



MASTERING CHEF CULTURE AT THE DEVONSHIRE ARMS

THE DEVONSHIRE ARMS HOTEL AND SPA INTRODUCED A FOUR-DAY WORKING WEEK FOR ITS CHEFS EARLIER THIS YEAR, IN A MOVE TO RETAIN STAFF, IMPROVE EMPLOYEE WELFARE AND GIVE KITCHEN HANDS A BETTER WORK / LIFE BALANCE. WE CATCH UP WITH GENERAL MANAGER ADAM DYKE TO SEE HOW THE NEW CONCEPT IS WORKING AND THE IMPACT IT'S HAD ON THE BUSINESS.

When news broke in May that the Devonshire Arms Hotel and Spa in Bolton Abbey was to pioneer a four-day working week for its chefs, I think the whole hospitality industry perked up.

With the ongoing lack of passionate chefs, kitchen staff and ambitious youngsters eager to carve a career in the hotel sector and the well-documented struggle operators face when

recruiting, it seems that this new concept could be the answer.

And while it won't change things overnight, it's certainly a hugely positive step in the right direction.

The Devonshire Arms Hotel is owned by the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, and alongside 40 bedrooms, a spa just a short hop across the road, and a more relaxed brasserie, the hotel's Burlington Restaurant is the property's fine-dining affair.

Boasting 3 AA Rosettes, the restaurant

will be the first area of the hotel to 'pilot' the chefs' new working hours, which will represent an investment of around £100k per annum, as new chef positions are created to support the changes.

"It's a huge investment at the hotel," explains Adam Dyke, general manager at The Devonshire Arms Hotel and Spa, "it's something we've been looking at for 12-14 months. It's gone through so many different ideas, but we are confident that we have got the right plan in place for a while."

In the summer of 2016, the hotel's executive chef Adam Smith left following three years at the helm of the kitchens at The Devonshire Arms to take up a role at Coworth Park. Dyke says that it was after his departure that the idea for the shorter working week was brought to the table.

"Initially we thought it was a bit of a fad and it didn't have legs," he says, "but the more we looked at it, the more we did research, the more people we spoke to – hoteliers in particular said it might not be a good idea because of the cost of it, restaurateurs and a lot of chefs think it's a very good idea – so we've taken a bit of a risk with it."

The Burlington's kitchen brigade will increase from 11 to 15, with an apprentice chef position included in the mix. Chefs will work 48 hours a week, over four days on 'straight shifts', allowing them to reclaim a healthier way of living, doing the job that they love, whilst having time to enjoy life outside of work too.

So four months into the new kitchen rotas and how has it impacted on staff wellbeing so far? It's certainly helped arouse interest in the hotel as a potential career option. Dyke says that within the first few weeks he forwarded 65 CVs to the chefs – five or six of which were through agencies, but the rest came in as independent applications.

The Devonshire Arms' reputation certainly pays dividends when it comes to attracting people for more senior positions, as Dyke explains, but he very much feels the skills shortage that impacts across the whole industry: "Whether it be back of house, front of house, but I think every business has the same struggles when trying to recruit. I've certainly never passed that many CVs to the chef before!"

A number of other benefits have also been introduced to improve staff welfare alongside the shorter working hours, in a bid to retain employees and give them a better work / life balance, which is something they all crave, Dyke says. "It's not about money, it's about getting some time off and getting the work / life balance right."

"Looking after the guys is so important," he adds. "People in that kitchen



have got families and I want them to be able to see them.

"The Duke and Duchess are very passionate about looking after staff and have spent a lot of money on staff over the last 12 months. It's ongoing really, an ongoing plan and project."

Last year, £50k was invested into upgrading staff accommodation, as well as substantial improvements being made in the kitchens to support the changes and really make staff satisfaction a priority.

The hotel's gratuity system also changed – to complement the hourly rate of pay above the minimum wage – with full allocation of the 5% service charge going to staff, as well as offers of discounts on eating out and attractions across all businesses in the group, social outings and events.

Dyke says: "Last year we were charging 12.5% on food, a couple of % on the rooms, but we changed that 12 months ago and now we charge 5% on everything and 100% of that goes to the staff, so some staff saw their wages increase by £1k - £2k a year because of that."

This isn't a fad or a marketing ploy; the hotel's pledge of £100k is testament to the business's commitment to its staff and employees. And while it is a short-term cost, Dyke is expecting to see a return within 12 months, as the Devonshire Arms goes for a coveted Michelin Star rating.

"Yes £100k is a lot of money," Dyke explains, "but we see it as a worthwhile investment, just as we invest in staff training, reward and retention across the whole hotel. It's eating into profits



in the short term but we hope that it will pay off in time.

"We hope by the autumn time, we will have a structure and a kitchen team that can push on to achieve that we want to achieve, with that comes money, comes profit, comes business, so it's a real investment into an area that needed it."

"The ambition is to achieve a Michelin Star again, but actually more than that ambition, is to make sure everyone has a great time, enjoys the food and enjoys the service. I think that if the staff have the right work / life balance, the right consistency, we'll achieve things without it, but the ultimate ambition for the business is to be the best that we can be."

Next January the hotel is also planning to invest £30k into upgrading The Burlington restaurant.

The change in working hours at The Burlington also coincided with the restaurant's search for a new head chef, to replace Paul Evans, who left the business in May, after less than one year in the role. Step forward Paul Leonard, former head chef from Isle of Eriska for the past two years, who is now tasked with



The spa will see some investment over the next few years.



Three AA Rosette restaurant The Burlington, where kitchen staff work four days a week.

taking the restaurant forward in a bid to achieve the sought-after Michelin Star.

The four AA-red-star Devonshire Arms Hotel and Spa, is already one of the leading hotels in Yorkshire and boasts several awards in its cabinet, including The White Rose Awards, 2016, 'Large Hotel of the Year' and The Yorkshire Post Oliver Awards, 2016, 'Best Hotel Restaurant'.

Members of the Yorkshire Fine Hoteliers association, Dyke says he took the idea for the chefs' four-day week to the last meeting, which was met with some mixed views. "I think everybody thought we were quite brave doing it," he adds, "I'm sure they are quite interested in how it's going and yes I've had phone calls from a few of them! And also from up and down the country, fellow hoteliers are saying well done."

"Now the hard work really begins, because we have to implement it and make it work."

The future looks bright

The next 12-18 months at The Devonshire Arms Hotel forecast developments and innovation across the business. Aside from the major changes in place at the Burlington, the hotel's brasserie continues to go from strength to strength – "it turns over a lot of

money and is a substantial business in its own right" – and F&B as a whole has risen 12% YOY.

The spa will be the next area of the business to be assessed, with plans being created for further development, having recently invested £200k in the spa at the start of the year.

"We have outlined plans for more rooms and developments to improve our spa. The plans keep changing at present as we are working closely to make sure our neighbours are also happy, we hope to break ground on these developments in the next two years or so."

Dyke is also well aware that just a short distance away, Ridding Park has invested £9.5m in the creation of a completely new spa, while Swinton Park is currently putting the finishing touches to its new health, spa and well-being facility. This level of competition has made the Devonshire Arms sit up and take notice.

"20 years ago it (the spa) was groundbreaking, it was the new thing," says Dyke, "now Ridding Park, Swinton Park both have fantastic spas and good on them; it's fantastic for Yorkshire. So we are now busy collating ideas about how we can best develop the spa in-keeping with The Devonshire Arms and its amazing surroundings."

Accommodation has seen a rise year on year of 7% on last year, alongside the 12% increase in F&B, as Dyke credits this success to fine tuning the product and really pushing the hotel and its facilities on social media and online.

"We've done a lot of TripAdvisor Facebook, Instagram, all social media, we've worked on the PR and marketing, we don't use third parties – only Booking.com as a top up occasionally, generally we try to avoid them if we can."

"We can fill the rooms, we are running at mid-to-high 80s% occupancy and in the last two months we've been busier than ever, so my guess is that we're doing something right!"

Further development on site isn't out of the question either, with two new cottages added on last year bringing in another revenue stream. The first year of business they ran at 79% occupancy, and this year they are fully booked, so naturally thoughts turn to expansion, with another four on the cards.

"It's great to work for a forward thinking company," explains Dyke. "I've worked for some good companies and good people, I just get the feeling with Richard Palmer the new MD, (who joined in March this year) and the Duke and Duchess, there is a real hunger to invest in this property. Year on year we've had one of our best years, there seems to be a belief that we can continue. It's great for staff to see. Yes, we are the Devonshire Arms but we can't live off that reputation, we have to keep building on improving that reputation." ■

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