



# A gastronomic leap

Jason Danciger is on a mission to bring gastronomy to the masses as director of food and wine operations at the Spirit Group. And with increased quality and lower prices on the menus, he's making tremendous headway

If you who haven't eaten at a Spirit pub for a while, it may be time you did. Since the company was originally formed – as Punch Retail in 1999 – things have been dramatically shaken up, from menus and ingredients to suppliers and wine. As a consequence, director of food and wine operations Jason Danciger describes sales charts as like “climbing Mount Everest”; food sales alone show growth now well into double figures, compared to the single-figure growth being achieved last year.

The menus have been refreshed and higher quality ingredients are used in the group's kitchens.

Food is now served in 90% of Spirit pubs, but Jason is working on the other 10%, intent on fulfilling his given task by Spirit to make a difference.

And certainly big strides are being made in Jason's almost evangelical mission to bring gastronomy to the masses.

“Pub companies have not really been focused on food and creating a culture of gastronomy has not been high on the agenda,” Jason believes.

“But with so many pubs there is a big opportunity to make a difference to the food culture in this country.”

“You are not going to be able to bring good gastronomy to the people through a Michelin-starred restaurant,” he adds.

“In pubs you can get to millions of people with good gastronomy and make an impact on popular cuisine.”

But Jason believes pubs have been slow in responding to the desires of customers who are eager to try dishes from the wealth of

cultures that are already represented in products such as cheese and wine in supermarkets.

Jason, a former Michelin-star chef whose CV boasts periods with the Roux Brothers and Groupe Chez Gerard, may be at the helm of food development at the company but says building the food business has been a team effort.

“We've got a really fantastic team who are really passionate about what they do,” he enthuses.

Meetings to decide new menus now include commercial managers, area managers, marketeers and pub chefs who all come together to swap ideas.

It is also refreshing to see – in the visitor book of the company's HQ development kitchen – hundreds of entries from the company's pub chefs.

“We don't just want to send out a new menu with a memo,” stresses Jason.

“When you get people involved, it gives them that ownership of something which makes them more passionate about something they will be cooking on a daily basis.”

The Spirit Group started life as Punch Retail – part of the Punch group – following buyouts from Bass and Allied Domecq.

The arm – consisting of employee-managed outlets – became the Spirit Group in February this year, an independent company, based in Burton-on-Trent.

Among the company's pub concepts are 121 Spirit food pubs, 595 Spirit locals and 41 Devcos, which include 18 Bar Room Bars. ►

# That's the Spirit!

Here, Jason explains some of his favourite dishes on the menu at Spirit:

## STARTERS

- Bantry Bay Mussels – new product using a classic white wine and herb sauce
- Grilled sardines – new product. “We butterfly the sardines, remove the central bone and dust them with paprika and herbs de Provence,” says Jason
- Club sandwich – that great classic using good-quality bacon
- Creamy garlic mushrooms – mushrooms sautéed with garlic and served on toasted ciabatta bread



## DESSERTS



- Bread and butter pudding – “A new product based on that old classic where double cream and baking in a bain marie ensure a light succulent dish.”
- Chocolate fudge cake – “Old classic where we switched the recipe to use a dark chocolate couverture to give that serious adult finish.”

Vanilla & chocolate ice cream – “We just changed the spec by adding the insides of vanilla pod seeds and again, using dark couverture and real cream in the recipe, we have fantastic ice cream.”

## MAINS

- Lasagne – “We had over 20 lasagnes in the system,” says Jason. “We tasted them all and then chose the best and worked on that product to create a sublime dish. A Sicilian recipe, we use plum tomatoes and pancetta to give a great taste.”
- Fish and chips – “We changed the fish, the batter recipe and the chip specification to create a ‘best in breed’ product.”
- Tuscan chicken – “A new product where we sit a grilled breast on a bed of bubble and squeak mash and use roasted vegetables to garnish.”
- Our steaks – “Simple yet using only Hereford, Limousin, and Charrois beef that eat a vegetarian diet and live a natural life – you can tell!”

