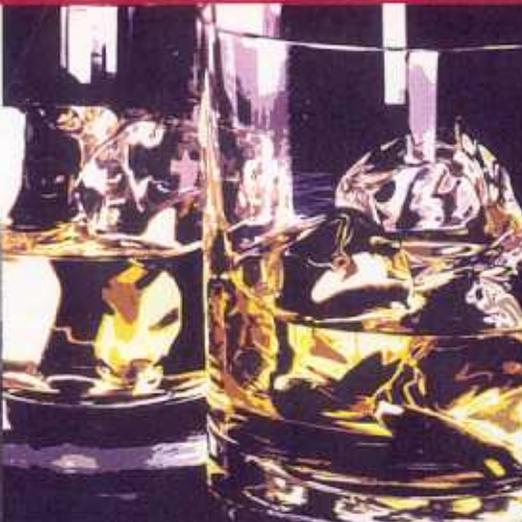


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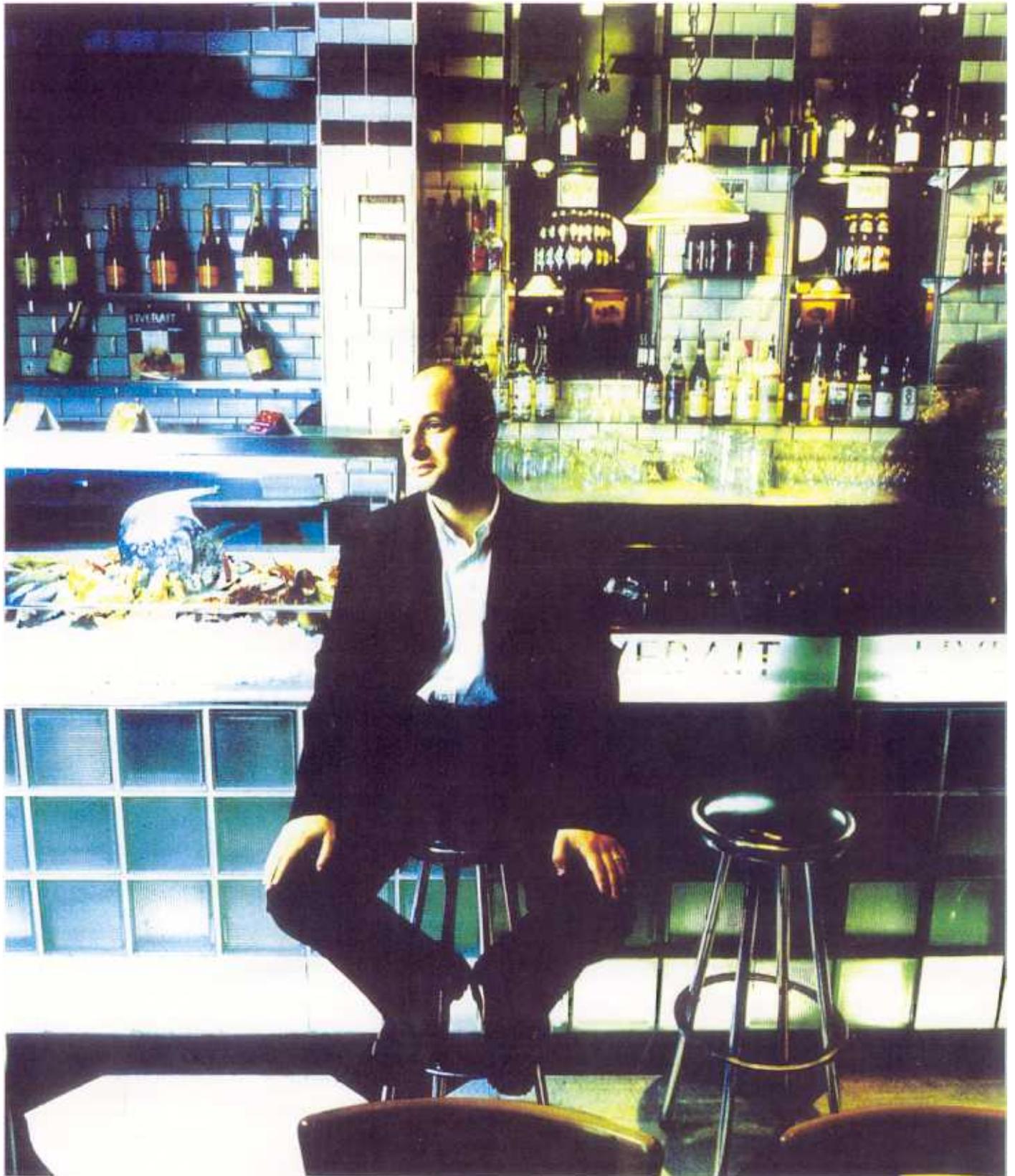


*harpers on-trade*



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**IN THE HOT SEAT: JASON DANCIGER**  
**FACE TO FACE: TRAINING FOR TOMORROW**  
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# PASSION DIRECTIVE

**Jason Danciger talks figures, fun and fish with Andrew Catchpole at Notting Hill's Livebait.  
Main portrait by Guy Drayton**

"Did you jump or were you pushed?" The question raises a smile from Jason Danciger and a characteristically relaxed and open response.

"Drifted, I think, is the right word."

At 35 years old, with a CV that reads like Westminster College's prospectus coupled with an in-depth guide to front and back of house career opportunities, Danciger's confidence is neither modest nor arrogant – rather the result of a lifetime spent marinating and maturing in the world of restaurants.

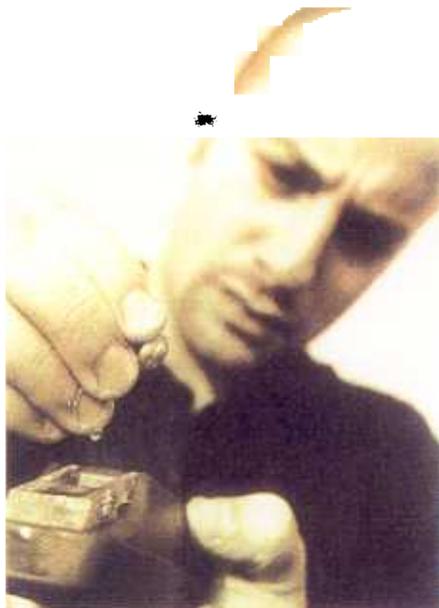
When I was at school my teachers said 'do well, or you will never get a job'. Not the best way to angle at someone to learn. And then I remember the first job I ever did, part-time, working evenings in an hotel." Another smile. "Of course, I was the kid with the money, buying all the Mars bars. I was earning around 99p an hour, but that bought a lot of Mars bars in those times."

Riches though these seemed at the time, there was a serious side to this experience, providing the young Danciger with the motivation to devote his life to the trade.

"This is not something you would go into for the money. But I realised it is a people industry. I love working with people and this industry is full of passionate people. I could never imagine myself in a firm of accountants or chartered surveyors. People give me such an incredible buzz and watching the buzz, the excitement on the first night of opening a restaurant makes me incredibly happy."

It should be explained that since his formative baptism as part-time waiter at Pickards Hotel in Surrey, Danciger's progression involved almost yearly career changes and twists to arrive at his current eerie overseeing Groupe Chez Gerard's concepts such as Livebait. His first jobs were front of house, but "I could see creative things happening in the kitchen and I enjoy creativity." Danciger chanced upon a profile of Jean-Louis Taillevald at Interlude de Tabailau, an ex-Le Gavroche head chef, who had opened his own restaurant, rapidly gaining Michelin recognition.

"I thought 'I want to go to work for him', so I went for an interview with him. I didn't understand a word he said and he didn't understand a word I said, but the next week I ended up in the kitchen." Language difficulties notwithstanding, Danciger says he learnt both hard and fast. A rapid progression follows, including lecturing and television work at the end of the '90s, prior to front of house and head office management roles at Café Rouge and the Pelican Group throughout



the decade. 1999 saw Danciger defect to rival Groupe Chez Gerard elevating him to commercial director early this year. In addition to this, there has been a course or qualification on a yearly basis, from WSET Diploma, via various marketing, management and IT qualifications, to European languages and a Mensa rating of 148.

This is clearly a driven person. But what drives him? "I am driven more by the aspiration to knowledge, rather than driven by a career. I have never thought 'I need to be able to do that' but rather as 'I always want to know more about the industry'." Given Danciger's obvious enthusiasm and commitment to the trade, his current role as commercial director does run the risk of distancing him from day-to-day operations of an individual restaurant. The job involves directing diverse aspects of the business from food & wine buying, property maintenance, IT systems, and so on. "Property maintenance is not exactly the most exciting thing, but I believe you can put passion into anything and make it fun," enthuses Danciger. There must, however, be a danger of losing touch with the pulse in each restaurant, plus a risk that ongoing group expansion will lead to stagnation.

A pragmatic answer refuses the hierarchical implications of the first charge: "I don't think there is a large difference between myself and an individual restaurateur. It is the same business, just a specialisation within that. Any restaurateur who is either working individually or in a small group of up to four or five restaurants does all aspects of

the work. Most restaurateurs are good all-round business people and when they come to bigger companies they tend to specialise simply because they can no longer be hands on all parts."

Danciger still sees himself very much as a restaurateur rather than a boardroom suit, counteracting any danger of alienation by conducting as many meetings as possible in the restaurants and staying closely involved with the individual staff. "You counter-balance by making the effort, changing your environment, working on ideas with people in the restaurants and involving people in the decision-making process." The highlights of the job, says Danciger, are still the chef and manager meetings where all aspects of work can be talked through.

This ethos, hopes Danciger, will also prevent concepts such as Livebait becoming stale and even shoddy imitations of themselves – an all-too-familiar result of over-expansion and greed. "We have set the limits and know how far we believe we can go with each concept. Funnily enough, it all comes back down to people. If you are focused on imbuing every single restaurant with the locality and the style of the manager, and this is part of your management, then you will be successful." An example cited is that within each restaurant concept the wine list is 60% chosen by buyer Barnaby Mager at HQ. The manager is then left to tailor the remaining 40%. "If the manager wants late harvest Gewurztraminer," says Danciger, "which no one else would want or could sell, then that manager will sell it because they are obviously passionate about it."

Danciger warms to this theme: "It's all about encouraging people and allowing them to make decisions. If everything in a restaurant is dictated, then the manager has no say. Having a say increases the staff's IQ. Between the chefs and staff there is hundreds of years of experience and if we can tap into that intellectual capital, it's very important. Very few companies switch on to that."

The future may see Danciger returning closer to the floor, perhaps managing his own restaurant, but so long as he is still working in the industry in some capacity he is formerly convinced he will be content. And what continues to drive Jason Danciger? "I was once nicknamed 'passion director' and I loved the title. It's a wonderful thing and what it's about is giving people some of this passion. In a way, that is my unwritten role, giving people some of that buzz." ■