

Bespoke Food Group prepare to celebrate first anniversary

11 months ago



BFG, the newest independent caterer to launch this year, is nearing the end of their first year of trading.

Wanting to setup a company with strong principles, centred on its people and creating memorable experiences, Mark McCann, Joel Featherman and Francois Gautreaux joined forces to create the Bespoke Food Group. Mark and Francois first worked together over 20 years ago when Restaurant Associates was first launched in UK, then again at Bartlett Mitchell when Francois first joined them in 2008. Mark eventually left to pursue new projects, including his unique street food concept “Bombay Times”, a vegan, allergen free, take on traditional Indian street food using less oil and chilli. This was an homage to Mark’s upbringing, with an Indian mother and Scottish father, and was created with his gluten sensitive daughter in mind.

Francois stayed on as Managing Director, ushering BM through a decade of growth from a turnover of £10 million to £70 million, until their eventual sale to WSH Group. Joel, who trained as a chartered accountant with KPMG and worked as a management consultant across multiple industries and sectors, met Mark when seeking a culinary expert for a new venture. With Mark’s background in fine dining, working with the likes of Raymond Blanc and Guy Savoy, and Joel’s passion to change the way people eat, always driven by a desire to improve the customer experience, they were a great fit.

Mark and Francois had always wanted to work together again and were just waiting for the right opportunity. When Joel came into the picture, the three felt there was a gap in the market after years of acquisitions had left clients without a truly independent, food forward boutique caterer that shared their values, so they joined up and the Bespoke Food Group was born.

Stuart Purdy, who had been working with Mark for the previous 2 years, joined as Executive Chef. Giovanna Carta, who had worked with Francois for 15 years, joined as the Operations Manager, and Heather Day, part of Francois's senior team for over 10 years, joined as the Business Development Director.

Joel Featherman said: "We're a diverse company and our senior team reflects that. That's important to us. We want everyone to feel welcome, wanted and supported, regardless of their background. We have a good mix of British and non-British team members, almost 50/50, a beautiful distribution of people of all working ages, and a flipped gender pay gap; 52% of our team are female and they are paid, on average, 1.5% more per hour than the men. We are proud to be a member of OutBritain, the UK's first LGBT+ chamber of commerce. That mix of culture and experience across our team makes us stronger. Just like with food, often ingredients may work well individually, but they're better together."

This diverse approach is not just limited to their people, but pervades many parts of BFG's business, including their clientele and contract structures. BFG does not take a sector specific approach, nor do they stick to one kind of offer or contract. They already work with hotels, classic B&I sites, multi-tenanted buildings, hospitals, manner estates and even garden centres. They have every type of contract, from consultancy to commercial.

Francois Gautreaux said: "It's all about the right fit. If a client sees their people as a priority and sees catering as a true benefit that can help create a healthier and more engaged team, they're probably a good fit for us. It doesn't matter what industry or location they're in."

BFG describe themselves as Bespoke, Engaging and Sustainable.

Francois added: "We want to challenge perceptions and make sure we're giving customers what they want. We want customers to use us every day, so things have to be kept fresh, varied and exciting. Hybrid working has become the way forward and every client has different requirements because they're all finding new ways to work. Too many catering companies want to sell specific brands and concepts they've developed or are just trying to recreate the high-street experience in the workplace. It works for them, but it doesn't necessarily work for their customers and clients. We hate that cookie cutter approach to business. Instead of trying to convince people that they should buy our products, we want to make sure we're listening to them and their teams and developing the right solutions to meet their needs. It's a collaboration and, though it's a lot more work than just rolling out the same things at each site, we think it's the only way to approach it."

Having launched in December of 2023, they have had a busy 9 months and are already excited about the next stages in their journey.

Francois said: "We didn't launch with much fanfare. We were fortunate to have 3 clients ready to join us at the beginning of our journey, so we just buckled down and made sure all the things we'd been working so hard to put in place were bedded in and working well. By the end of the first 3 months, we had increased sales, achieved 5-star ratings on hygiene and had managed to outperform budgets at every site. We felt stable and we were ready to grow".

They embarked on a steady period of growth, opening their 7th contract in July to celebrate their 7th month trading.

Joel Featherman said: "From the start, we knew that you can't deliver great food or great service without a happy, well-trained team, so we worked hard to create a work environment where teams felt trusted and supported. I'm thrilled that we've managed to get all of our team up to Real Living Wage and, 8 months in, we've retained 89% of the original team members."

The founders have taken a very hands-on approach, with each taking a pivotal role in the company.

Joel added: "It really mattered to Francois and I that we had a food focused, chef led approach. Not enough companies have a chef sitting at the board table, let alone co-owning the company. Mark heads up our culinary vision and training, working closely with our supply chain to ensure we have the best sustainable produce for our teams to work with."

Every week Mark and Stuart are in their chef whites, working alongside our teams and customers.

Mark McCann said: "Food is something that can't be taught from a manual. Chefs don't belong in offices or behind computers. You have to be there in person to experience it with all of your senses. That's why it's so important we're alongside our teams working on new ideas, and always helping them find the best way to deliver them.

"Food needs to be inspiring for the team. That starts with sourcing the best, seasonal, local products you can get. We've developed some great partnerships over the last 8 months. We work with Angry Monk, rescuing imperfect fruit and veg that could have otherwise gone to landfill. Our tea is the only tea actually farmed right here in the UK, supporting small batch, local farming, and we were able to introduce locally roasted, organic Speciality coffee at no additional cost to our clients."

So what's next for these 3 entrepreneurs?

Joel Featherman said: "We've had a solid first year. We're on track to finish at over £2 million in turnover with zero borrowing and a small profit that will allow us to reinvest in some exciting projects as we continue to grow. Catering

companies can sometimes try too hard to be the jack of all trades, developing their own tech, apps and support systems, but they're never able to do these things as well as companies that are 100% focused on their respective fields. We focus on our food, our clients and our people and get expert support on the rest. We have been able to partner with best of breed specialists to ensure everything we have is cutting edge and industry leading. We ask clients to trust us to be the professionals in what we do, and we adopt the same approach in our service partners."

BFG has embarked on several new partnerships with some organisations that are really having an impact. London's Community Kitchen, focused on addressing food insecurity and promoting community wellbeing rescues 50 metric tonnes of food every week, feeding 20,000 people across 15 London Boroughs. BFG will be joining forces, bringing their "Waste Not" campaign to life, helping LCK with masterclasses, fund raising and work placements to aid them on their quest to zero waste, zero hunger.

Mission Kitchen is a fantastic organisation who are doing a great job giving small companies a platform and support to launch, scale and grow. BFG is working with them, not only giving these exciting new businesses a platform in their own sites, but also trying to help them reach a wider audience.

Francois concluded: “We’re on a quest to create great experiences, while making the world a better place. Our partnerships will continue to grow. We have some exciting plans for 2025 where we will be launching our own social enterprise to help support small businesses that are struggling to get going. We’re on the path to BCorps, Best Places to Work in Hospitality, and will continue to be a Real Living Wage employer.”