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IN THE CHAIR WITH

# Francis O'Hagan

Jackson Gilmour has been delivering exceptional food with outstanding service at top venues all over London for more than a decade. Joyce O'Hagan is the creative force in the kitchen and her husband, operations director Francis O'Hagan, keeps the whole show running smoothly



## **What are the biggest challenges facing caterers in the next 12 months?**

Making sure our clients get more than they expected. That has been the Jackson Gilmour philosophy since we set up more than 12 years ago, and it will continue to be our strategy whether this recession takes hold or not. More than ever, our clients will be entrusting their company resources and time to us. They are looking for a safe pair of hands and we have to ensure they feel we have not just delivered, but over-delivered.

## **How will you react to these challenges?**

Whatever the economic climate, clients will be looking for value for money. That doesn't necessarily mean that they want something on the cheap, it means they want to feel they are getting what they paid for. We always source the highest-quality food from reliable suppliers and we care passionately about service. Gimmicks have never been our thing. When budgets get tight, I believe clients will focus on what they really want from a caterer – fabulous food, stylishly and beautifully presented.

## **What have been the most significant changes in the event marketing industry over the past five years?**

In general, I feel there has been a rise in style over substance throughout the whole industry. We pride ourselves on our innovative and stylish approach to presentation. However, we like to think we keep the focus on the food.

We are proud of our food and we always show it off to the best advantage.

## What has been the most popular type of event that you have organised in the past 12 months?

We have been in demand for big charity bashes, as well as industry events and awards dinners. Having said that, we have also found ourselves in a new niche – the celebrity market. Our message that it's all about the food is something that resonates with people, and it has brought us an interesting range of business.

## How important is it for you to offer clients green credentials for their events?

We were the first caterer in the capital to offer reduced carbon menus and it is something that we all feel very strongly about – however, we like to offer our clients choice. Going green has helped us to reduce energy costs and can be a cost-effective choice for clients. When we prepare reduced-carbon menus we focus on seasonal produce that can be sourced locally.

## How has the credit crunch affected your business?

Advance bookings for 2009 are proving to be strong, although I suspect there may be fewer events overall. Obviously, some clients have less money to spend but others are still holding big budgets.

## What measures have you taken to combat the recent economic problems?

We always run a tight ship and we will be keeping a close eye on costs. However, we mustn't lose sight of what we are about. People come to us when they have something to celebrate, and we are there to make the event go with a swing.

## How can businesses offer clients a discounted rate without affecting the bottom line?

With difficulty. I suppose it depends on how much profit margin they have to play with. Personally, if I had been using a supplier for a while and they suddenly told me they could provide the same service for a lot less money I would be a bit annoyed. Had they been ripping me off all that time? We have always provided a great service at a reasonable price and we will continue to do that. Rising food prices mean we are struggling to hold our prices where they are, let alone knock them down.

## What do you think would be the best type of event that would most suit your service or skills?

Good food, great service, exacting management – what type of event doesn't need this kind of catering? One thing you need to be when the economy slows is flexible, and in the 12 years we have been in business we have learnt to be that. I wouldn't want to pigeonhole us into one category. We work in some of London's biggest venues and some smaller ones. If your event needs food and drink, talk to us.

## What does the future hold for the industry event from your perspective?

Perhaps this economic downturn will enable people to take a step back from the industry and take stock. When it comes down to it, what really makes a great event? An outstanding venue, a good group of people and the best food and drink you can afford. Perhaps it's time to get back to basics.

## How would you help clients deliver an amazing event on a tight budget?

Spend the money where it counts and where people will notice. Think hard about the kind of people who will be attending and stay focussed on what they really want from the event.

Are those robotic dancers really going to make a difference? Maybe canapés or bowl food would be better than staging a sit-down dinner. It's amazing how you can give the impression of an extravagant, top-class event while cutting corners. Just make sure these are in areas where people simply won't notice what they are missing.

## Francis O'Hagan In Brief

- 1990** Hospitality catering manager at All England Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club, and major rugby, golfing and polo championships with Town & County Caterers
- 1995** Shepperton Film Studios, general manager of catering
- 1998** Operations director for event caterers Jackson Gilmour