

Planday

Seasonal

Survival Guide

How To: Survive the festive season in 2024

A restaurant manager's guide to overcoming seasonal changes.

For hospitality businesses, the holidays are the busiest time of year. Or at least, they used to be. Changing customer habits, spiralling costs and staff vacancies are trying to spoil the party.

To help you put the ho-ho-ho back into the holidays and successfully navigate their changing landscape, we sat down with hospitality pros who have been there, done that. Better yet, we asked them for their top tips on everything from cost control to planning the perfect event.

The Planday Festive Survival Guide? It's the perfect stocking filler for any hospitality business.

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The Gannet: More is more



The Gannet.

More is more

A restaurant manager's guide to overcoming seasonal changes.

It's nearly here again. The busiest, buzziest, most wonderful time of the year. More parties. More special menus. Bigger spends. More bums on seats. Bigger bottom lines?

So far, so positive. But for hospitality businesses, this time of year also brings the gift of more challenges. More changes and cancellations. More staff illness. More time-off requests. Higher costs. More stress.

How does an industry already strained by *changing staff expectations, the cost-of-living crisis and the ongoing challenges of recruiting and retaining talent* cope in what could potentially be their most profitable time of year?

Kevin Dow from the Gannet shares 5 observations to have on your restaurant radar for a more joyful festive season.



1.

More customer focus

A clear, laser-focused philosophy drives **Kevin Dow**, general manager and front of house at **The Gannet** restaurant in Glasgow: *"The most important person in our business is the customer. Without them we wouldn't exist."* Spending time with customers is his favourite part of the job.

With nearly two decades of festive season service under his belt, Kevin has seen plenty of changes in customer behaviours. The one constant? How they respond to genuine hospitality.

"Welcoming people is what hospitality is all about. The same as welcoming someone into your home. **Putting people at ease from the moment they walk in makes a big difference and sets the tone for the experience ahead of them.** It's important to remember that you're not just serving nice plates of food, you're hosting people and creating what is hopefully a memorable experience."



Food for thought

What are you doing to personalise your guest experience? Post-booking email surveys are an obvious one. But have you thought about hiring mystery diners once a quarter for unbiased, no-holds-barred feedback?

2.

More belt-tightened budgets

With many customers watching their budgets, Kevin and his team, led by chef/patron **Peter McKenna**, are preparing for a slightly more subdued festive season in 2023.

*"Office party budgets aren't what they used to be - an all-expenses-paid outing for business colleagues. We're not seeing so many of those bookings these days. In fact, we've just had two provisional **Christmas bookings cancelled** because entertaining budgets have been slashed. Hospitality businesses need to prepare for that."*

Food for thought

The average Brit eats out 1.5 times a week, spending up to £53 a head each time. What can you do to encourage greater spend during the holidays? A special cocktail? Off-peak prix-fixe?

Less is more

On the back of companies tightening their belts, though, The Gannet has also noticed more bookings from smaller parties with better spend per head, and have tweaked their menus, reservations and service accordingly. "Smaller groups, for example, are more likely to go for a full drinks pairing or to start with a cocktail or end with a digestif than, say, a group of 10 or 12, where multiplying those extras really adds up."





3.

More flexibility = Happier staff

The pandemic changed the way the world thinks about work. Work-life balance? No longer a nice-to-have but a bare-minimum expectation, especially for younger workers. In its 2023 Global Gen Z and Millennial survey, Deloitte found that these generations place a high priority on reduced or flexible working hours and want companies to offer more part-time roles, despite the financial consequences of working fewer hours.

The hospitality sector is still struggling to attract and retain workers to replace those who left during the pandemic's 'Great Resignation'. So being mindful of this shift in expectations is critical to nurturing a culture where staff are engaged, happy and want to stay.

Kevin Dow takes a 'firm but fair' approach to managing requests for time off and shift swaps. He believes transparent communication is key to building a culture of openness and fun, especially during the festive season, where expectations are heightened and the pressure is on staff to deliver excellent customer experiences.

"Times have changed and the hospitality industry isn't like it was when I started - I would just say yes to everything and never questioned my boss. Now people feel comfortable saying no or asking for what they want. And I'm quite generous in accommodating requests for time off, as long as service isn't affected. At the end of the day, I still need enough people in the kitchen and on the floor to deliver a great service for our customers. You get back the flexibility you give."

Food for thought

Gen Z cares about mental health. Create a supportive environment through **mandatory breaks and activities that promote career development**. One study found that employers who demonstrate they care about mental health **improved employee retention rates by 33%**.

4.

More listening, more storytelling

Responding to customers' interest and awareness around provenance, sustainability and food trends (like plant-based dishes and no/low waste) can make a real difference to customer satisfaction - and profits. Remaining authentic to what makes your business unique is a key driver in customer loyalty.

For The Gannet, telling a positive story about where their ingredients come from, how they're prepared and what customers can expect is all part of the experience. So roast turkey might not make the restaurant's six-course festive tasting menu. But Scottish game birds and foraged mushrooms almost certainly will.

Restaurants with frequently changing menus or specials need to keep their staff up to date with their dishes. Briefing them so they're experts on ingredients and suppliers creates an opportunity for relaxed, informed connections with customers.

Kevin describes his own management style as relaxed and informed, and he encourages the same attitude in all of his team.

"However you think about 'fine dining' and what that means, beyond the artistry and skill of what's on the plate, it's about being knowledgeable and feeling able to talk people through menus and through wine lists in a relaxed and natural way, without it being intimidating for the customer.

Having that opportunity to tell them about what's gone into what they're about to enjoy is a huge part of what we do and why we have a loyal base of regulars."

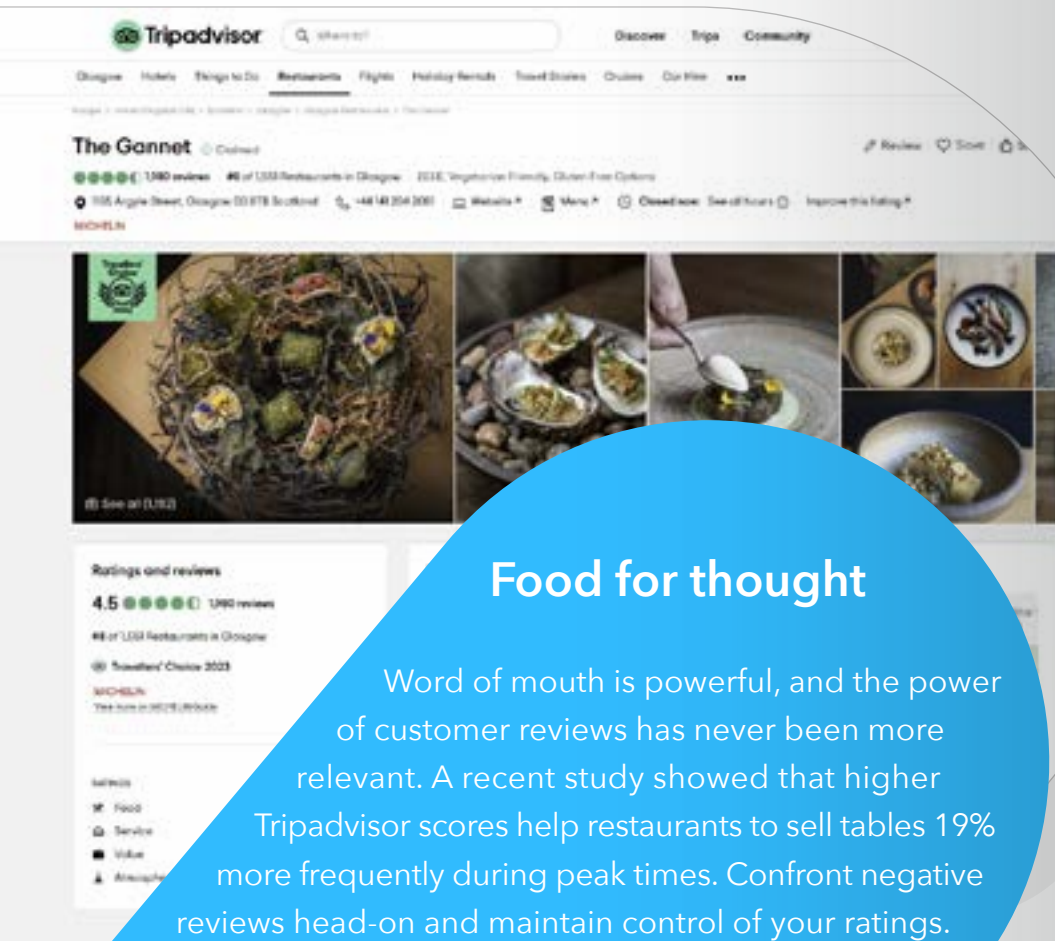
Food for thought

Is it time for a brand refresh? Define what makes your business unique and create a clear narrative that you can build into staff onboarding and service briefings. That could get your customers coming back for more.



5. More positive reviews

Feedback counts, From customers. From staff. The last quarter of the year is hectic, and throws up all sorts of challenges. Proactively responding to issues that pop up puts you in line for more positive reviews. Because it shows you care.

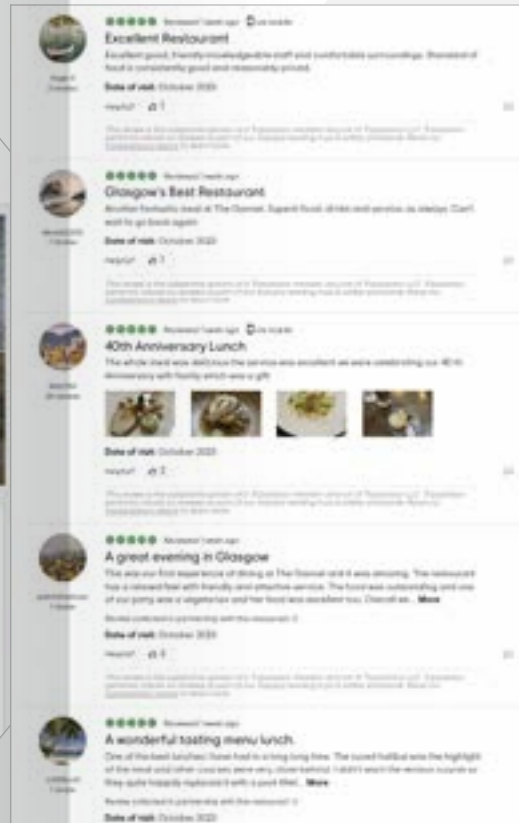


Food for thought

Word of mouth is powerful, and the power of customer reviews has never been more relevant. A recent study showed that higher Tripadvisor scores help restaurants to sell tables 19% more frequently during peak times. Confront negative reviews head-on and maintain control of your ratings.

These days, we have instant information, booking facilities, reviews and opportunities for sharing content on hand 24/7. And businesses have never been more open to opinions and feedback. And the bad ones can have a powerful effect in decision-making around whether to book or not to book. If they're not acted upon, that is.

So how much attention does Kevin pay to customers posting on social media?



"A lot! I mean, the majority of the feedback we get is very positive. And I'll reply to everyone who has a genuine issue. The thing is, if anything wasn't 100% on the night, I'd be aware of it. So if I read or see something that I somehow wasn't made aware of, I'll address it. You do get people who won't say anything at the time and then will go away and write something negative. And if someone says that, say, they weren't happy with the seasoning on something, I'll double-check with the kitchen to make sure they know and that something hadn't gone out wrongly."

This proactive approach, combined with an unwavering commitment to the customer, is the antidote to the aggregate of small negatives - tiny issues that, when added up, can morph into an overwhelmingly negative experience. If you fix the first tiny issue, that turns into overwhelmingly positive. Don't forget to celebrate your wins, too though!

FHIOR:

Cost control in hospitality



FHIOR.

A guide by Scott Smith chef patron at FHIOR

5 ways for restaurants to manage spending in seasonal peaks

Bookings are healthy. Anticipation is rising. But so are energy bills. Rent. Wages. Expectations. How do you keep a lid on all your costs to keep customers (and your accountants) happy and end the year on a high?

One hospitality pro with several seasons - festive and otherwise - under his apron, shares his observations and red-hot ideas.

Scott Smith is chef patron of FHIOR, Edinburgh's multi-award-winning, Michelin recommended modern Scottish fine-dining restaurant. Alongside his wife and business partner, Laura, he keeps a keen eye on every element of the operation, from sourcing ingredients to menu planning to pricing strategies.

Here the former Great British Menu competitor offers some wisdom gleaned over his career in the kitchen and in front of endless spreadsheets.



1.

Cutting back on staff hurts in the long run

Which costs can you control, and how do you prioritise them? What, if anything, can be cut? When looking at the biggest cost shouldered by hospitality businesses, it's tempting to go straight to wages. But that could easily create a downward spiral.

For Scott Smith, the team is FHIOR's number one fixed cost:

"You could argue that's a cost you could cut, but this is not a manufacturing business - you're not selling a product, you're selling an experience. And the quality of that experience very much depends on the quality of the team."

Scott thinks salaries are an area that needs greater investment, thanks to the red-hot recruitment landscape left in the wake of the pandemic and Brexit.

"If you start to cut your staffing levels to match a drop in revenue, you end up damaging the overall experience. You might survive in the short term, but in the long term you put your reputation at risk."

"We could hire staff for the same salary as we offered last year, but then they can't afford to pay their bills because of the cost of living - they won't stay with us. So you have to pay a salary that makes them want to stay."

Food for thought

Retaining staff is more cost-effective than hiring, onboarding and training new team members. What low-cost benefits (free staff meals, flexible shifts, training, more time off) could make your business more attractive than competitors?



2.

Raising costs? Elevate the experience too

Higher costs might just be “costs” now. So what happens when wages and other outgoings surpass incoming revenues? Especially when previously familiar peak periods no longer guarantee profitability.

“We know we’re now going into a really busy time of year,” Scott states with confidence, “but at the same time, energy costs and inflation mean the margins are nowhere near what they used to be.”

How can you counteract narrowing margins against rising costs? By raising prices – but give it careful consideration first.

“We’ve always tried to be inclusive and affordable with our prices, which are good value for some and a treat for others. Next year though, we’ll have no choice but to raise our prices – not just because of inflation but because we don’t want to compromise the experience we give our customers.

“Which means we need to work really hard with our marketing to justify the new prices – they’ll be almost double what they were 18 months ago for our 10-course tasting menu.

“Regulars will get it because they understand the value of the experience. But for first-time customers, we’ll have to be very bold and confident with our marketing and storytelling to make sure people feel comfortable spending that kind of money on an unknown experience. We don’t have a Michelin star, so we don’t have that advantage that says, ‘You can definitely blow your money with these guys!’”



Food for thought

- Food prices for UK hospitality are 22.6% higher than the equivalent figure for June 2022.
- Prices are going up for everyone, you can win in this area by carefully considering your marketing.
- Look at your USPs, your storytelling, provenance, sustainability, ambience and dining experience.
- Look at your reviews and understand what your diners love most about you and ensure you talk about those things.

3.

Be creative: get more from less

Try as they might, business owners can't control everything - like energy costs. While food costs have increased, it is an area that kitchens can control. By dialling up the creativity with ingredients, they can make things go further and create a great narrative at the same time.



"Food has definitely gone up in price for us," says Scott, "but we can be cleverer with cheaper produce, because we have a really talented, well-paid team who know how to create better value on the plate."

It's a clever and deliberate pendulum swing towards more effective sourcing, creative menu writing and innovation around lesser-used ingredients and waste - something the FHIOR kitchen loves to experiment with.

"Right now, for example, we have a brilliant dessert on the menu made with plums. The skins are then dried and used to make a tea that appears in a kombucha on our soft drinks menu. So we've made a really interesting, tasty product out of waste."

Savvy thinking can not only literally squeeze value out of ingredients but also have a positive (if subtle) effect on customer perceptions around the guiding values of the business when it comes to sustainability.

Food for thought

Food waste costs restaurants around £682 million every year, according to a recent WRAP report.

Make the most of every ingredient to minimise waste, and join a restaurant buying group to negotiate the same kinds of discounts that franchises and bigger restaurants enjoy.

Think about reducing your menu size to ensure less waste.

4.

Take time to talk to your suppliers

Scott's advice to save on food? Work with your suppliers directly and review your supply chain regularly.

"It's about being very conscious of their pricing and using what's not fashionable - supply and demand is a way to crank up prices. You'll see prices for certain ingredients suddenly jump up because they're all over Instagram."

For chefs who like to experiment, Scott advocates selecting products or varieties that are 'out of fashion' and devising more interesting dishes from them.

"Take pork jowl - it's what's used to make guanciale, which is a very fashionable cured meat. We use it differently - we get a high yield out of it, it's cheap to use and very tasty!

"Pork collar is another unfashionable cut and can be quite tough, but if you know how to marinate and cook it correctly to break down those proteins, it's probably one of the tastiest. But if you're interested in not saving money on ingredients, then just put the prime pork loin on the menu."

Food for thought

- Talk to your suppliers and see what they recommend as cheaper alternatives.
- Check Instagram regularly to ensure your prices are not being pushed up by 'food fads'.
- It might not be everyone's cup of Bovril, but offal is starring in dishes at the likes of London's Bouchon Racine and Manchester's Higher Ground. It can be around a tenth of the price of prime steak at a supermarket.

5.

Scrutinise your costs across the whole business

There will be lean times. Scott and the FHIOR team have been there.

“We were in a strange situation recently – for the first time since opening, even at full capacity, our incomings weren’t always covering our outgoings.”

With FHIOR’s wages bill peaking going into 2023, the team spent the first half of the year scrutinising every part of the business. One thing Scott knows is that successfully riding out loss-making months means never letting the coffers get too low.

“I think people sometimes forget about working capital, whether it’s a new business or ten years in. You can have a healthy P&L, but if your balance sheet is empty, you don’t have a business. We actively put money aside to keep running in case we find ourselves in a loss position.”

“It’s not about changing who you are, but about creating a model for the current climate that would benefit and future-proof both businesses.”

Food for thought

Q4 of 2022 was reported as the ‘worst on record for restaurant closures’, according to audit firm Mazars.

Scrutinise your costs across the business, pennies make pounds in climates like this. Look for costs you can put on hold, create a benchmark for a return on investment and only focus on areas that deliver.

Look at your sittings and see if you could save costs by changing your opening schedule to busy periods only.





**Killiecrankie
House:
Manage
festive stress**

Killiecrankie House.

Manage festive stress

5 lessons hospitality can learn from other sectors

Who says Q4 is a sackful of stress? Come on, Santa's on his way and he's dropping customers down your hospitality business's chimney in numbers like you haven't seen all year. Under-staffed? Look on the bright side - your sous chef's dressed the Christmas tree without falling from the ladder, and only half your wait staff are suddenly off sick. Because, who doesn't love surprises at this special time of year?

In this, the second part of the Planday Q4 Survival Guide, we listen to lessons learned by some successful industry angels who chose hospitality after corporate life, bringing some enlightened thinking with them about how to swerve workplace stress.

Take comfort from the following: most Q4 stresses are, like Christmas and New Year, reassuringly traditional. Entirely predictable. Knowable in advance. And therefore can be pre-empted. Solutions can be put in place before problems raise their party-hatted heads. (By the way, you did know your swags of mistletoe are actively poisonous, right? Phoratoxin apparently.)

So start planning ahead now for the crunch of seasonal issues that are bound to repeat themselves now, and next year, at exactly the same time, in exactly the same way.

Golden rule:

If it's predictable it's manageable



KILLIECRANKIE HOUSE
RESTAURANT & ROOMS



1.

Play the numbers game: hours / staff / budget

Here's what two experts say about managing stress in the hospitality industry: "Don't wield a cattle prod at your team." Tom Tsappis was a currency broker at a major finance house in London and Tokyo, where sticks were clearly favoured over carrots. But cattle prod? He's exaggerating, surely? "No." These days he's chef patron of Killiecrankie House in rural Perthshire, named The Scotsman's 2023 Scottish Restaurant of the Year only two years after opening. The hotel side is run by Tom's wife and the restaurant's sommelier, Matilda Ruffle, also ex-Tokyo but from the relatively calmer backwater of an international advertising agency. In the kitchen garden many carrots grow.

The scale of the operation – five rooms, three front of house, three in the brigade for 12-18 covers – might imply there's not much here to get stressed about. Birdsong every morning, a burbling river across the road... Yet as every owner of a rural retreat will tell you, the rurality itself greatly complicates recruitment.

We'll come back to that. The first thing Tom and Matilda make clear is that having their own business does make running it simpler. These two self-described control freaks call the shots. "We plan the year carefully in advance, and when we go on holiday we shut. Simple as that." No delegating, no worrying. Actual downtime.

Their decision to open only four days a week also provides the kind of thinking time that lets them assess how ambitions are progressing and define what needs tweaking, in what order. "You could say we'd make more money if we opened five or six days," says Matilda, "but how many customers would come on a Monday? And then we'd need a second string of staff."

Savvy thinking can not only literally squeeze value out of ingredients but also have a positive (if subtle) effect on customer perceptions around the guiding values of the business when it comes to sustainability.

Food for thought

How you scale things down or up is down or up to you. Extended hours, more staff and (theoretically) more customers don't necessarily add up to bigger revenues (or happier staff).



2.

Recruitment realities: lean into your USP

How does a remote location like Killiecrankie manage recruitment? By providing unexpectedly attractive conditions for staff. The rural reality is that running a fine dining experience requires staff with skills most usually honed beyond the immediate locality.

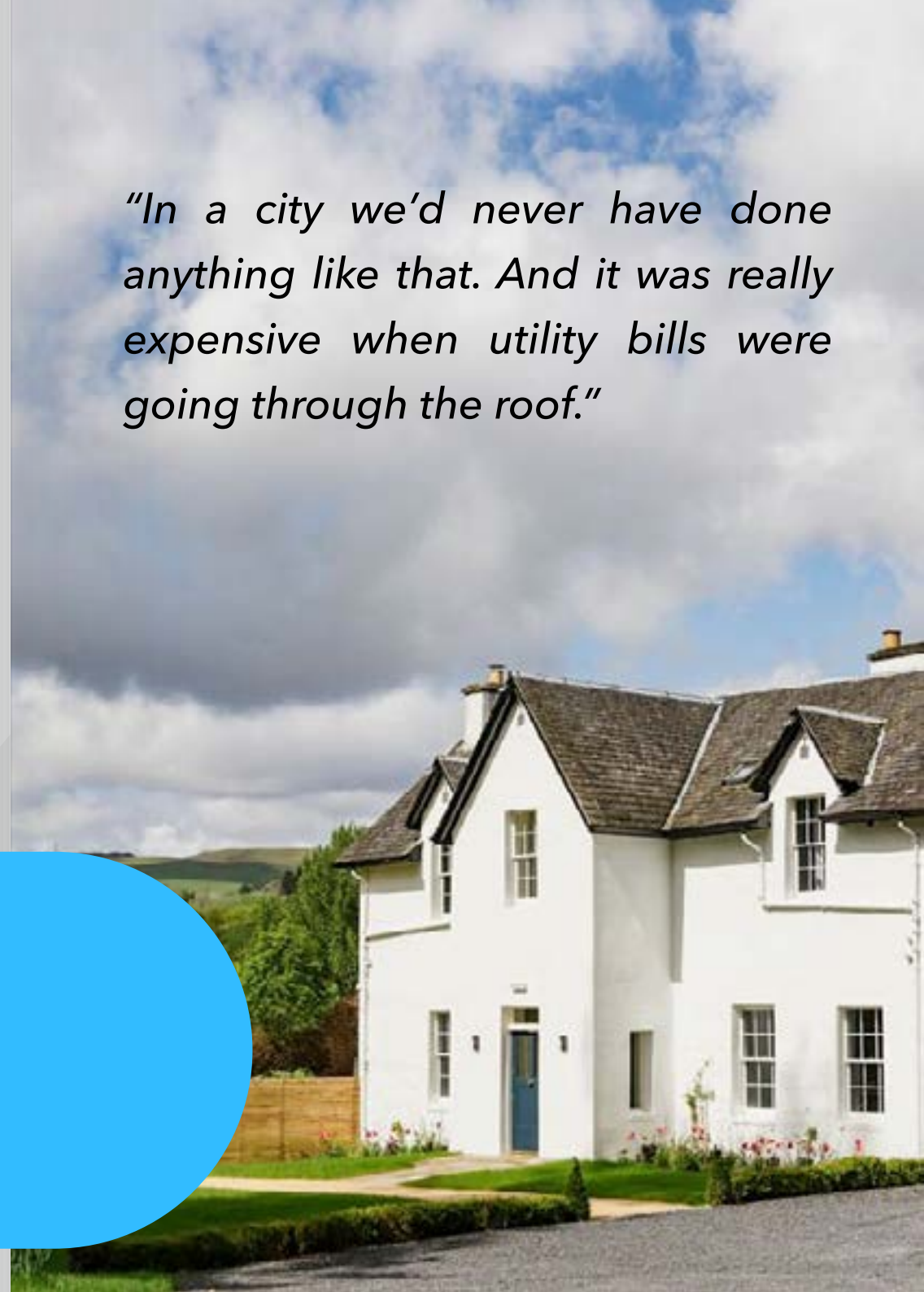
A good number of the core crew here are Scottish, but one thing that makes them stay is the high-quality accommodation they're given on site. Staff are housed in part of Tom and Matilda's own home at no cost. "In a city we'd never have done anything like that. And it was really expensive when utility bills were going through the roof." But the commitment was made on both sides. A beer in the garden together when service is done? A sense of belonging helps work move in the right direction.

Killiecrankie is no commune – privacy is prized by all – but the thinking is indubitably right-headed. Recruit the right staff, prove you're nurturing them, and the follow-through of two-way loyalty is one factor that keeps a lid on stress levels during peak times.

Food for thought

Reframe your obstacles as a strength. Innovative thinking that really makes staff feel comfortable, confident and supported makes your business uniquely attractive to unflappable and loyal talent. Look at how sectors known for success in a certain area do it.

"In a city we'd never have done anything like that. And it was really expensive when utility bills were going through the roof."



3.

Listen carefully: match your offer to what staff actually want



And certainly Tom and Matilda's approach to managing staff, without being either contrived or gooey, reflects the expectations of young people joining the industry today. For that new generation, well-being and mental health aren't cheap badges of woke, they're part of their everyday vocabulary.

That might mean an active listening, arms-round management style, an open-door 'ask me anything' policy or scheduled time off for life admin. It could also mean paid pre-shift meditation sessions. Or not. But if you don't ask, you won't know.

Tom's quick to note how the industry has changed, even in the relatively short time since he retrained as a chef: "No one wants to work the way things were in the 1990s with [names several fiery-tempered celebrity chefs] throwing pans and burning people on stoves. At the same time, you do have to lose staff who turn out lazy - that's what happens in other sectors. So we're very upfront here about our expectations and about what people get in return. You're going to work 56 hours a week, but you'll live rent-free, you'll get meals on the days you work and you'll learn skills that can take you anywhere in the world."

Food for thought

Stress festers in misunderstanding, so listen and learn your people's expectations. Simple. Lean into things like flexibility, training and rewards. Planday is all about transparent scheduling and flexibility in shift planning. it also provides a central communication hub which means messaging is transparent, timely and clear.

4.

Value personal development as part of the culture

Upskilling often happens spontaneously on the job, but it can't be left to happen accidentally. It needs to be planned in as part of the job, just as it is in office-based businesses. Tom again: "I'm not gonna send my people on a training course to Slough. Instead we've taken them to four or five Michelin-starred restaurants, including in San Sebastián this year. That's a kind of training, of course, but a softly softly approach."

The core team at Killiecrankie have been in place for two years now, which speaks volumes in a generally itinerant industry. And constancy like that means a culture can be set. In this case a culture of learning by sharing tips with each other every day, but also by setting time aside each week for pre-arranged technical sessions. Knowing their people are up to new tasks takes the strain off Tom and Matilda.



Food for thought

Learning is a human condition as well as a cultural one. Developing skills and broadening knowledge is good for motivation - and good for business. Build it into your schedules.

5.

Steal ideas from business! Then make them your own

Finally, here's another lesson learned. Not just from the fast lane in Tokyo but from corporate culture in general. Appraisals. They do appraisals at Killiecrankie House. Not exactly an everyday tool in the hospitality industry, apart perhaps for the more enlightened international chains

We take each member of staff aside twice a year and talk as people, not as 'I'm your boss' but about their career vision and how we can help,"

Food for thought

Plunder other sectors for best-practice management models (just not cattle prods). If you don't have first-hand experience, find a business-guru podcast that speaks to you.

"We take each member of staff aside twice a year and talk as people, not as 'I'm your boss' but about their career vision and how we can help," says Matilda. "And we ask them how we're doing too," adds Tom. "How can we all improve? We're a really collaborative team. Always open to new ways of doing things whether that's in the kitchen or bar or hotel. Always listening. And, really important this bit, always proving we're listening to each other." Stuff like that must bust stress before it happens.

If much of the above happens spontaneously as part of the culture they've built at Killiecrankie House, Tom and Matilda's decision to consciously build in time for the 360° appraisals they experienced in the corporate world is a direction the industry at large might consider.



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