

Food for the Spirit



Moving from restaurants to pubs may seem like a strange career choice, but for Jason Danciger, the new director of food and wine operations at the Spirit Group, it's a way of bringing good meals to the unconverted. Andrew Davies went to meet him

IF THERE'S one word that sums up Jason Danciger it's "enthusiastic". Nothing is "good" or "OK" to him; if he likes it, it's "tremendous", "amazing" or "fantastic". Even a brief lunch with him to discuss his new role as director of food and wine operations at the Spirit Group turns into a wholly convincing sermon on bringing good food to the masses.

"If you look at bringing gastronomy to the people as a real evangelical issue, you're not going to achieve it in a Michelin-starred restaurant," he explains. "A nation's cuisine should be judged by what you can pick up for under £10 rather than over £100. In pubs you have an opportunity to get to millions of people, and if we can get to those millions with good gastronomy we can make enormous advances in popular cuisine."

It's this fervour that bought him to the aptly named Spirit in the first place. Formerly Punch Retail, the group's stable of names includes Wacky Warehouse, Big Steak, Q's, Bar Room Bar and others. The 1,000-pub estate is one of the biggest in the UK.

But what makes Danciger's appointment so interesting is that he's hardly your traditional pub man. At 37, his early career in the 1980s began as a chef, taking in stints first with Roux Restaurants, then as chef-patron of his own Vault restaurant in London in 1987.

In 1989 he became general catering manager at the National Gallery for caterer Justin de Blank and in 1990 joined the Pelican Group and its then fledgling Café Rouge as restaurant manager. He switched over to Groupe Chez Gérard in 1999, first as purchasing director, then as commercial director.

So why, in the light of that CV, did he switch to pubs in October last year?

The real link between Danciger's restaurant past and his work with Spirit is former Pelican head Karen Jones, now chief executive of Spirit. She interviewed him in 1990 for an operations manager role when she was starting out with Café Rouge and, he says, it was her personality that made him want to take the job.

"She's just an amazing lady," he explains. "Very dedicated and down to earth. She's just one of those people who get things done and makes everyone around her just as excited as she is."

But it was also the concept of Café

Rouge that he enjoyed. "I absolutely loved it there," he says. "I was totally passionate about the operation. In the early days the food was tremendous, the customers loved it, we had superb reviews and working there was a real thrill."

In the end, though, the increasingly corporate nature of the business dampened the creative freedom he enjoyed. "After it was taken over by Whitbread it did lose its way somewhat," is how Danciger delicately puts it.

Danciger was tempted away in October 2001 by his former boss and head of Spirit, Jones, who persuaded him to join as director of food and wine operations in October last year.

As a restaurant man, Danciger's opinion of pubs was pretty old-fashioned before he started at Spirit. "Fireplace, dog licking Guinness from an ashtray, cigarette smoke and Irish songs," he shrugs. So since October it has been, by his own admittance, a steep learning curve.

"But the main thing I've discovered," he says, "is that from an operational point of view, it's no different from running restaurants. All the tactics are the same. People think it's a completely different industry, but it's not."

So what exactly is his new job?

"It's really just to drive the food offer forward," he explains. "It is a large company, so my role is more ambassadorial. With 1,000 pubs, you can't start shouting and telling people what to do, because you'll fail straight away. You've just got to get people to believe and see that it can be done for themselves."

It seems to be working, too. According

Spirit Group

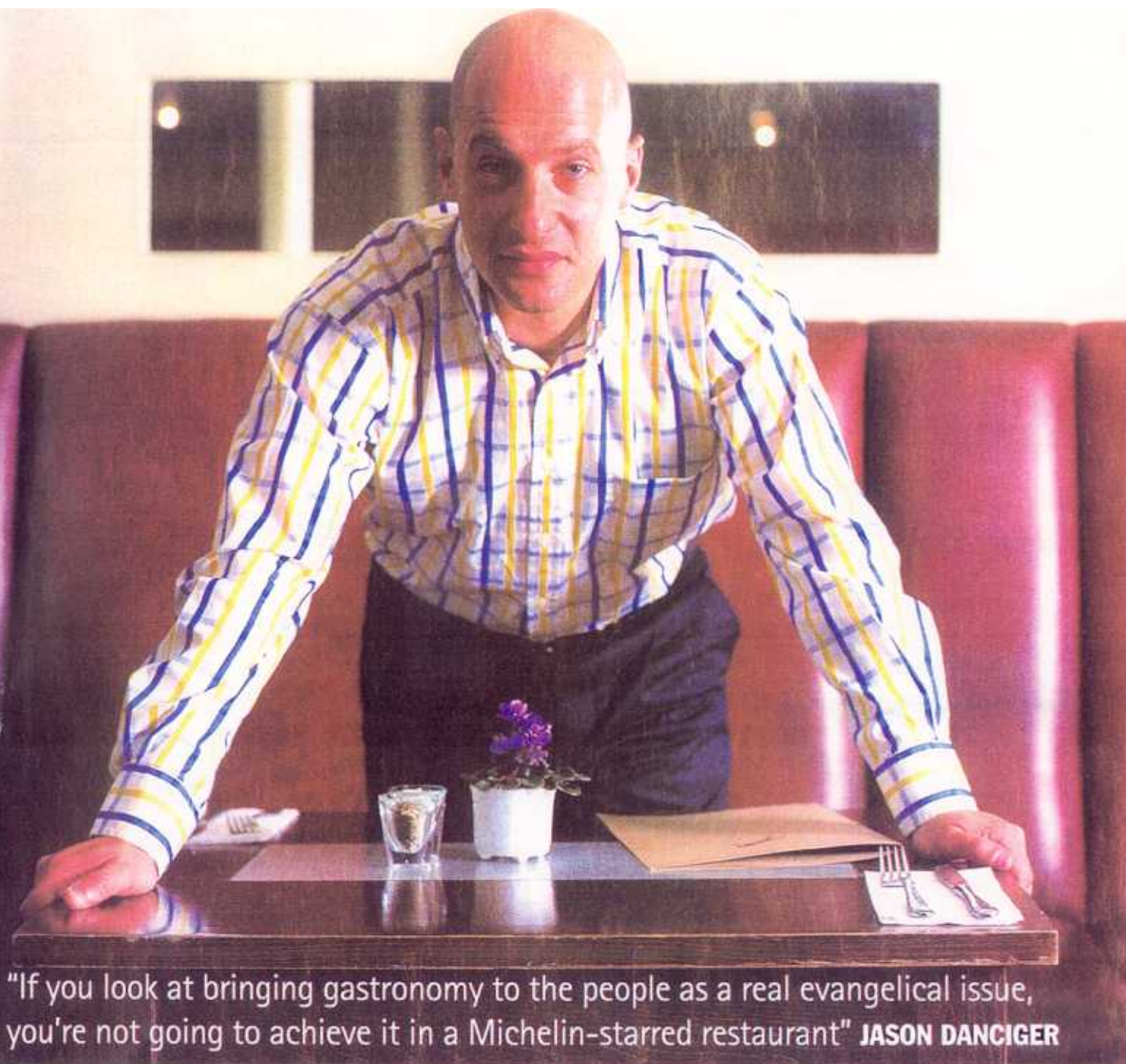
107 Station Street, Burton upon Trent, Staffordshire DE14 1BZ

Web site: www.thespiritgroup.com

Outlets: 1,153 – including 161 Mr Q's, 62 Q's, 52 Two for Ones, 125 Spirit Food Pubs (formerly Big Steak Pubs), 98 Wacky Warehouses (attached to Two for One outlets and Spirit Food Pubs), 40 Devco (including 17 Bar Room Bars), 603 Spirit Locals, eight nightclubs and four outlets trading as nightclubs with late licences – plus ongoing new developments

Staff: 17,000-plus

Sales: 124.5 million pints a year; more than 2.2 million transactions each week



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to Danciger, when he joined at the end of last year Spirit's food growth was in single figures, now it's more like 20%. The measures he's introduced are straightforward – mass menu tastings, better training and some new menus, for example – but the biggest change is probably the simplest: better ingredients.

"I've spent a lot of time with our suppliers, making sure we get the best products," he says. "Most people would agree that Spirit was 20 years behind the industry before, but now we're up with everybody else and in six months' time we'll be beating them."

Better ingredients, menu changes and big development plans don't come cheap, though. Surely this increase in cost can only lead to either higher menu prices for the consumer or lower profit margins for the company?

"It can, unless you've had a few years in

procurement," Danciger grins. "We've got enormous buying power and it probably hasn't been flexed in the past. We've said that we want to be the best for quality and value for money, which does mean slightly lower margins – but much greater sales."

As for development costs, Danciger insists Spirit is spending less now than it did before he arrived. "That may sound strange," he says, "but I don't think everyone focused in the same direction. We had 15 development chefs going in 15 different directions and different teams working on different menus. Now we have the same team working on all of them."

Things are going well for Danciger at the moment, but given that he feeds on creative freedom, is he not worried that the size of the company will frustrate him in the same way that Whitbread did with Café Rouge?

"It helps that Karen [Jones] produces

ABOVE AND LEFT: Jason Danciger at the Spirit Group's Fire Stables pub in Wimbledon, south-west London

exactly the right culture," he says. "If she wasn't there, I wouldn't be either. It means that we can get the job done quickly, and that's pretty unique. I won't say we're 100% there yet but it's getting better all the time. When I first started, it was three months to get a new product to market; now it's six weeks, and we're working to get it to four."

Danciger's plans and ideas pour out of him with the smallest encouragement. With Spirit his evangelical mission has the backing of a huge company and it will be interesting to see how far he can take it. The next item on the agenda, however, is the group's plans for wine and coffee, which Danciger outlines with a sentence that could apply to his whole attitude at Spirit: "Restaurant groups should be petrified." ■