shook hands, he said, with a smile of course, 'I must thank you, this was most therapeutic'.