

Life in the fast lane

With millions sunk into it, Café Grand Prix is aiming for pole position in London's restaurant scene. We revved up the man in the driving seat

Olivier Delaunoy knows how to get his point across, even if this means resorting to a practical demonstration. The Belgian general manager of Café Grand Prix, a 22,000 sq ft Mayfair establishment that encompasses a brasserie, restaurant, bar and flower shop, Delaunoy has been working on the project since December 2000.

The aim was to create a sister restaurant to the original Café Grand Prix in Monaco, at an estimated cost of well over £10 million pounds. "Everything you see here wasn't here before," explains Delaunoy as we sit in Rosie's, the building's basement

bar. "Everything you see has been built into an empty shell. It's a massive project, both structurally and organisationally."

To begin with, dealing with architects and builders was how Delaunoy spent 99 per cent of his time. "I raised my voice a lot," he says. "When I first got involved, they had a plan but it was completely wrong." This is where Delaunoy resorted to his practical demonstration. "I put a stopwatch down, started it and handed it to the architect, then walked the distance to the kitchen and back. 'How long have I been gone?' I asked. 'Nearly two minutes,' he answered. 'Do you think it's easy

to keep food hot for that amount of time?' I asked. Then they agreed to change it."

Delaunoy left home at 14 to work in restaurants because he had a passion for cooking, and originally started his career in the kitchen as a dishwasher.

He then trained in Belgium until he was 21: as in France, working in restaurants in Belgium is and always has been seen as "a noble profession".

At 21, though, he wanted to see the world and so did a six-month stint on cruise ships. "It's an experience: it's about speed and numbers. It's hectic and if you survive after six months, it will give you a great understanding of speed and precision," he recalls.

When he arrived in England in 1990, his command of the language was non-existent. "I didn't know a word. Not 'yes', not 'no', not 'I'm hungry' - nothing." But that didn't hold him back, and in working with Raymond Blanc from 1996 to 1998 he found a mentor on the same wavelength: "I'm a manic perfectionist and so is he."

Oliver also did his stint in the kitchen, which he feels gives him an advantage that others in

DETAILS: ICE

With summer here, we all want an ice cold drink. Trouble is, the British aren't very good at serving them. The American approach is to serve drinks with so much ice that although the first half of the drink is chilled, the second half is watery and tasteless. Part of the problem is that when it gets busy, bars use glasses still hot from the glasswasher. This melts whatever ice is put in the glass, producing a diluted, lukewarm drink. To avoid this, run the glass under a cold tap and fill with ice and water. Let it sit for as long as possible, then empty it out and add fresh ice: we suggest two or three cubes. Then - and only then - pour your drink.



his position don't have. "The chef will never respect you if you haven't been a chef before. It's about the understanding of how they're going through a service, and that can only be done by having been there," he says.

He left Blanc with Simon Rhatigan in late 1998 and set up a consultancy, which he enjoyed; but he was itching to get back in charge of an operation.

Which led him to Café Grand Prix, a move he freely admits is his biggest challenge to date. He began as a consultant, but decided to remain full-time once he got involved in the project. That meant spending seven days a week there until systems were in place and everything was up and running: "You might work intensely for two months, but then you have given your business a good start," says Olivier. Is he not worried that he's involved with a project whose size and scope goes against current trends? Not at all. Partly because his multi-millionaire backers aren't expecting a return on their investment for 20 years. But also because: "If you worry too much about what's happening around you, you will fail." It's not something he's anticipating. **■**

Joe Warwick



THE STORY SO FAR

Jan 2001-Present General manager, Café Grand Prix, London
Nov 2001-Dec 2000 Joint managing director, Rhatigan Delaunoy Ltd (Consultancy)
Sep 1997-Nov 1998 General manager (Cheltenham), Le Petit Blanc,
Aug 1996-Sep 1997 General manager (Oxford), Le Petit Blanc
Nov 1990-Feb 1991 Station head waiter, Premier Cruise Liners
Sep 1983-July 1987 Head waiter / chef de rang / commis waiter / commis rotisseur to pastry chef, Prince de Liege Restaurant, Belgium